

From Active to Passive Noise

Rethinking the Radicalism of Japanese Noise Music

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Abstract

In recent years noise has gained theoretical momentum as a concept used to consider the complexity of difference in both culture and art. Despite a great degree of variance between its authors, there is nevertheless a common insistence within noise theory that noise must be thought negatively. Particularly in accounts of Japanese noise music,

noise is construed as oppositional to musicality and meaning traditionally understood. This thesis aims to reassess this claim with the argument that the true alterity of Japanese noise music cannot be reduced or essentialised to the categories of negativity and radicalism. It will be argued that the language of this music is predicated on a fundamental absence that makes any essential categorisation impossible.

Drawing on twentieth-century continental philosophy, particularly the work of Maurice Blanchot, this thesis will develop an entangled relationship between two different, although fundamentally dependent, languages of noise. Chapter one will lay the theoretical groundwork for these languages by distinguishing between active noise and passive noise. If active noise names the language of negativity and radicalism through which we understand the materiality, sonority and performances of Japanese noise music, then passive noise names the way in which this language is problematised by Blanchot's challenge to atomistic and holistic thinking. Chapter two will demonstrate how an intentionless alterity, which constitutes passivity, accounts for a different idea of transgression than the kind frequently attributed to the erotic and sacrificial activities of Japanese noise music. Chapter three will continue this discussion by exploring Japanese noise music's relationship with death and impossibility. The conclusion will examine Blanchot's idea of community as a possible way of understanding the community centred around Japanese noise music. By way of summary, it will be argued that no unifying principle collectivises either the community or language of this music, because both are fundamentally predicated on an irreconcilable impossibility.

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## Aiming for Passivity

This thesis aims to readdress the complexity of noise, particularly as it is expressed in relation to Japanese noise music, by proposing a very different understanding of alterity to the kind typically assumed in analyses of this music and theories of noise more broadly. If alterity is understood as a term aimed at differentiation and heterogeneity, in other words, all that exists in opposition to identity, meaning and homogeneity, then it is tempting to think the alterity of noise as a property of radical, political, expression. This is indeed typical of those musicologists and philosophers who understand Japanese noise music via a recuperable opposition. With this position a common-sense definition of noise is retained alongside a dialectic process which understands noise as firstly something negative (opposed to meaning and the world) which, once aggravated against the world, becomes subversive only before it is assimilated into the world as a new kind of meaning. As Greg Hainge explains quoting Paul Kohl, noise is often thought to be a multifarious site of 'resistance toward the dominant ideals of music, and consequently, of the larger society,'<sup>1</sup> exactly before it is folded back into this world as, in the case of Japanese noise music, a new type of music. The idea of impossibility is held in close proximity to Japanese noise music in this type of understanding through the idea of failure; the expression of a 'pure' noise, uncontaminated by the limits of music and meaning, is fundamentally made impossible because noise fails to stay noise, becoming, as it does, a new type of music and genre. This is, as we will see, how Paul Hegarty necessitates failure in relation to noise. But the alterity of noise, as this thesis aims to propose, is not an aggregate of political resistance and thus cannot be held in proximity with impossibility according to dialectical failure. This means that the alterity of noise is not relative to the supposed normativity of music as meaning. Alterity instead is what persists and contaminates the language of noise from within, as an irrecuperable impossibility that is anterior to the temporality of dialectics as what remains outside the operation of conceptuality. What is transgressive about Japanese noise music is

<sup>1</sup> Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 16.

thus not measurable by volume or subversive performance. What is transgressive about this music is not found in its supposed negativity or the voluntarism of its practice. Noise's transgression is instead its predicate, for what conditions the language used to understand noise music and the actions of the noise performer is equally, it will be argued, what exceeds them.

By drawing ideas and gestures from philosopher and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot, as well as commentators attentive to the passivity in his work, such as Joseph Libertson and Thomas Wall, the idea of passive noise will be developed in conjunction with what we will be calling active noise. If active noise is the language we use to write about Japanese noise music then passive noise names the way in which this language is both inexhaustible and impossible. Passive noise exposes the supposedly essential ideas of negativity and radicalism, as well as any configuration that posits noise as possibility, to what Blanchot understands to be, through a radical

impossibility, the non-essentiality of language. Passive noise is not, however, the consequence of some kind of method. Instead, passive noise names this non-essentiality itself as it exists beyond the relation of any kind of action; its passivity is radical in that it comes before passivity thought as a mode of action or non-action. The aim is to show that while noise can be understood in part through these ideas of negativity and radicalism, there is still another, hidden and irreducible account of noise that shadows the language of active noise making it unstable. This shadow is what lives on in noise theory as the impossibility of being able to say, once and for all, what noise is. In short, the language about noise and Japanese noise music can indeed be said, but in its saying, more noise is born.

It should be clear from this that the proposition of passive noise is not at the expense of the active. Nor is the move away from transgression as it is associated with subversive action engineered at the cost of action itself. This thesis is not, in other words, an attempt to debunk all existing theoretical approaches to noise in general and Japanese noise music in particular. It is essential to understand passive noise as an intervention and displacement that occurs within the language of the active beyond the control of an author and without invitation. Passive noise is what approaches us in the realm of meaning as an uncontrollable displacement of meaning's totality as well as its constitution. In keeping with Blanchot's strategy of reading, then, the aim of this thesis is to 'generalise the essential proposition of the

text [active noise] to its fullest extent.' This will involve, at times, adopting various approaches that have been used to write about Japanese noise music, that argue through possibility, negativity and radicalism, as well as interpreting specific examples of Japanese noise music through these conceptual filters. But this will be done only to 'radicalise that argument to the point where it becomes consumed by its own impossibility.'<sup>2</sup> The aim is to expose the restrictive limitations of noise's conceptuality to a perennial impossibility that exists deep within it. This is not done in order to make 'thought capitulate' but, as Blanchot explains, 'in order to allow it [noise] to announce itself according to a measure other than that of power.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 74.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* [1969], trans. Susan Hanson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hegarty, 'Brace and embrace: Masochism in noise performance', in Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (eds.), *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorising Sonic Experience* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 135.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Libertson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), 116.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

To philosophise via passivity is to move away from the voluntarism that is largely constitutive of active noise. In part, this is about moving away from the rather tired and played-out twentieth-century modernist idea of transgression the exigency of which is reliant solely on exaggeration and shock. Although Hegarty is fair to suggest that many people 'have not yet encountered either the content or form of the

transgressive in experimental musical terms,' allowing us to question 'anyone who imagines that transgression itself is somehow over,'<sup>4</sup> he is equally right when he acknowledges the manner in which the 'widescale dissemination of oddness,'<sup>5</sup> in certain artistic circles, has to a degree rendered formal the idea of transgression. But there is a necessity for understanding transgression differently that, while addressing this latter concern concomitantly, precedes the ontological certainty of transgressive content in action. As Libertson explains, the 'aggressivity which seeks to liberate violence [...] constitutes a voluntarism which cannot but misunderstand the passivity of violence itself, and of the unicity which undergoes its approach.'<sup>6</sup> According to the nature of passivity, expressions of violent content and subversive action are unthinkable without the 'proposition of a primordial alteration of closure which would make possible these relations.'<sup>7</sup> That is to say, we do not approach excess and the limit through our own volition, but the very constitution of our own subjectivity, prior

to our ability to act, is one of excess. By and large, the language of transgression has been drastically misunderstood if we believe Libertson when he argues that it was never meant to address action or power of any kind. By rethinking Japanese noise music through this different understanding of transgression as it accords with passivity, there is equally the implication that analysis of its content has so far, to a large degree, been misdirected. But it is only through following this misdirection to its absolute limit that we might glimpse this alternate form of transgression and ultimately an alternate understanding of noise. This will not be illustrated through examples of authorial intent but argued, with the use of Blanchot and Libertson, as an anterior fact of symbolic form and content.

## A Brief History of Noise

As Hainge explains in the opening chapter of his book *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*, 'Since the advent of post-Industrial society, the world has become louder and louder, and noise has invaded our lives more with every passing year.'<sup>8</sup> Although, as demonstrated throughout his text, Hainge is referring to the multifarious expressions of noise which encompass a much broader spectrum of audio-visual and literary affairs than the sonic definition of noise might imply – he pays close attention to, for instance, film and literature as sites for considering the differentiating complexity of noise – his opening gambit is also indicative of the way in which cultural and sonic theory has, to an extent, been invaded by noise. Noise is, indeed, 'everywhere and on the rise' and no more can this be seen than in the recent surge in publications concerned with noise<sup>9</sup> (an analysis of which will constitute a large part of this thesis). Yet despite this increased interest, definitions of noise are nevertheless as numerous as their publications and as varied as the disparate contexts through which they have been examined. This is partly because the conceptual terrain upon which noise is predicated is distinctly heterogeneous.

<sup>8</sup> Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

A testament to the 'vast range of meanings that have been attributed to noise and the number of sites that it has inhabited' is Hillel Schwartz's 2011 publication *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond*, whose title and 912 page breadth give some indication as to the scope through which noise can, and indeed has

been, analysed. Even though, as Hainge suggests, despite the scope of his analysis, Schwartz can offer no 'consensus as to what noise is in a definitive sense,'<sup>10</sup> his concluding thoughts in the final pages of the book go some way to defining the elusive nature of noise's agreed heterogeneity:

10 Ibid., 6.

11 Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 858.

Timeless and untimely, noise is the noisiest of concepts, abundantly self-contradictory [...]. Noise must be what we are waiting for all along, an encounter with the chaotic that loosens the lug-nuts of routine. Or, grating and incessant, it sends us over the edge. Sound and unsound, something or other.<sup>11</sup>

It is the emphasis placed on the idea of the 'other,' through its italicisation, that is perhaps most illustrative of the discourse of noise theory. The idea of the other regularly refers, not only philosophically but in a range of discourses, to something foreign and strange; it accounts for an alterity and difference that allows us to explore the boundaries of meaning. Regarding noise, it accounts for what struggles to be assimilated through our definitions of noise. The implication here is that through an appropriation of the chaotic, noise somehow enables us to encounter a reality unrestrained by the limitations of meaning. In short, noise is said by Schwartz, as well as various other theorists who will be discussed, to represent a chaotic site of differentiation that might, in some cases, shatter the limitations of meaning once this differentiation is mobilised or encountered.

The scope of the analyses that pertain to this abundantly self-contradictory, 'noisiest of all concepts,' definition of noise may seem at odds with the nature of a literature review. It seems almost self-contradictory in itself to identify a common pattern in a theoretical discourse that champions its conceptual disparities. But this disparity is exactly what unifies noise theory as a unique body of thought regularly indebted to philosophical ideas of difference and impossibility. And, in fact, the history of this disparity has been well rehearsed by a number of theorists, including Schwartz, Paul Hegarty, and Douglas Kahn. All of these theorists offer comprehensive histories of noise based on the conceptual premise that noise belongs to the region of differentiation and alterity, even if this differentiation is ultimately assimilated, dialectically, into the region of meaning. For this reason, a fully comprehensive and inclusive commentary on existing noise literature does not bear

repeating. What does bear repeating, however, is the belief shared by the majority of noise theorists, alluded to here by Schwartz, that noise is heterogeneous in a manner in line with its etymology, one that is derived from the Latin *nausea*, meaning seasickness; noise's heterogeneous nature creates a sense of unease and confusion in the subjects who experience it. In the words of Kahn, noise is everything that is 'interchangeably soundful and figurative,' and directly inclusive of what is 'loud, disruptive, confusing inconsistent, turbulent, chaotic, unwanted, nauseous,

injurious.<sup>12</sup> And it is this idea that seems to connect an otherwise divergent body of noise theories.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), 20.

<sup>13</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* [1977], trans. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 11.

What is considered loud and disruptive exceeds what any sonic phenomenology would allow. In the body of noise theory noise can and has been used to name, particularly in information theory, a moment of confusion and complexity.<sup>13</sup> Its heterogeneity is found in its standardised formation into a category of negativity and disorder which is, necessarily, contextually dependent. As long as noise names complexity, the breakdown in meaning and the disorder against the normativity of order, then noise can embody a variety of political, social, and artistic characteristics. Jacques Attali's 1977 *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*<sup>14</sup> was a formative step in theorising noise in this way, particularly because it hypothesised noise as a concept inclusive of socio-economic and political weight. Noise is thought, by Attali, to be the charged (sometimes political) content of a historical vanguardism that prefigures social change. It exists inside music for Attali, yes, but as that which resists the status quo of society more broadly and what aggregates itself toward a new system of meaning. For this reason, Attali's work is doubly important for understanding active noise. The flexibility of his concept of noise, with its origins in a musical vanguardism, enabled those 'theorists of the (often musical) avant-garde such as Russo and Warner and Paul Hegarty'<sup>15</sup>(Kahn can also be included here), to reflect more closely on the philosophical and social implications of sonic excess. In other words, Attali broadened the potential significance of noise beyond its acoustical qualities without leaving those qualities entirely behind. What becomes typical of

language about noise music (active noise) – especially in the work of Hegarty whose position will be referred to throughout this thesis as a pedestal of active noise at its most brazened but also, and more interestingly, at its most complex and contradictory – finds its origin in Attali; the sonic extremity of Japanese noise music is reflective of a complex philosophical heterogeneity that actively questions not only music but society and identity at large.

Attali's work can also be thought as playing a big part in what Hainge, quoting Adrienne Janus, refers to as the 'anti-ocular turn'<sup>16</sup> in philosophy and critical theory. In privileging references to sound over the dominant position of sight, a very different and, as Hainge argues, 'far less Cartesian'<sup>17</sup> critical vocabulary can be entertained. By its very nature, sound forces a less controllable and definitive phenomenological relationship with the world than sight. In language this is reflected in the argument that the affirmation of a sound being noisy is a synthetic proposition in that the predicate of it being noisy, that is, inharmonious and chaotic, is not contained or held within a subject, sound or site. Noise is empirically verifiable but only as, according to Hegarty, something fundamentally dependent on 'historical, geographical and cultural location.'<sup>18</sup> For this reason, a critical language that makes reference to sound



over sight is one inclined toward heterogeneity as opposed to homogeneity; it is an approach that favours the mutability of meaning other than any kind of resolute manifestation of meaning. This is precisely where Jean-Luc Nancy discusses his idea of listening (*écouter*), as a site always 'on the edge of meaning.'<sup>19</sup> His approach to phenomenology opposes *écouter* to *entendre* which, as Hainge reminds us, means both 'to understand and to hear'<sup>20</sup> in French. In other words, Nancy develops a complex auditory phenomenology which, with its emphasis on listening – that is 'inclined toward the opening of meaning, hence to a slash, a cut in un-sensed indifference at the same time toward a reserve that is anterior and posterior to any signifying punctuation'<sup>21</sup> – questions the very impetus of phenomenology. For this reason, like Attali, Nancy's text is formative because the type of phenomenological opening it offers has subsequently become so commonplace in noise theory.

16 Ibid., 12.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 3.

19 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 7.

20 Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 12.

21 Nancy, *Listening*, 27.

According to Hegarty, however, 'What noise needs, and where noise is, however briefly, is a listening that is brought back to hearing through processes of rejection (as noise), confusion (through noise as change), excess,' but most importantly to a 'wrongness or inappropriateness, failure (of noise, to be noise, to not be noise, to be music, not to be sound, not be).'22 Noise is able to straddle a number of different disciplines – information theory, social theory, philosophy, music – because it names in each a moment of communicative breakdown, the opening up of meaning to differentiation, which is met somewhere along the way, dialectically, as a new type of homogeneity. In short, listening is brought back to hearing for Hegarty, through noise's failure to stay noise (meaningless/chaotic) as it becomes normalised as a new type of meaning/music. But this failure only works if we assume noise always from the negative, in the manner Hegarty does: noise 'can never be positively, definitively and timelessly located.'<sup>23</sup> Noise only fails if we define it resolutely through an antithesis to meaning. But by doing this we effectively reduce the nature of alterity, and noise's relationship with the category of heterogeneity, to the region of conceptuality and meaning. In other words, we limit the complexity of noise when we essentialise its definition to a category of negativity.

22 Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007), 199.

23 Ibid., ix.

The complex manifestation of differentiation that frames noise as the conceptual split within an otherwise autonomous ontology is designed, for the most part in the language of active noise, in the image of that ontology. Put another way, the importance impossibility plays in relation to noise as discussed throughout the discourse of noise theory by the ideas of self-contradiction, listening and the other –

according to the bulk of this theory noise is impossible to definitively locate – is minimised when impossibility is thought as the relational opposite of possibility, and therefore recuperable via this possibility through the idea of failure. As previously stated, a comprehensive review of this literature is not necessary here, having been rehearsed in a number of texts. Also, a large part of our methodological approach will include close readings of active noise to the point of critique. It is enough to indicate the various peculiarities of these theories in a more general fashion if we keep in mind that close readings of these peculiarities will constitute the bulk of this thesis as well as our point of departure. As such, it is enough to indicate here the manner in which impossibility is typically thought, in the discourse of noise theory, to be lived

only momentarily as the instance in which noise brings into question the limit of musicality, meaning and with it, the world. Noise for theorists like Hegarty, Eugene Thacker, and Salomé Voegelin, delimits the world by exploring boundaries and limits, offering momentary glimpses of escape without ever escaping entirely. This is all done through the supposedly radical gestures of the noise musician and the extremity of both their sound and actions. Impossibility, then, can be understood in this language only as a consequence of the failed possibility to live outside the world once and for all. The image of heterogeneity in the language of active noise is thought in opposition to the world and in direct relation to the actions of a subject that is phenomenologically grounded: 'The alterity which escapes totalization or comprehension on the basis of its autonomy and its power to escape, is an alterity designed in the image of the Same.'<sup>24</sup> With this approach, the questioning of phenomenology that Nancy was reaching for is somewhere forgotten.

<sup>24</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 2.

What this thesis will address and what, for the most part, has failed to be addressed by the majority of texts about noise and Japanese noise music is that true alterity, as is evoked by this elusive process of *écouter*, must by definition come before the world of relation and prior to the subject that is relational. Ruptures in our phenomenological reality would, in this understanding, only work as a reminder of our prior constitution within a differentiated reality before the readiness of failure. What this thesis is working against is the idea that noise and its questioning of limits is a result of direct action or subversion. By instead arguing that its alterity and relation to impossibility comes before any kind of action as both the manifestation and impossibility of action, the word passivity will be taken over activity as a decisive move away from a long trajectory of vanguardism that has its origins in the likes of Attali and which was followed later by a number of theorists, who will all be analysed closely in this thesis (Hegarty, Kahn, Thacker, Voegelin).

## Why Japan?

If noise is truly heterogeneous, appearing in a variety of guises across a range of contexts, and if we aim to explore this alterity even further by arguing for noise as an anterior passivity that questions the very regions of ontology, then why choose the

specificity of Japanese noise music to make the case? While the aim of this thesis is

to develop a malleable framework of passivity available for considering impossibility and alterity across a wide variety of artistic expressions and contexts, the site of Japanese noise music presents a perfect case study for the reason that the tension between impossibility as both a condition of possibility and conversely anteriority has, to an extent, already been enacted in a number of theoretical approaches to this music. Hegarty is right to suggest that it makes sense to talk of noise in relation to music and meaning 'since the advent of the various types of noise produced in Japanese music.' As Hegarty goes on to suggest, 'there is, if you like, more noise in Japanese noise music, whether in terms of volume, distortion, non-musicality, non-musical elements, music against music and meaning.'<sup>25</sup> But it also makes sense because the complex heterogeneity of noise, that we briefly traced, seems to reach a theoretical peek in discussions of Japanese noise music. That is to say, discussions of Japanese noise music are rarely just ethnomusicological or sociological but are often poststructural in style, wherein the site specificity of a regional music and our listening encounters with it rupture from the philosophical thrust of heterogeneity.<sup>26</sup> Put more simply, examples of sonic and performative excess in Japanese noise music are used by a number of theorists to explore a philosophical idea of excess that has implications stretching far wider than the materiality of these initial examples. Theorists of Japanese noise music are, to varying degrees, theorists of the impossible. But the problem so far, as this thesis will argue, is that these theories, which belong to what we are calling active noise, have not gone far enough in their account of impossibility and the relationship it has to Japanese noise music. Their focus has typically been on noise's supposed negativity, giving precedence to the non-musical distortions of an excessive and erotic art thereby forcing their recognition of the impossible into a tight reciprocity with the possible. The result has been a largely homogenised account of noise that is in fact at odds with the alterity these theories set out to evoke.

<sup>25</sup> Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 133.

<sup>26</sup> There is of course a danger of ethnocentrism here. But we are not trying to say that Japanese noise music is, ontologically, poststructural but that in the literature surrounding this music, the emphasis is typically poststructural.

If we look at certain aspects of Japanese popular culture alongside certain facets of Japan's socio-economic structure, or at least perceptions of this structure,

then it is quite easy to see why a number of theorists have been tempted into understandings of this music that lean heavily on ideas of violence, subversion and antagonism. In his essay 'Larvae', an essay he suggests might also be an 'incipient nervous breakdown,' Wall argues against the 'faked naiveté'<sup>27</sup> of the kawaii (... ) phenomenon which, 'originating in Japan,' he argues to have 'contaminated much of Asian culture for the past thirty years.'<sup>28</sup> The term kawaii refers to the quality of cuteness that has, according to Kanako Shiokawa, dethroned the once preferred ideas of the 'beautiful' and the 'refined' in Japanese aesthetics.<sup>29</sup> Kawaii is ubiquitous in Japanese culture and extends to anything from the 'the adorable aspect of babies and children, pretty young women and pretty young men,' to the 'charming characters and likable personal quirks in not-so-young folks, especially the elderly.'<sup>30</sup> For Wall the varieties of kawaii expression, that vary from such things as Lolita fashions<sup>31</sup> to Pokémon, are indicative of a collective arrested development, indulged by 'practitioners of incapacity.'<sup>32</sup> Yet perhaps most interestingly for us is kawaii's most 'outstanding feature,' categorised by Shiokawa as 'its complete lack of anything observably threatening.'<sup>33</sup> It would be quite tempting, then, to see a music as extreme

as Japanese noise music, with its violent, macabre and bloody aesthetic as well as its excessive sonic gestures, as an active antithesis to this non-threatening cuteness that represents the aesthetic of Japan's contemporary mainstream culture (this idea will be picked up in chapter three in the discussion of Aida Makato's 1999 painting *Harakiri School Girls*). If there is more noise in Japanese noise music making it, like Hegarty argues, the go-to reference point for all noise music, it may well be because its resistance is doubled, working against not only the 'limits of the non-noise world, a world of taboos, controls, limits, normalised behaviours and so on,'<sup>34</sup> but also the dominance of a non-threatening *kawaii* aesthetic that has its origins in Japan and

27 Thomas Wall, 'Larvae', in William Large (ed.), *Parallax*, issue 39 (April-June, 2006), 71-82 (71).

28 *Ibid.*, 72.

29 Kanako Shiokawa, 'Cute but Deadly: Women and violence in Japanese Comics', in John A. Lent (ed.), *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1999), 94.

30 *Ibid.*, 93.

31 Lolita fashion is varied and can refer to a number of different styles, some more elaborate than others. Typically though, it is characterised by Victorian clothing, 'cupcake' shaped dresses/skirts and petticoats. In the more *kawaii* Lolita fashions, such as 'Sweet Lolita', the style adopts light/pastel colouring for framing child-like motifs in its design, such as hearts, fruit and animals.

32 Wall, 'Larvae', 72.

33 Shiokawa, 'Cute but Deadly', 94.

34 Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace', 135.

whose quirks are most realised there. It is feasible to say, in response to the question 'why Japan?' that Japanese noise music is resisting more than its Western counterparts, which would explain why it is often perceived as the most extreme and the most noisy of all the noise musics.

In a similar antithesis, the contrast between the image of the Japanese salaryman – a noun often used to describe the life of Japan's bureaucratic white-collar worker, who is commonly thought to be overworked, diligent and formative of Japan's heteronormativity – and the unconventionality of noise might go some way to explaining the extremity of this music as it is said to be specific to Japan (this will be discussed at length in chapter two through an analysis of Shinya Tsukamoto's film *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*). The daily lives of Japanese noise duo Incapacitants are, for instance, notorious among noise fans for the reason that their 'extreme performances stand in stark contrast to their personal ordinariness.'<sup>35</sup> Kosakai Fumio works in a government office while the more famous of the duo, Toshiji Mikawa, works a bureaucratic job in a Japanese bank. In their day-to-day lives the two members of Incapacitants are prototypical images of the Japanese salaryman; they embody the humdrum of the everyday. Yet their physical performances and the extremity of their noise music offer a window into a subterranean chaos. As Novak argues, 'The quotidian life of a Japanese banker becomes a blank slate of social normalcy, against which the power of Noise is revealed through its transformative effects on the humble bodies of ordinary people.'<sup>36</sup> There is, if you like, a parody of social normalcy offered

by the lives of the Japanese salarymen, and embodied by the members of Incapacitants, that delimits the possibilities of radical action and Japanese noise music is arguably a direct articulation of one of these many possibilities. The image of the salaryman, unique to Japan, is arguably more than an image of capitalism as it embodies a sort of hyper-capitalism that symbolises uniformity at its most extreme. It is arguably no coincidence, then, that a music thought to be noise's most extreme expression would emerge from a backdrop of such an extreme uniformity.

35 David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 40.

36 Novak, *Japanoise*, 42.

37 Franck Stofer, *Japanese Independent Music* (Bordeaux: Sonore, 2001).

Alongside Franck Stofer's book *Japanese Independent Music*,<sup>37</sup> which offers a rather extensive archive of some of the key figures in Japan's underground noise

scene as well as interviews and articles pertaining to the peculiarities of Japan's noise making, Novak's 2013 book *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* offers the kind of ethnomusicological mapping that enables us to think about these sorts of pop-cultural and socio-economic factors. His first-person account of multiple noise performances and interviews are coupled with analyses of recorded media. It is as if, at first glance, Novak's lengthy period in Japan has given him some type of cultural access to understanding this complex music. However, Novak's analysis, despite initial appearances, in fact aims to complicate this historical narrative through what he calls 'the repetitions, delays, and distortions of technological mediation.'<sup>38</sup> He introduces the idea of the feedback loop to displace the site specificity of Japan within Japanese noise music. Or perhaps more accurately, his argument is that culture itself, Japan's included, is a condition of complex cultural circulations and exchanges of materials, ideas, knowledge and expressions. For instance, he describes noise music's part in the cultural exchange of what he calls 'Cool Japan.' Despite naming those aspects of Japanese popular culture, inclusive of the likes of anime, manga, cinema and music, that were adopted and invoked by Western popular culture, particularly the United States, 'Cool Japan' also names the 'transnational mediation'<sup>39</sup> with the U.S. that helped shape Japan's pop-cultural image as internationally 'cool.' Novak explains the peculiar instance of hearing about Japanese noise music only when arriving back in the U.S. despite living in one of the supposed hot-spots for noise – the Kansai region of Japan – for a year. With the idea of feedback circulation Novak is trying to explain this type of phenomenon as part of a complex rhizome of 'intercultural relationships'<sup>40</sup> that constitute the production and representation of noise's identity without a particular centre. His examples are only part of a partial story that is made up of various fragments, instances and expressions of intercultural noise thought to be specific to Japan. It is, as it were, 'marked as much by what it occludes as by what it reveals'<sup>41</sup> and is as noisy as it is explicative.

38 Novak, *Japanoise*, 20.

39 *Ibid.*, 10.

40 *Ibid.*, 17

41 *Ibid.*, 26.

What is perhaps most interesting about Novak's text is the way in which, despite being the first comprehensive ethnographic study of Japanese noise music, he challenges with the concept of noise the very discipline of ethnography. He does not

'touch down in particular sites for long' but constructs an 'unsettling ethnography'<sup>42</sup> that is vigilant of noise's diverse expressions and movements. While Novak is keen to emphasise the practices and experiences of noise music over any theoretical abstraction in his explanation of its heterogeneity, he is still nevertheless being attentive to the theoretical alterity that has been the centre of noise music's conceptual framework since its inception into critical theory. Although Novak is more attentive to Japan's pop-socio-economic climate than any other author writing on Japanese noise music, a climate that implicates both *kawaii* and the salaryman lifestyle, he is wary of the limitations this sort of theoretical orientation might impose. '[T]he sounds and performances that fell under the umbrella of Noise,' Novak tells us, 'were too inconsistent to be categorized with quick-and-dirty summaries of sound, aesthetics, audiences, or regional histories.'<sup>43</sup> Novak knows that at its core noise is multifarious and without centre, making any claims to its economic or cultural orientation precarious ones. He acknowledges the way in which noise's sonic resonances mirror the seemingly limitless scope of its conceptual invocation, while the sites of its material expression are too numerous and varied to exhaust. Therefore, despite what looks like an obvious work of ethnography, his findings pull us away from the sociological explanations that would make noise exclusive to Japan. Novak reminds us that what is unique to Japanese noise music is not its 'Japaneseness,' but its extreme disparity and heterogeneity that in essence refuses any fixed location.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 117.

Any hope of a stable ethnography of noise runs up against the uncertainty and variety of what noise actually is and where it might be found. However, this does not make the choice of Japan, in this thesis, an arbitrary one. On the contrary, as stated previously, there is more noise in Japanese noise music because the evocation of conceptual heterogeneity that has occupied the space of noise since Attali and the anti-ocular turn in critical theory reaches a philosophical peak in discussions of Japanese noise music. Both the inconsistency and variety of performances in Japan, alongside the extremity in which these performances are often framed puts the possibility of Japanese noise music, as a genre of music, in direct relation to its conceptual impossibility; antagonistic to the normativity of music and performance, Japanese noise music is chosen by most theorists as a material case study for considering noise's conceptual heterogeneity precisely because it exists as a

'cultureless form of antimusic.'<sup>44</sup> In other words, with its disparity and because of its extreme behaviours, Japanese noise music lives on the cusp of possibility and impossibility; the possibility of a music existing without definable content as well as the possibility of exceeding the norms of behaviour inevitably reaching the processes of conceptualisation, assimilation and desensitisation, which is to say, impossibility.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 119.

Theories of Japanese noise music agree on this much at least, that the

possibility of encounter, either as the listener or practitioner, runs up against a mode of impossibility in some way. Hegarty, Thacker, Voegelin, Novak, and Hainge all, to some degree, acknowledge the inevitability of impossibility when writing about this music. At the very least, this is an agreed acknowledgment of heterogeneity either within noise's conceptual make-up or its material expressions that reveal an uncertainty which runs counter to the possibility of fixed definition. At its most extreme, the physical properties of noise are argued to be so overwhelming that the subject who listens, and who would subsequently make sense of these sonic properties, shatters, thereby giving the possibility of easy interpretation over to an almost transcendental vocabulary that is naturally indebted to the impossible. All the while, a type of cultural dialectic is assumed which processes and assimilates the subversions of noise so thoroughly that any hope of an end-point, a hope retained in the escapist fantasies of extreme artistic behaviour, is ultimately subsumed by impossibility. Yet what is curious about all of these theories – even, as will be argued in chapter three, Hainge's theory in spite of its relational ontology – is the way in which the different encounters with impossibility are curtailed by expressions of possibility, namely through the expressions of radicalism and negativity. The consequence of this is that impossibility, which should refer to what can never be assimilated into the regions of conceptuality and meaning, is coaxed into a full expression. This is not, however, to say that impossibility and alterity are completely lost but that they are, in the end, given over to the possibility of action even if, like Hegarty argues, this possibility is doomed to fail.

The reason why a comprehensive explanation of these various expressions of impossibility is not presented here is because a large part of this thesis is primarily concerned with the content of impossibility as it appears in these various theories of Japanese noise music. Under the umbrella term active noise we will be including all

theorists, particularly those listed above, who take impossibility and alterity as consequences of successful/unsuccessful action. We will be examining the ways in which these theories approach alterity and how this alterity is ultimately folded into the realm of comprehension. By doing this, we will be able to demonstrate how this assimilation in fact runs counter to the alterity it looks to understand precisely because the very idea of understanding is counterintuitive to the philosophical ideas of alterity and impossibility. The purpose of exposing this theoretical inconsistency is not to collapse noise's theorisation into an irremediable scepticism. On the contrary, at the moment of theoretical rupture within the language of active noise we can glimpse the inherent language of passivity and it is through this inherent instability that we can begin to think about an alternative way of theorising noise's heterogeneity without conceptual reduction and away from negativity and radicalism. By staying with the inherent passivity found within discussions of Japanese noise music the aim is not so much about understanding noise more clearly but about complicating the discourse of noise with a more nuanced account that figures alterity as this language's latent condition. As such, both languages of noise are necessary to the extent that passive noise stands as the hidden predicate of the active, but a predicate which is without condition and without retrieval. It is, as will be argued, the anterior condition of conceptuality that makes the language of active noise both possible but not exhaustive. Ultimately what will be asserted is the idea that noise's heterogeneity is not material just as its relationship with impossibility is not voluntaristic. Noise's heterogeneity and conceptual disparity insists within the language of active noise but beyond any kind of control, which implies a relationship with impossibility that extends beyond the operations of the possible.

## A Strategy without Method

The concern of this thesis, or perhaps more accurately, the site where the tremors of impossibility are felt is language. What is meant here, and throughout this thesis, by the language of Japanese noise music is not language as it might refer to Japanese noise music itself, as if this music has its very own language. Instead, the acknowledgement of passivity occurs in what Daniela Cascella, in her book *En Abîme: Listening, Reading, Writing*, refers to as 'Writing Sound,' which names the

engagement of words with sound in the attempt to write about sound.<sup>45</sup> Passivity inhabits the language about Japanese noise music; it contaminates the discourse of this music and exceeds its limitations. The concern of this thesis is, therefore, with language about Japanese noise music; the language put forward by theorists attempting to make sense of this music and passivity is what names what escapes this discourses' predications.

<sup>45</sup> Daniela Cascella, *En Abîme: Listening, Reading, Writing* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2012), 86.

<sup>46</sup> William Large, Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot: *Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2004), 131.

<sup>47</sup> Cascella, *En Abîme*, 86.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

However, if passive noise names that which, in the discourse of Japanese noise music, is outside the phenomenon of thematisation and conceptualisation then how is it possible to write about it? What happens to the language about Japanese noise music when it is no longer governed by the exigencies of negativity and radicalism or, to ask more broadly, as William Large does, 'What happens to writing [...] when it no longer seeks what can be designated and nominated, when it is no longer governed by the final goal of totality and unity?'<sup>46</sup> This question is, according to Cascella, the very impetus behind the nature of writing about sound. Sound, for Cascella, is a 'perceptual asymptote'<sup>47</sup> of words in that words can never quite make present the sound in question. This means that writing about sound, which would include the writing about Japanese noise music, can never be governed by any kind of unity, totality or presence or that, in spite of itself, this language is always other to itself beyond the control of its author. The reason for this, according to Cascella, is that writing sound is tied strictly to an act of remembering a sound that is fundamentally absent in the act of writing; writing can only recall what is no longer present when one finds themselves present in the space of writing. As Cascella tells us, 'Listening and writing are bound to remain strangers to each other, and Writing Sound inhabits the space of this otherness.'<sup>48</sup>

It is for this reason that, as Large goes on to argue, the difference between writing driven by unity and writing driven by what is not designated or nominated cannot be simply stylistic. To adopt, for instance, a literary or poetic approach over a formalistic style of writing would only clothe the original thought that would



ultimately still be intact. The change must run deeper than a surface level and must, in

fact, be epistemological in its effort. This is why Cascella's own writing sound has consequences for her understanding of herself. Cascella's phenomenological relationship with the world is one based on sound and because writing about sound necessitates a space of otherness, it follows that Cascella's phenomenology is determined and therefore interrupted by an irrecoverable impossibility that ripples across the surface of her ontology, disturbing its steadiness. As Large explains, 'the aim of philosophy is to unify experience in the present,' which describes the phenomenological method. But as this notion of unity is contained in ontology, the idea of being, ontology stands as the 'culmination of phenomenology.'<sup>49</sup> What this means for Cascella is that her writing, which is constituted by absence as much as it is presence and thus by silence as much as it is sound, must also reflect an idea of the self that is as equally uncertain as the experiences she draws on. And what this means more generally is that impossibility partially determines not only the act of being able to make sound/experience fully present in writing but also it determines the self that chooses to write.

<sup>49</sup> Large, *Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing*, 142.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

It is true that the language of passive noise that we aim to expose as existing deep within the language about Japanese noise music will interrupt the certainty of the phenomenological relationship with noise that sees its sonic materiality, as well as the physicality of its various performances, as actively anti-thematic, negative and subversive. With the idea of passive noise we will be accounting for a different understanding of temporality than the kind in which the noise practitioner is able to act. By arguing for an alterity that inhabits ontology rather than opposes it, the phenomenological relationship is altered to account for a temporality that is other to the restoration of a unitary present. But to deny phenomenology completely would deny us the possibility of being able to write about this different kind of relation to noise and would deny us the very possibility of passivity. As such, what is recognised through the language of passive noise is a different kind of phenomenology, an almost negative phenomenology, existing inside the language about Japanese noise music causing it 'to write its own impossibility.'<sup>50</sup> This is why the development of passive noise is not proposed as an alternative to active noise. It is not a matter of choosing one mode of writing over another. Passive noise, instead, is the exposure of the manner in which the certainty of the active is upset by an alterity that is

inseparable from and yet never fully present in the language of possibility. One cannot exist without the other even though, paradoxically, it is this co-dependence which perpetually disturbs their existence.

In the explanation of this doubling of language, where passivity will be argued to paradoxically constitute the manifestation of meaning as the inexhaustible insufficiency of meaning in the discourse of Japanese noise music, the work of Blanchot will be the main point of reference. This is not because Blanchot is a musical theorist or philosopher of music. On the contrary, with his concern firmly placed in literature, Blanchot almost never addresses music or noise directly, although sound is a literary tool he occasionally deploys to explore the impossible (this will be discussed in relation to his novel *Thomas the Obscure* at the end of chapter one).

However, in his essay 'The Song of the Sirens' Blanchot does give a brief novelistic account of music and its potential relationship with noise that not only helps illuminate the problem of certainty as it relates to the language of music but demonstrates a potential connection between his literary theory and music. From this essay we can glimpse what Blanchot's understanding of might have been and we can begin to entertain what Blanchot might have said about the language of more dissonant/noisy music had he chosen to write specifically about it. Most importantly, however, we can begin to see why a theorist so preoccupied with literature might be a useful reference for rethinking about the language of Japanese noise music.

In his essay 'The Song of the Siren' Blanchot writes about The Odyssey and specifically about Ulysses's encounter with the alluring sound of the Siren's song. What is signified by this song, 'an inhuman song [...] sung in an unreal way by strange powers,'<sup>51</sup> is, for Blanchot, a type of promise, an 'enigmatic promise' where the ethereality of the Siren's call, working as a 'form of navigation,' would guide the sailors to safety by awakening in them 'the desire for a marvellous beyond.' This beyond, for Blanchot, is thought to be the 'region where music originated' but because of the fate that awaits anyone who follows the Siren's sound, a fate of shipwreck and ruin, this origin cannot be reached and is, for this reason, ultimately impossible. Although Blanchot is using the impossible song of the Sirens – impossible because it cannot be heard and survived – as a way of explaining the impossible centre of the

<sup>51</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'The Song of the Sirens' [1959], in George Quasha (ed.) and Lydia Davis (trans.), *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays* (New York: Station Hill, 1999), 443-450 (443).

language of literature, it is as if Blanchot is also saying that the language of music is equally impossible because it has no origin that can be accessed. It is for this reason that the relationship between the Sirens and the sailors, and the hope placed by the sailors in the Siren's call, can be likened to our relationship to language and the hope placed in it when writing about Japanese noise music. Just as those who try and approach the Siren's song but ultimately fail, writing about noise music inevitably meets the absence upon which this language is predicated. This comparison can be drawn quite explicitly from Blanchot's essay, when he writes:

by awakening in them hope and the desire for a marvellous beyond, and that beyond was only a desert, as though the region where music originated was the only place completely without music, a sterile place where silence, like noise, burned all access to the song in anyone who had once had command of it.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 444.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 443.

Blanchot seems to be saying that the origin of music, embodied in the song of the Sirens – a song so unfathomable and unreachable because of its inhuman origin – is fundamentally uncertain and that noise itself constitutes in part, along with silence, this uncertainty. The noise Blanchot is referring to is also significant here because it is not a noise that can be heard nor noise as it is thought in opposition to music. Although Blanchot does not expand on this notion it could be argued that he

gesturing toward a similar understanding of noise to the kind this thesis will account for with the term passive noise; Blanchot's noise is anterior to the realm of music and meaning as an impossibility that cannot be reached or mastered. This noise, therefore, does not belong to sound but to language as the very impossibility that makes the language of music uncontainable. In his discussion of the Sirens it seems that Blanchot is saying that an 'inhuman' noise held in the 'margins of nature,'<sup>53</sup> a noise that this thesis will refer to as passive noise, has already 'burned' any access to its origin.

Blanchot's discussion of Ulysses and the Sirens, however, is not written in order to demonstrate how everything collapses in the face of impossibility. This is only the first part of his discussion which, in one respect, is a discussion about the fate of every sailor until Ulysses. It is a discussion of the impossible up until the impossible becomes the narrative. After this, Blanchot begins to discuss Ulysses's own encounter with the Sirens and with this he accounts for the impossibility of the

narrative relation which is, paradoxically, the possibility of literature. The space of literature, according to Blanchot, belongs to a very different reality and temporality than our everyday use of language. Like Casella's writing sound, what is written about in the writing of literature is only made real by the act of writing: 'in the same moment that this narration comes into being it creates what it is narrating; it cannot exist as a narration unless it creates what is happening in that narration.'<sup>54</sup> This means that literary writing is suspended over a non-origin or rather a self-perpetuating origin as it is not conditioned by the reality of which it writes but rather it, the narrative, is the condition of reality itself. The song of the Sirens, originating from a region that is without music (an abyss), is the point from which not only the story of The Odyssey begins – that inhuman/non-origin that draws Homer into the act of writing and which Ulysses must survive, in the tale, so that Homer can write about it – but the point from which all narration begins. Like Ulysses struggle to survive the song of the Sirens – Ulysses ties himself to the mast of the boat so that he can survive the consuming impossibility of their inhuman sound – the narrative occurs as a preservation of the 'interval between the real and the imaginary.'<sup>55</sup> Ulysses has to tie himself to the mast, an act that for Blanchot risks nothing and accepts no consequence, because he knows he cannot face the abyss of the Sirens properly. In doing this he recognises the measure of impossibility without being consumed by it. This is the recognition of the interval between the real and the imaginary, the possible and the impossible, out of which Homer is able to construct the tale of The Odyssey.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 447.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 448.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 445.

For Blanchot, this encounter with the impossible in The Odyssey is not simply an allegory, as he writes: 'A very obscure struggle takes place between every tale and the encounter with the Sirens.'<sup>56</sup> In other words, what Blanchot is saying with this statement is that the very nature of literary writing takes place in relation to the impossible and writing is the struggle for narration when faced with this impossibility. However, with this statement, Blanchot also narrows the distance between the language of literature and the language of music by suggesting that music, in The Odyssey at least, is central to the literary encounter. But this music is of a very different kind to music as it is typically understood. Blanchot's idea of music is

inseparable from the realm of the Sirens, which is an inhuman, abyssal realm that

cannot be approached and that has its origin in an anterior (passive) noise. In this way, Blanchot uses the uncertain origin of music as a way of describing the impossible centre of literary language. What is equally implied by this essay, then, is that the language of music is owed the same seriousness as the literary encounter, a seriousness that understands impossibility to reside at its centre. While Blanchot does not frequent the idea of music as much as he does death, the night, the neuter, and waiting in his numerous contemplations of the impossible, this recognition of the impossible in 'The Song of the Sirens' illustrates how Blanchot's novelistic treatment of music might account for the impossible in the discourse of music. Although a literary theorist first and foremost, this essay demonstrates the sprawling nature of Blanchot's literary reflections; it shows how the impossible contaminates any language that searches for an origin. For this reason, it is useful starting point that helps explain why a literary theorist is going to be the central reference in a thesis about Japanese noise music. What will be demonstrated through the argument for passive noise is the idea that, because of implications that stretch beyond the frame of literary contemplation, Blanchot's reflections on impossibility can help us complicate the language of Japanese noise music by refusing the rigid essentialities that have become common practice in the language about this music. Equally, Blanchot's language will help us acknowledge how the possibility of being able to write about this music begins from the instant of impossibility, which is to say it begins from the anterior instant of passivity.

Blanchot does not have a theory as such and the concepts that he draws on are more like non-concepts because of their inherent relation to impossibility. However, the impossible figures so centrally in Blanchot's work that Kevin Hart and Geoffrey Hartman, in their edited text *The Power of Contestation*, go so far as to recall the Greek poet Archilochus and his fragment 'the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing'. Their suggestion is that, like Archilochus's hedgehog, Blanchot's writing is concerned with one big idea, and that this idea is, as they say, the 'outside, the impossible, or the neutral.'<sup>57</sup> This is why this thesis will draw on a range of Blanchot's writings in order to reveal the impossible as it persists in the commentaries about Japanese noise music. The emphasis given within Blanchot's vocabulary to impossibility, which we will refer to also as passivity, will allow us to

<sup>57</sup> Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Power of Contestation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 15.

pull away from the rigidity of negativity, radicalism and voluntarism that theorists of Japanese noise music insists upon too readily. The result will be a language capable of thinking a new kind of alterity in noise, and particularly Japanese noise music, in a way that is not limited by modernist notions of transgression and subversion. This will also allow us to rethink Japanese noise music's relationship to the philosophy of Georges Bataille. Often used a reference for framing this music's active antagonisms against systematisation, we will demonstrate how the emphasis placed on voluntarism, by a number of theorists writing about Japanese noise music, is a mischaracterisation of Bataille, particularly the Bataille which Blanchot knew and which Liberton wrote about.

In chapter one we will lay the theoretical groundwork necessary for understanding the language of passive noise as it contaminates the language of active

noise. By firstly introducing a different relation to alterity than the one assimilated by conceptuality, we will then approach a different type of passivity than the one accounted for by our grammatical understanding of the term. Passivity, as it accords with a radical passivity, is not the target of action but an ontological fissure that jeopardises our very foundations of subjectivity. It will be argued that this passivity murmurs beneath our entire conceptual structure, including that of Japanese noise music, making it an inherently unstable structure. Reference will be made to the two slopes of art as Blanchot understands them in an attempt to glimpse the manner in which this passivity interrupts the certainty of active noise. By re-framing noise's etymology in accordance with Levinas's understating of nausea, as it aligns with Blanchot's idea of the night and their shared idea of the *il y a*, the dominance of the ideas of negativity and radicalism will be uprooted with the assertion that noise's alterity exceeds the intention of its authors and escapes the clutches of any conceptualisation.

Chapter two follows on from this idea of intentionless alterity by accounting for a different idea of transgression than the kind frequently attributed to erotic and sacrificial activities. Starting with a discussion of Blanchot's interpretation of Simone Weil's ideas of decreation and affliction, we will introduce a different temporality of suffering than the type assumed through dialectics and the type typically tied to Japanese noise music's flirtation with masochism. This temporality paradoxically accounts for a loss of temporality affirming instead an infinite feeling of disquiet that fundamentally displaces the idea of the subject dwelling in affliction. From there we

will move on to discuss the notion of excess through the relation of proximity, which roots the origin of excess and alterity deep within the ontological structure of the subject as a contamination. In this section of the chapter we will lean heavily on Libertson's reading of Bataille in order to extricate the idea of transgression from its erotic and macabre voluntarism, and in order to demonstrate the way in which noise is, before the action of its authors, already other to itself. As our final point of discussion we will draw further on Cascella's account of writing sound and Shinya Tsukamoto's visualisation of mutation in his film *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* to further explain this alternate temporality and this internal relation to alterity/excess.

In chapter three we will examine the relationship between death and noise. Japanese noise music is regularly conceptualised through a macabre and fatal aesthetic. It will be argued, with reference to *seppuku* (Japanese ritual suicide), that this relationship between death and noise is not only symbiotic in its excess but both physical and deliberate. That is, according to the language of active noise, Japanese noise music actively looks for its own death and that of the listeners as if, through death, an escape from worldly restrictions might be found. What will be argued, however, is that this understanding of death is largely Heideggerian in that it makes of death a type of possibility that in fact misunderstands or underestimates the unassimilable impossibility that occurs in death. By following Blanchot's reversal of Martin Heidegger we will account for an alternative understanding of death that in fact never occurs as it is lost to the temporality of waiting and the suspended animation of fascination. The general thrust of the analysis will be a sustained discussion of passivity which in each chapter argues the very same point: the alterity of noise is caught in a temporality without origin and without end, contaminating the language of Japanese noise music from within as the refusal of essentiality and the insistent impossibility of action.

By its very nature passivity interrupts communication which means that any

formal presentation of passivity must, by necessity, remain incomplete. With the idea of passivity we are not, despite appearances, proposing a new taxonomy of concepts. We are complicit in the experiment of conceptualisation only to the extent that passivity names what exists inside conceptuality as the refusal of conceptuality. It is a non-concept introduced in relation to Japanese noise music with the aim of pulling noise away from the rather tired repetition of negativity and radicalism. There is, as it were, no historicising passive noise for it is a point of dispersion rather than identity.

This goes some way to explaining our final chapter. To the extent that a conclusion can be formulated about something that cannot be avowed, we will touch upon the idea of community as our final, synthesising point. Here it will be argued that Japanese noise music exists closer to Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy's ideas of the unavowable/inoperative community not because of a deliberate refusal of a musical scene, nor because of its disparate expressions, but because of an anterior relationship with impossibility that is equally its manifestation as well as its dispersion.

It might seem futile to propose a work that is affirming quite directly the impossibility of affirmation. Equally, it may seem that any analysis that gives prominence to impossibility over possibility is nothing short of a flattening scepticism. But the argument for passivity – as an argument for the outside, alterity, the other – is not equivocal to the argument for the impossibility of reason. In other words, passive noise is not saying that every expression of noise's heterogeneity is false but that the expression itself, which is absolutely necessary, contains within it an impossible remainder that resists conceptual completion. As Large argues, 'Scepticism belongs to reason, but like an uninvited guest that will not leave.'<sup>58</sup> Alterity, impossibility, death, transgression and waiting are all rearticulations of passivity as it occurs not outside of reason as an unfathomable beyond but deep inside as an ever receding centre. It is, as it were, not just what is said that is important but the manner in which what is said is interrupted and diverted by an inexhaustible excess deep within its saying. Therefore, as a limitless excess, impossibility is what conditions the very possibility of saying anything at all about Japanese noise music. This means that noise's radical impossibility, far from silencing the discussion of noise, in fact returns it to its heterogeneous centre that is noise's theoretical exigency.

<sup>58</sup> Large, *Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing*, 156.

## Questions of Noise

According to Blanchot, in his essay 'The Most Profound Question,' the nature of questioning is to seek, 'and to seek is to search radically.'<sup>1</sup> What is radical about this searching that conditions the nature of questioning is the irremediable ambiguity opened by the asking of a question. Blanchot uses two modes of expression to develop his discussion: "'The sky is blue," "Is the sky blue? Yes."<sup>2</sup> Of these two different modes of expression it is the latter, according to Blanchot, which is exposed momentarily to the realm of possibility, baring itself as it does to the potential to be something other than what the answer declares. In contrast to the former expression that insists and declares unconditionally, the answer yes in the second expression does not, as Blanchot argues, 'restore the simplicity of the flat affirmation,'<sup>3</sup> precisely because of the space opened by the question. In other words, in the phrasing of a question there is a moment of suspension, an instant of potentiality – which in this case could render the sky both blue and not blue – that is preserved in spite of the question's answer. The categorical 'yes' in the second expression does not make it equivocal to the declarative nature of the first expression, or as Blanchot phrases it: 'The question awaits an answer, but the answer does not appease the question.'<sup>4</sup> Rather the question joins us to a strange relation of uncertainty and potentiality which, despite seemingly being put to an end with the answer, cannot be forgotten; in the declaration of what is, the answer carries with it the withdrawal of what is not and therefore what could have been. This for Blanchot is the very profundity of what it means to question.

1 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* [1969], trans. Susan Hanson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

2 *Ibid.*, 12.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, 14.

This relation, which is categorised by uncertainty as well as potentiality, is essential to the discourse of Japanese noise music. As Hegarty explains, Japanese noise music 'can come in all styles, referring to all other genres, like science fiction does, but crucially, asks the question of genre – what does it mean to be categorized, categorizable, definable?' This is precisely what, as Hegarty rightly argues, 'ties it

together as a genre.'<sup>5</sup> Because noise is often theorised as an unpleasant interference to the transmission of a message/meaning and because it is held outside of the grid of tonality, which is to say a dominant understanding of musicality, noise can easily be thought as music's opposite.<sup>6</sup> Thinking noise in this way, as the opposite to meaning and normativity, has a long trajectory from the sonic experimentations of early movements like Futurism and *Musique Concrète* to the visual, literary and political excursions of groups such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus, and Art Brut. All of these movement arguably adopted a degree of noise in that they were all seen and heard as cultural violations. But as formative movements in what we consider to be the avant-garde they also pioneered strategies for artistic and musical questioning, and Japanese noise music is but one coalescence of these many strategies. In fact, it is one of the most extreme contemporary instances of musical interrogation, where

'What is music?' 'What is noise?' 'What does it mean to speak of noise music?' are all asked simultaneously.

5 Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007), 133.

6 This idea relies on music being equated with musicality which is clearly problematic. However, by stating this here we are not arguing in favour of this idea but rather demonstrating the way in which noise and music are frequently contained by these limited definitions in explanations of Japanese noise music. What this thesis will demonstrate, however, is that not only noise but all definitions, including music, are never exclusive in their referral.

7 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 3.

There is a great reserve held in the discourse of Japanese noise music because it is a language dependent on the profundity of the question. As a genre of music that questions our definitions of what we think music to be and what, by extension, we think of as noise, there is an uncertainty evoked in almost all of the commentaries about this music. This uncertainty is sustained and murmurs deep within this language. If noise is not, as Hegarty insists, an objective fact but instead occurring always in relation to perception, 'both direct (sensory) and according to presumptions made by an individual'<sup>7</sup> then the language about this music, as well as the categories and materials that define it, must be heterogeneous and disparate. Or, put another way, if the language about Japanese noise music is, generally speaking, a matter of questioning, then any categorisation of this music, and noise more broadly, will never free itself of the uncertainty of its exigency. This uncertainty seems to be what conditions the majority of writing on Japanese noise music. As this chapter will illustrate and as this thesis more broadly will demonstrate, all of these texts about

Japanese noise music approach the impossible, either the impossibility of defining this geographically and sonically disparate music absolutely or the impossibility of conceptualising noise. They are all, in other words, attentive to the way in which language is left uncertain once a question has been asked and since, according to Hegarty, the language about Japanese noise music is one dependant on the question of noise, this language belongs quite distinctly to this uncertainty. Yet at a certain point these theories forget this or at the very least they implicitly assume that their understanding of Japanese noise music appeases the uncertainty. These theories are written in such a way that the impossibility and alterity, from which their analysis of Japanese noise music begins, are ultimately assimilated into the regions of possibility and conceptuality. The potentiality of noise's original question is forgotten and a language of negativity and radicalism is affirmed.

As Scott Wilson explains, 'In Western culture at least,' noise is typically thought as a 'source of more annoyance and distress than vision.'<sup>8</sup> And as Attali explained before him, even before the noises of the avant-garde, noise had been experienced as 'destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, an aggression against the code-structuring message.'<sup>9</sup> This is why, in the language of active noise, noise is drawn away from the space of the question and into a language of negativity that is mobilised against the normativity of meaning and society. Even when emphasis is placed on noise's radicalism, it is only because of its association with negativity that noise is able to be radical. Radicalism can only work if we understand noise negatively because this negativity is what holds noise in opposition to meaning and what defines it as a radical gesture against meaning when mobilised. For this reason, the history of noise is in the language of the active, according to Hegarty, 'like a



history of the avant-garde' as a history of 'disruptions and alterations.' And this is the case because, he argues, 'noise is a negativity (it can never be positively, definitively and timelessly located), a resistance, but also defined by what society resists.'<sup>10</sup> But Hegarty's idea that noise cannot be 'definitively' located is not the consequence of its language; it is not because the language about noise is equal to the language of

<sup>8</sup> Scott Wilson, 'Amusia, noise and the drive: towards a theory of the audio unconscious', in Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan and Paul Hegarty (eds.), *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* [1977], trans. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, ix.

questions that Hegarty identifies a heterogeneity deep within it. Instead, it is the consequence of a deep subjectivity along the lines of the platitude: 'one person's noise is another person's music.' Noise is in fact locatable in Hegarty's theory despite what he is suggesting here, as it is always defined negatively regardless of the subjective nature of this negativity. And this is true of the entirety of what we will be calling active noise. Noise works typically in the language of active noise through negativity and it is mobilised in this language as a concept that creates agitation, resistance and transgression against the dominant forces of the social and the aesthetic. In this language, alterity and impossibility are ultimately given over to the possibility of conceptualisation where noise's heterogeneity is firmly anchored to a curiously rigid negativity. This is the conceptual thread that ties noise's disparate configurations found in the likes of Cage's experimentations with 'chance, and the I-Ching' together with generative moments such as 'free jazz and Japanese noise terrorism, through to the recent preoccupations with digital glitches [and] process aesthetics.'<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Bring the Noise* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), xii.

But as Blanchot reminds us in his discussion of the question, the answer does not appease absolutely the uncertainty of the question because it is the uncertainty that is the predicate of the answer. Regarding Japanese noise music, the emphasis that is given to what is presented as an essentialist view of negativity and radicalism, while not entirely false, is certainly not exhaustive. In fact, in forgetting the heterogeneous space of the question that is the exigency of noise, the language of active noise assumes a relation of possibility between the regions of conceptuality and impossibility/alterity. Put simply, the result of negativity and radicalism is a reduction of the heterogeneity of noise in the language about noise, and particularly Japanese noise music. If we anchor noise to this negativity then the significance of noise is easily undermined by the likes of Simon Reynolds, who scorns the 'irritating end' of those artists aiming at 'ye old "shock effect."<sup>12</sup> The noise of Japanese noise music, if confined to a history of shock and rebellion, will become staid as it will remain rooted in a twentieth-century modernist idea of transgression that has quite simply, as Reynolds reminds us, over stayed its welcome. But if we understand the role of passivity in Blanchot's thought as a way of suggesting a very different understanding of noise and with it, a very different understanding of transgression,

then much more will be at stake in the discussion of noise. What is at stake with the concept of passivity is language itself and the very nature of subjectivity. This is because passive noise, as will be argued, precedes the very constitution of subjectivity and therefore precedes the very impetus of negativity/radicalism.

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the way in which active noise is interrupted by an anterior relation to alterity which ultimately uproots any stable claims to what noise might affirm/negate. What differs here from the essentialised model of noise as negativity is that the negative aspect of noise is no longer theorised as a fixed attribute of it. The idea of an attribute, trait, or quality, as something always belonging to noise, is instead exposed to the sheer absence of purity, essence and essentiality of language as Blanchot sees it. This is something we might think of as the non-attributable play of noise's real refusal. This idea of non-essentiality must, however, be thought passively precisely because it resists even the idea that non-essentiality itself be figured as an attribute of it. What is left is not something that is mobilised in and against the configuration of meaning and cannot therefore be said to be active. Instead a residue of noise, which sustains before and after the region of the active in a radically passive sense, remains; a noise that both comes before and after as a fundamental overflow of what is said in the realm of the active. And it is this anterior realm of noise, this passive noise, which displaces the mode of subversion before one has the power to act, which is the real space of transgression. But before we can talk about transgression in this way, which will be the focus of chapter two, we must first understand what we mean by passivity.

### Noise without Horizon

Passive noise shares a relationship with alterity that is equivocal to what Blanchot calls the 'relation of the third kind,' a relationship where subjectivity and identity are ultimately 'without horizon.'<sup>13</sup> Blanchot makes subtle philosophical ground in his distinction between the first two relations that the self has to alterity, or what we might think of as the Other. To understand the Other as Blanchot sees it, we necessarily think it alongside the Same. While the Same names identity as the relation each thing bears to itself, as the language upon which we are able to navigate through

<sup>13</sup> Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 66.

the world meaningfully, the Other names its opposite, standing for that which overflows and escapes the categories of the Same and the language of the world. In the first relation to the Other, according to Blanchot, 'man wants unity,'<sup>14</sup> and under the law of the Same, separation is observed only to the extent that it is rendered identical. To make this clearer, if we think this reduction in terms of Levinas's analysis of the ethical relation then the initial separation and difference of one human being to another is made identical through categories of the Same by diluting her alterity to everyday labels; she is my sister; she is my boss; she is my friend; she is my neighbour; she is brought to life through the functioning of language and communication. She is, therefore, no longer rigorously other as absolutely different to myself but instead animated and made coherent for me 'in terms of my understanding of [her] place in the world.'<sup>15</sup> Her otherness and sheer distance from myself is negated and brought closer by the fundamental necessity of a general language that allows us to communicate. Likewise with Blanchot's second relation, otherness is preserved

only to the extent that it is absolved into the rigour of the one/unity. In this relation, though, separation is not observed for long, but instead the self and the other immediately unite in a dialectical union charged with 'ecstasy, fusion, fruition.'<sup>16</sup> It is not absolutely clear what kind of relation Blanchot is highlighting here, but what is made clear is that both of these relations to alterity, regardless of their mediate, immediate or infinite gesture, arrive 'like a magnetic needle, index of the north,'<sup>17</sup> toward that point of unity and cohesion that defines the region of the Same.

14 Ibid.

15 Lars Iyer, *Blanchot's Vigilance: Literature, Phenomenology and the Ethical* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 93.

16 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 66.

17 Ibid., 67.

For this reason and for the purpose of simplification, these first two relations might be thought of as one, brought together as they are by a shared interest in unity, cohesion, understanding and subjectivity. More precisely for this study, however, if we think them as one then a sharper image of active noise starts to appear. As a relation that assimilates the expanse of noise's sonic intrigue into categories of negativity and violence, one might say that the absolute alterity of noise as something rigorously inassimilable, is passed over in the relation that we are calling active noise. Put simply, the category of active noise understands noise's alterity like Blanchot's first two relations, which we are thinking as one. Noise is passed over as something

rigorously other and out of grasp in favour of a cohesive model of negativity that makes negativity itself an unshakeable facet of noise. Like the distant human other who is brought near as my sister, the distance of noise (categorised not only by a wide geography and a seemingly limitless catalogue of sounds but by a conceptual heterogeneity) is brought near as we start to think it via the categories of the active. Passing over the alterity of noise by favouring a language of negativity and radicalism has become so essential for understanding noise that, for Hegarty at least, as soon as it becomes positive and understandable as a genre of music or a moment in film and therefore no longer the 'unwanted, other, not something ordered,'<sup>18</sup> it fails in a fundamental way. And it is precisely this failure in Hegarty's work that is testament to how essentialised negativity has become within the realm of the active; once noise is no longer defined negatively, it can no longer be thought of as noise.

18 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 2.

19 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 67.

20 Ibid.

But Blanchot's third kind of relation, that of a man without horizon - which will be understood here (again for the purpose of simplification) as our second relation - and through the idea of passive noise as this thesis will develop it, does not tend toward unity and cohesion. Rather, as a language resistive to the reductive tendency of active noise, passive noise is an attempt to think noise without 'reference to the One and without reference to the Same,'<sup>19</sup> which is to say, an attempt to think about noise without reducing its alterity to the fixed/essentialised categories. To be

clear, as Blanchot is, this is not about breaking away absolutely from coherent thought and from the different things that can be said through the story of active noise. If this were our aim, we would have to stop speaking entirely and refuse language in the hope of evoking some kind of mystical and ineffable atmosphere of noise. Instead, it is precisely through speaking the language of active noise under, as Blanchot has it, the 'authority of comprehensive thought,'<sup>20</sup> that we can start to sense another language of noise, which is curiously no language at all as we might know it. This noise attests to the dissimulation of nominalisation within the language of noise; it occurs the moment in which the language of noise breaks down and fails in its account of what is absolute to noise. In the way that Lars Iyer reminds us through Blanchot's account of the cadaver, demonstrating another kind of relation to the human other as a relation that 'withholds itself from my capacity to accommodate

myself with respect to its differentiation,'<sup>21</sup> passive noise similarly withholds itself from our ability to accommodate the differentiation of noise absolutely into the framework of the negative and the active. It is not, therefore, a totemic invocation of noise, but instead there to show that the language about noise is multiple inasmuch as it is not determined solely by the One or a language of cohesion. What passive noise shows is that the language of active noise is irredeemably double and within this doubling is evoked a limitlessness that fundamentally outstrips the categories of negativity and radicalism.

<sup>21</sup> Iyer, *Vigilance*, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Parages* [1986], trans. Tom Conley (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 143.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* [1972], trans. Alan Boss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

Blanchot is able to exploit and accelerate the many paradoxes within language only as they are produced by the structure of what we think of as the limit, the frame, and the margin. And likewise with passive noise, the extreme point of noise's inherent impossibility is achieved only by driving the paradox of thinking active noise absolutely to the splitting of its limit. In its most complex articulation, this second relation of noise is thought similar to what Derrida calls a 'chiasmic double invagination,'<sup>22</sup> a repeated self-imbrication that has already displaced the conceptual trope of atomistic thinking. Here, passive noise might be read as an appellative for Derridean *différance*, working as a non-concept of symbolic slippage that is the 'non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences.'<sup>23</sup> In the way that Derrida reads concepts always within a discursive network of differences, making them not only what they are by virtue of other concepts but also in a fundamental way, inscribing that otherness within themselves, passive noise might be read as the naming of otherness within the language of the active. In its most simple articulation, this second relation might be thought through excess and lack; there is always more to noise than what we might say of it and therefore our categories of noise are fundamentally lacking. But it is only through this failure of the symbolic framing of noise as active that we are able at all to glimpse that which cannot be glimpsed within it. What makes Blanchot distinct from Derrida, however, is that this limitlessness of the limit, as it is invoked within poststructuralism more broadly, becomes the necessity of the work itself as a necessity of impossibility. What is left is a textual

space, a literature, which as Leslie Hill rightly explains, no longer discriminates between 'what is inside and what is outside, what is general and what is singular, what is subject to the law and what is beyond it.'<sup>24</sup> For noise, if we understand it alongside Blanchot, what is left is a language that can no longer discriminate between what is noise and what is not-noise, what is radical and what is normative, what is negative and what is positive. More specifically though, we are no longer able to discriminate between what is active and what is passive, which is to say, what is possible/understandable within the workings of noise and what makes this possibility simultaneously impossible/incomprehensible.

<sup>24</sup> Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 95.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 2. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>26</sup> Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 27.

The idea of passivity, then, must be thought radically in the way that Thomas Wall thinks it. It is passive not because it is opposed to activity but passive before activity itself and is therefore 'passive with regard to itself, and thus it submits to itself as though it were an exterior power.' As Wall goes on to write:

Older than any (actual) possibility is the potentia-in-general that 'gives' nothing (except itself) and that 'is given' prior to any real state of affairs. Always older than any activity, this radical passivity 'gives' its own withdrawal, therefore. It is and is not the subject. More intimate than any perception, experience, or feeling, radical passivity 'gives' nonpresence, inequality-in-itself: i.e., the incalculable specificity of destruction. This paradox would remain a merely frustrating formality were it not for the fact that existence is the name for this passivity that suffers itself outside itself. Prior to any given being, in short, is the existence that destroys itself as a presence with a destruction that leaves everything intact.<sup>25</sup>

In Wall's view, radicalism has nothing to do with any form of activity or gesture. In order to understand this, it is necessary that to clear away the grammatical understanding of the passive voice. The voice or diathesis of a verb describes the relationship between the state that the verb expresses and the participants of the sentence, i.e. subject/object. When the subject of the sentence is the doer of the action, the verb is in an active voice and thus said to be active. The understanding of active noise is in keeping with the active verb, as something that is committed by the subject. Like the white noise audio sculptures of Japanese noise pioneers C.C.C.C. or the artistic insistence by the 1960s Fluxus movement to 'shock, confuse and be messy,'<sup>26</sup> noise understood actively is something enacted by the subject, as a tool used

to challenge discourse. In the frame of music, noise is said to be active precisely because C.C.C.C., Merzbow and Masonna all make what musicologists have come to refer to as noise music; Merzbow – subject, makes – verb, noise – object; the argument is active in the making of Japanese noise music. Noise can also similarly be said to be active by listening to it, once it is admitted that a subject actively chooses to listen to noise, whatever that noise may be. It is through this idea of listening that we first approach an idea of passivity but it is an idea of passivity that risks confusing our own understanding of passive noise if it is not dealt with duly. This idea of passivity is what we think of when we think passivity grammatically and in opposition to the active voice. It is the grammatical form of a sentence when the

subject is the target of an action. If we think this acoustically, it refers to listening when, contrary to the active form, one has not chosen to hear a sound. Passivity here refers to how we hear daily as inhabitants of a sonic environment, one that R. Murray Schafer significantly referred to as the soundscape.<sup>27</sup> It is socially engaged noise because it belongs to the auditory peculiarities of environmental space in general. Passivity, in this context, is a consequence of the very nature of hearing which, as Michel Serres explains, is 'continuous while the other senses are intermittent.'<sup>28</sup> Unlike the active voice, then, the passive subject is not in control of noise in this instant. Instead, with the passive verb, the subject is said to undergo noise or be affected by it; the subject is not the doer but the receiver. It is construed as passivity precisely as it is figured in opposition to activity.

27 R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994).

28 Michel Serres, *Genesis* [1982], trans. Geneviève James & James Nielson (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 7.

29 Ibid.

Despite their apparent opposition, however, both active noise and passive noise (as they are thought in the above way, in opposition to one another) are mutually dependent on an active subject. Regardless of whether the subject is said to be active or passive in her relation to noise, in the language used above there is still implied a subject that has the right to either of these relations and it is this right which is essentially active in the manner that it belongs to a subject. As Serres writes: 'it [hearing] is still active and deep when our gaze has gone hazy or gone to sleep.'<sup>29</sup> What this means is that the subject might still be said to be active in this passive

relation, in the sense that she undergoes noise and is passive to it as she actively involves herself in day to day living, an involvement that is still as Blanchot tells us, a relation of an 'I to power, in the form of power's loss.'<sup>30</sup> Even in a Derridean sense, passivity cannot be thought without its relation to activity and therefore activity itself lives on through the intrigue of passivity. To avoid confusion though and to steer away from the pitfalls of what Žižek calls 'spaghetti structuralism' – which he explains as a 'simplified, mass-culture version of structuralist and post-structuralist ideas' where there is 'no final reality'<sup>31</sup> – rather than arguing that the passive is really active, what is shared by these two relations and what is precise about the above passivity which our language will aim to move away from, is that both work within the language of *le dit* (the said). The said is what appears in Levinas's work as the naming of a classical account of language, which understands it didactically as a medium through which a message, information and knowledge would deliver itself. *Le dire* (saying), by contrast, is that which withholds itself from the language of the said, a withholding which by consequence dramatically calls into question the subject of the said. As it were, the idea of passive noise as we are proposing it must be far more radical than the passivity that is owned by the subject of the active.

30 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* [1980], trans. Ann Smock (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 12.

31 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 27.

When passivity is said as a relation to be owned, the subject is sustained in a

determined relationship to noise. That is to say, passive noise that we hear daily as inhabits the soundscape, rather than disturb the notion of the subject, sustains the subject as a witness to the sounds it cannot but hear. It captures the alterity of noise through categories belonging to the world. It is like negativity, radicalism or activity, in that it is noise reduced to a category we undergo and it is precisely this reduction that allows us to understand it. The radicalism of passivity as Wall sees it, however, and how we will share it, does not aim at reduction, is not thought in opposition to activity and does not sustain an idea of a subject more generally. Passive noise thought radically is older than any actual possibility of noise and before any actualisation of a subject that might be said to be active or passive. It is radical not because it is antagonistic but because it comes before the idea and formation of a subject. Radical passivity is Wall's way of building on Blanchot's idea that the constitution of what we think of as the subject and conceptuality is anchored in an

emptiness and alterity that comes before both the subject and conceptuality. It is to suggest like Levinas does and like Blanchot alongside him, that the Western metaphysical subject has been 'incorrectly conceptualized.'<sup>32</sup> The subject was never destined to appear and the language through which we understand it was never meant to close in on itself. Instead, like Derrida's supplement, being and conceptuality more broadly are marked by a trauma that precedes the constituted ego as well as any conceptualisation of it. And as a supplement to active noise, passive noise will find its place in the structure of active noise only 'by the mark of an emptiness.'<sup>33</sup> It is thus said to be radically passive as it comes before the formation of the language about Japanese noise music and it is glimpsed as the impossible exhaustibility of this language.

<sup>32</sup> Wall, *Radical Passivity*, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chadkravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Hopkins University Press, 1997), 145.

<sup>34</sup> Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 250.

<sup>35</sup> John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme* (MCA Records, 1964).

<sup>36</sup> Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 172.

## A Disturbed Silence

On the surface, it seems that the language of passive noise falls into what Hillel Schwartz calls 'metaphoric noise,' an idea first intimated by Charles Baudelaire's insistence to judge painterly colour in Paris art exhibitions from 1846 in terms of sound: 'turbulent, noisy, riotous bedlams.'<sup>34</sup> There is also the danger that any emphasis given to an account of noise that somehow precedes phenomenology inevitably runs the risk of a poetico-religiose commentary. It could be argued that peaking of noise beyond its auditory materiality invites a degree of mysticism, as if offering the concept of noise up to an idea of the holy in the way that John Coltrane offers up *A Love Supreme* to 'Him [God]','<sup>35</sup> or in the way Kodwo Eshun so beautifully writes about Coltrane: 'If Sound is Mystery, then Volume is Holy and

Noise is a Blessed State.<sup>36</sup> The attempt to understand noise as something without limits, whose very articulation is made impossible because of its sheer limitlessness, arguably evokes the idea of impossibility that marks certain descriptions of the holy. For instance, since we are trying to think about passive noise alongside Blanchot's

idea of impossibility and the different ways in which he conceives of this impossibility, it is not inconceivable to think about this passivity alongside Simone Weil's idea of holy absence because Weil is a central figure in Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation*. Weil's relation to a Jewish tradition of creation shared in Isaac Luria's belief that creation was fundamentally an act of abandonment on the part of God:

Infinite Being is necessarily everything. In order that there be the world, he would have to cease being the whole and make a place for it through a movement of withdrawal, of retreat, and in 'abandoning a kind of region within himself, a sort of mystical space.'<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 117.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

In an assertion that is close to Blanchot, being is made possible for Weil by a prior impossibility; an impossibility that describes a withdrawal and an absence deep within our very ontology. But where Blanchot differs from Weil and where our idea of passive noise will shy away from the holy, is in trying to keep the secret of this impossibility. As Blanchot tells us, truth for Weil can be reached only in the secret, truth is the secret and we must love the secret itself. The secret is precisely this holy withdrawal, where truth and certitude are found in God's remoteness and hiddenness. But according to Blanchot, we cannot but feel regret when reading Weil because she betrays the secret each and every time she speaks openly, with 'assurance and indiscretion,'<sup>38</sup> of this hidden God. The closer thought comes to expressing itself for Blanchot, the more a reserve is maintained within thought itself, a reserve of a kind of 'uninhabited, uninhabitable non-thought,'<sup>39</sup> a blind spot of thought that disturbs and torments it continually. But rather than leave the emptiness of this space empty, rather than preserve the hidden alterity of thought, Weil fills it up with an idea of the Holy, 'obscuring it with the strongest, the most august and most opaque name that can be found.'<sup>40</sup>

To think this problem more clearly and to move closer to what is meant by passive noise, we might imagine the filling up of the non-space of passive noise through the aesthetic category of the sublime. The aesthetic trope of the sublime would categorise the emptiness and uninhabited space of thought as a thinking of metaphysical ineffability. Generally speaking and without digressing into the nuances developed by Paul de Man and Derrida's readings of Kant's notion of the sublime, the

unsettling experience that categorizes such a notion springs forth from an attribute within a work and toward the personal constituted subject, albeit in a movement that



unsettles that subject. Even in de Man's reading of Kant's sublime, where an unreachable exteriority interrupts phenomenal proceedings, it does so in the noumenal world of reason. If we thus followed Kant, passive noise would be said to be an attribute within active noise, found in something like Masonna's Inner Mind Mystique,<sup>41</sup> where mystique would name precisely that which within the sonic feedback and screeching was only expressible through a negative movement of ineffability, where, in an ironic twist, what cannot be said about it is said all the more through the category of the ineffable. The sublime is said to not only belong to the work as an attribute of the work itself but like a consequence akin to Weil's betrayal of the secret, it works fundamentally as a category of containment. Through ideas of ineffability and mysticism, the sublime tries to take us closer to what cannot be thought or experienced and toward the beauty and splendour of the work itself, by attempting to contain absolutely through the category of the sublime, the holy withdrawal itself. It is fundamentally a category of and for reason; a safely paraphrased and translated hyperbole that 'brings us closer' to the realm of the unknown. The idea of passive noise as proposed, by contrast, yields no such ontology nor does it work simply within a system of dialectics. Nothing is contained in the thinking of passive noise other than alterity itself which, as Iyer tells us, cannot 'permit me to draw back into myself' but instead 'outstrips me, with what refuses to be interiorised.'<sup>42</sup> What is crucial for Blanchot and for our own thinking of passivity is that alterity can never be included in conceptual thought because it is what constitutes the unspeakable condition of thought itself. Where the sublime and active noise are attempts to make possible a thinking of alterity and noise, respectively, within the horizon of thought itself, passive noise stands for the doubling that takes place within this possibility as a simultaneous impossibility, bearing witness to the irreducibility of conceptuality and its unstable point of origin. Philosophically speaking, alterity as Blanchot thinks it is not a question for ontology but a questioning of ontology; alterity is not a question for being to grasp but a questioning of being that makes the very notion of being unstable. And similarly for the language about noise, passive noise is

41 Masonna, Inner Mind Mystique (Relapse Records, 1995).

42 Iyer, Vigilance, 67.

not a mode of understanding noise but the illustration of impossibility as it exists deep within the categories of noise, particularly negativity and radicalism.

Noise in a radically passive sense certainly slips out of sonic range if we try to think it only through sonority and classical ideas of materiality. At first we might think the slippage like the extreme reduction of minimalist onkyo (...) <sup>43</sup> artist Sachiko M, whose almost entirely absent composition Detect<sup>44</sup> articulates a philosophy of music that verges on the 'extinction of sound.'<sup>45</sup> Perhaps closer the language of passive noise than active noise, Sachiko M arguably creates at the limit of what the human ear can hear and, by consequence, what the human ear can turn into thought/language. Her music is closer to a non-music, her sound more like a non-sound, as her minimal frequencies strain the musical into an audible non-existence. Her concern has more to do with silence than noise and it is this silence that has, according to Blanchot, haunted the remarks of the poet in particular. As he goes on to tell us, once the exceptional ability of language's absence and questioning has been discovered – in Sachiko M's case, once music's exceptional ability to be almost absent has been discovered – 'one has the temptation to consider the very absence of language as surrounded by its essence, and silence as the ultimate possibility of speech.'<sup>46</sup> In other words, silence might on its own appear to offer a new kind of truth

and essence. But what this pursuit forgets is precisely what resonates at the centre of Blanchot's philosophy and by consequence the idea of passive noise. Blanchot is very attentive to the role silence plays in language, but he does not look for it like the poet or arguably like Sachiko M as some kind of essence. For Blanchot, silence is something that is heard in the empty negation that formulates our very ability to speak. According to him, every word by necessity, even a proper noun and even Blanchot's very own name, 'designates not an individual event but the general form of this event: whatever it may be, it remains an abstraction.'<sup>47</sup> It is impossible to imagine a language attentive to singularity and devoid of abstraction because it would demand

<sup>43</sup> A free improvisation movement that emerged in the late 1990s in Japan which emphasised minimalism and quiet noise by combining elements of techno, noise and electronic music. In opposition to noise music, Onkyo works toward an almost complete abolition of sound bordering on a Cagean silence.

<sup>44</sup> Sachiko M, *Detect* (Antifrost, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Franck Stofer (coordinator) and Christian Aupetit et al (eds.), *Japanese Independent Music* (Bordeaux: Sonore, 2001), 264.

<sup>46</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire* [1949], trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 34.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

an infinite collection of signs that is precisely at odds with the purpose of signification. It is necessary, therefore, that language abstract, negate and generalise the singularity of an event, or as Blanchot quotes Mallarmé: "I say: a flower!" and I have in front of my eyes neither a flower, nor an image of a flower, nor a memory of a flower, but an absence of flower. "Silenced object."<sup>48</sup> In this way, language moves away from the thing it is referring to by anchoring itself in a void or, more specifically, it takes the form of a general idea/image of the thing in question. The object is, therefore, said to be silenced. And it is this silence that both the poet and Sachiko M watch over with their unusual grammatical/musical arrangements. It might even be said that they in some way circle this silence as if it were a truth. With Blanchot's commentary on Mallarmé in particular, there is a feeling for Blanchot when reading Mallarmé that through a certain arrangement of words, language 'might in no way be distinct from silence.'<sup>49</sup> Mallarmé – like Weil's betrayal of the secret and similar to the faith Hegarty places in Sachiko M as the potential fate of Japanese noise music – believes he can evoke, through allusive words, the silenced object. But where Blanchot's suspicions lie and where the intrigue of passive noise is really anchored is in our fundamental inability to master this silence. Far from being the opposite of words or the end of words once they run out of the ability to mean, silence is rather 'implied in words and is almost their prejudice, their secret intention, or, rather, the condition of speech.' Language can indeed make itself appear empty and by that token give the feeling of its own lack, just as Sachiko M can make a music that is almost completely absent. But the appearance of silence is for Blanchot only that, an attempt to make appear the silent workings of language which, by necessity, has already exceeded the attempt itself. As Blanchot goes on to write, 'a language that, expressing emptiness, must finally again express the emptiness of language.'<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

49 Ibid., 34.

50 Ibid., 35.

Blanchot's reflection on Mallarmé and the poetic silence that his poetry circles, much like the silence circled by the onkyo music of Sachiko M, is not to end simply with the suggestion that language says existence and not absence – there is (il y a) instead of there is not (il n'y a pas) – but instead, as Wall writes, that language

'tears itself apart from the moment it begins to speak.'<sup>51</sup> What is crucial to note here is that there is not first and foremost language and then after, once language approaches its limit, a silent void into which it spills. Instead, language is caught already in the necessary emptiness which occurs once language replaces that to which it aims to refer with the sign. Instead of saying the thing, language insists upon the thing's very absence by presenting itself as an image in place of the thing. To paraphrase Mallarmé, we do not speak of an actual flower but an image of the flower as a symbolic gesture. What occurs, then, is what might be thought of as a double gesture within language; an emptiness that is both the very condition of language whilst also being the very thing that causes language to unravel. Like our introductory remarks on Blanchot's essay 'The Song of the Sirens,' impossibility is what animates the possibility of the narrative; all writing is therefore an approach to an unapproachable impossibility. Similarly, silence is said to come to us only through the speaking of language, through the word itself and through the noise of its articulation. It is only in noise that silence might be heard as a silent announcement that language itself is somehow not enough. To reiterate, we are not speaking here of silence understood as the moment when speaking stops, nor silence as the alternative of language once the limits of language are observed. But rather as an absence of meaning that is uncannily present in the very domain of what is said. As a result, Blanchot speaks of silence but only through the paradox of a voiceless cry, a cry that 'tends to exceed all language, even if it lends itself to recuperation as language effect.'<sup>52</sup> A word that is almost deprived of meaning, as Blanchot writes, is not silent but 'noisy'<sup>53</sup> as it makes of silence (non-meaning) already a kind of speaking, and only through this speaking can we start to hear the voiceless cry. This voiceless cry that is as noisy as it is silent is precisely how Blanchot understands the origin of music; an origin that is distinctly unapproachable and that makes any language about it equally impossible. And this is how we are understanding the language of passive noise as it exists within the language about Japanese noise music (active noise).

<sup>51</sup> Wall, *Radical Passivity*, 65.

<sup>52</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 52.

Silence in Blanchot is not silence as our language might think it; silence thought through ideas of absoluteness, purity and end-point. Rather, like Cage and his anechoic chamber experiment where he discovered the impossibility of silence,

silence in Blanchot is similarly impossible as it names precisely the impossibility of silence itself, of silence ever reaching the totality which its conceptual image hopes to claim. Silence murmurs in Blanchot as the slide of conceptuality into the emptiness

upon which it is predicated, and it murmurs exactly because it only occurs once language is spoken. But silence is not spoken, for it whispers no system of thought and as Blanchot writes, it 'slides outside all possible meaning without this slide's meaning anything.'<sup>54</sup> More accurately, silence is neither a murmur nor a silence, but closer to a murmuring silence which makes itself present as the dislocation of conceptuality but all the while refusing this dislocation as clarity of thought. It is, as Blanchot claims, 'a silence that is speech empty of words.'<sup>55</sup> In this way, passive noise is more appropriate than the term silence. Its double-barrelled-gesture allows us to think the already absent space of conceptuality (via the term passivity) next to the voice in which this absence breaks through (as it is glimpsed only in the language about noise music). We might understand this 'breaking through' as noise, as it interrupts directly the signal of communication. But where this idea differs from information theory, and the idea of noise existing as the audible interruption of a message, is in the suggestion that noise interrupts as the absent constitution of the message itself. That is to say, absence (passive noise) is what constitutes presence (active noise) and it is glimpsed through the articulation of this presence as an inexhaustibility.

54 Ibid., 58.

55 Maurice Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death' [1949], in George Quasha (ed.) and Lydia Davis (trans.), *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays* (New York: Station Hill, 1999), 359-401 (387).

With the idea of passive noise we are trying to think the impossibility of noise's closure into conceptuality, which through a typical Blanchotian turn of phrase, also becomes its very possibility. Again, if we recall the discussion of the Sirens in the introduction, this impossibility is the condition of the narrative relation and also the condition of his novelistic treatment of music. In the way Blanchot thinks of a silence and noise that ripples beneath the surface of music as its true origin, passive noise names a noise within the language about noise music, murmuring as an endless reserve in thought itself that dislocates essentialist notions of noise as something negative, unwanted and incomprehensible. Ultimately, it sounds as noise's conceptual non-origin. Therefore, as a non-concept that is felt only in the dislocation of

conceptuality, passive noise stands for the neutral chaos that precedes any notion of music and noise as we know them. It is neutral as it is neither negative nor positive, and it is chaotic precisely because it settles into neither. What Blanchot writes about the Sirens is true of what we are trying to express with this concept: it is a 'sterile dry place where silence, like noise, [has] burned all access to the song in anyone who had once had command of it.'<sup>56</sup> It would, then, be somewhat disingenuous to think passive noise in the way Schwartz thinks Baudelaire's judging to be metaphoric. Not least because of its simplicity but because passive noise does not look to say anything itself other than a curious silent announcement of what is not said through the conceptualisations in the language of active noise. Or perhaps more precisely, it is that which is hidden deep within what is said in this language.

56 Maurice Blanchot, 'The Song of the Sirens' [1959], in George Quasha (ed.) and Lydia Davis (trans.), *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays* (New York: Station Hill, 1999), 443-450 (444).

57 Hector Kollias, 'A Matter of Life and Death: Reading Materiality in Blanchot and de Man', in Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson and Dimitris Vardoulakis (eds.), *After Blanchot: Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*

(New Jersey: University of Delaware Press, 2005) 123-137 (134).

58 Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship* [1971], trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 219.

A different type of materialism charges the idea of passive noise, one that makes the idea of metaphor inadequate. Derrida tells us that it is a materiality which in itself is nothing as such, yet it nevertheless works, it 'operates, it forces, but as a force of resistance.'<sup>57</sup> This kind of materialism, in the way both Blanchot and Derrida think it, is not found as an attribute of the work, in the way one might locate a certain chord progression in a piece of music, or the refusal of chords and harmony in the likes of Japanese noise music. When Blanchot writes about the withdrawal and alterity that comes to mind through the work of Swiss sculptor Albert Giacometti for instance, he does not find it manifest in the ceramic discontinuity of the line in such pieces as *Woman Standing*. 'One can call *Woman Standing* a figure or even a figurine' Blanchot writes, 'but what is it, this figure?' It is not what it represents or the matter from which it is composed, instead the nakedness of the woman affirms a 'naked presence that has nothing, is nothing' other than the 'presence of what is between man and man, absolute distance, infinite strangeness.'<sup>58</sup> This infinite strangeness comes to us in our relation to the work, a relation which cannot be thought other than through a relation of language. If we look closely at Blanchot's essay 'Traces,' it quickly becomes clear that his focus is not Giacometti himself or the sculptures he is

responsible for, but instead Jacques Dupin's commentaries. These 'texts' as Blanchot sees so fitting to a work that is as 'clear as it is unapparent and always ready to escape whatever it is that might attempt to measure it,'<sup>59</sup> function not only as a translucent image of what withholds itself in Giacometti's sculptures, but more broadly as the literary demand that is implicated by all works of art. The idea of materiality, then, is not abandoned as such; ideas of impossibility, silence and passive noise come to us precisely because we have encountered a composite of matter. But if we boil the alterity of a work of art down to a visible/audible attribute of the work then alterity itself, which by its very definition is meant to dislocate with the language of the world, becomes part of that very system, no different say from the colour red or a G chord on a guitar. Therefore, there must be a different kind of materiality that precedes the worldly matter of the object. This materiality comes to us like Derrida's idea of the trace that forcefully resists the philosophical seeking after essences by returning us to the absence and negation upon which language is necessarily predicated. Materiality as Blanchot wants to think it, is located in what he calls the impossibility of aesthetic consciousness, which as Critchley explains, is the impossibility of the 'total realization of meaning in an artwork,' which he goes on to call the 'radical impossibility of creating a complete work.'<sup>60</sup> It is this incompleteness that is the materiality of passive noise as we aim to think it.

59 *Ibid.*, 217.

60 Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 36.

61 William Large, *Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot: Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2004), 144.

## Two Slopes of Noise - from the Active to the Passive

If read alongside Blanchot, the extremity of Japanese noise music is not the result of its effort to escape the world of meaning. As Large explains, there is not on the one hand the world and the language of communication and meaning, and on the other, the anti-world and anti-language of 'derangement, disorder and subversion.' Just as there is not, on the one hand, a phenomenological world comprised of such things as sound and sculpture, and on the other, an evanescent immateriality that harks back to a world without access or comprehension. This would, as Large goes on to explain, simply 'oppose one order to another, or to make disorder relative to order.'<sup>61</sup> On the

contrary, the suggestion is that within the dimension of order, disorder 'insinuates itself,'<sup>62</sup> just as silence insinuates itself in the act of communication and just as uncertainty persists after the asking of a question, regardless of what the answer states. Similarly, passive noise cannot be thought to oppose a non-system of disorder and chaos to a system of meaning and order. Such an understanding would only serve to reduce the region of alterity, of which we are arguing passive noise belongs to, to a region of order and understanding; a reduction which would be counterintuitive to the nature of alterity. Instead, insinuating itself within the region of active noise, passive noise is found inside the world and inside the language of meaning as a scorched interior that empties the place to which interiority and meaning typically retreat. For this reason, passive noise is not a sonic quality like feedback or drone, and nor is it a gesture towards silence. It is rather, as Blanchot would have it, the possibility of the narrative, which is to say, the possibility of being able to write about noise.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>63</sup> Merzbow, *OM Electrique* (Extreme, 1979).

<sup>64</sup> Brett Woodward, *Merzbook: The Pleasuredome of Noise* (Preston: Extreme), 82.

<sup>65</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death' [1949], in George Quasha (ed.) and Lydia Davis (trans.), *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays* (New York: Station Hill, 1999), 359-401 (388).

Our relation to passive noise is held in the space between us and the artwork, as it persists within and in excess of our language of interpretation. For instance, we might hear Merzbow's *OM Electrique*<sup>63</sup> as an 'incremental demise of an ailing piece of equipment.'<sup>64</sup> Certainly this is how Brett Woodward describes the recording in his *Merzbook*. But what is key to bear in mind, when reflecting on the nature of any form of interpretation, is that what makes interpretation possible is a double invagination that by necessity implies an inexhaustible dimension of impossibility. This impossibility is inexhaustible because it refers to the fact that interpretation is, fundamentally, disparate and limitless. Put simply, there are no truth claims when it comes to the language of art but rather an infinite regression of meaning. So, impossibility also names here the region of absence upon which the language of interpretation is ultimately predicated. This absence or lack, which makes for Blanchot the 'endless movement of comprehension,'<sup>65</sup> is what we are calling passive noise, that which within the language of active noise prevents our understanding of noise from reaching an absolute and final definition, and which perpetually withdraws from such material interpretations. As we have seen, contrary to the

sublime and Weil's holy secret, this has nothing to do with the finitude of human knowledge, as though there were some beyond on the other side of the limit of comprehension. As Large reminds us, it would only take any good Hegelian to demonstrate that any proposition of such a limit is only ever posited by 'the very thought which claims it is so restricted.'<sup>66</sup> The excess of language over and above its claims to meaning and identity has to do precisely with the idea of passivity, of language 'internally and not externally being out of sync or out of joint with itself.'<sup>67</sup> The dislocation within conceptuality is passive precisely because we cannot control it or master it, but it is passive more so because it comes before the very order of being as being's fundamental absence, as the emptiness on which all language and our understanding of the world is necessarily constituted.

<sup>66</sup> Large, *Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing*, 142.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

This event cannot be said to be unique to the language of noise alone, but is for Blanchot the call of literary language and artistic language more broadly. He understands the languages of both art and literature as a singular language which, unlike our everyday language, is no longer designated. Because literary language belongs to fiction it does not refer to reality as we know it. References made to a tree in a novel are not made in order to refer to the tree 'out there' in the real world, but instead refer to a tree as it exists in this imaginary, fictitious, world. In literary language things are doubly separated from themselves in order to be 'known, subjugated, communicated.'<sup>68</sup> Similarly, a painting need not replicate any specific tree but can indulge a multitude of shapes and sizes, colours and shades, in the imagined space of the work. There is, as it were, a doubling of signification in both the literary work and the work of art that further distances us from the supposed reality of language. This is exactly where Blanchot frames his two slopes of artistic interpretation. On the one hand there is the interpretation of the materiality of the work, which ranges from anything like a literal analysis of the written word or a material account of a sonic quality as it is recorded. Yet, on the other, there is the recognition that this materiality is not definitive but rather, because of this double withdrawal of artistic language from the world, multifarious. It is from this site of heterogeneity that the second slope of artistic language begins: as a complaint or,

better yet, an uneasiness with the rigidity of material and essentialist interpretations of art.

In this second slope of artistic language we are reminded of Mallarmé and the flower that is neither present materially nor even as an image, but fully absent as a silenced object. This second slope works as a reminder that a 'thing' is not completely present in language precisely because of its material negation when entering into language, which is particularly the case in art where language is doubly negated from the world of meaning and referral. Therefore this language, according to Blanchot, 'sets off in quest of a language that can recapture this absence itself and represent the endless movement of comprehension.'<sup>69</sup> If we think about these two approaches of art as equivalent to active and passive noise then it is second slope of art that embodies the exigency of passive noise. In the language of active noise, particularly the

language that is about Japanese noise music specifically, the static and feedback of Merzbow's sound are simulated in this language through the use of such words as 'static pulses' and 'feedback'. 'Chaotic,' 'unbearable,' 'overwhelming,' 'static' and 'dissonant,' are also words often used in journalistic and fan accounts of Merzbow as if to bring his sound fully present before us. Equally, the idea of being consumed by Merzbow, so much so that the 'physical properties of sound are physicalized,'<sup>70</sup> is a regular discursive technique employed in the language of the active. This is, for instance, exactly how Voegelin accounts for listening to Merzbow's album 193071 (something we will discuss in detail in chapter two). But these words, as Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé reminds us, never quite bring the sounds to presence as they are held at an unassimilable distance because of the absence that animates them. And it is at this distance that passive noise is figured as an account of noise's heterogeneity that is not material because it sympathises with 'darkness, with aimless passion, with lawless violence,' which is to say, it sympathises with 'everything in the world that seems to perpetuate the refusal to come into the world.'<sup>72</sup> It is a language about noise that wishes to fuse not with materiality as we typically know it but with materiality as Derrida sees it – with the darkness, emptiness and unconsciousness that is the limit of language; with the trace of impossibility that marks the interior of the concept like an

69 Blanchot, *Literature and the Right to Death*, 388.

70 Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 261.

71 Merzbow, 1930 (Tzadik, 1998).

72 Blanchot, *Literature and the Right to Death*, 386.

invisible scar. This side of language favours the unconscious and the night and is vigilant over the trace of alterity as a duplicity of meaning in the way it unravels in the very instant the word is written. Contrary to active noise, this side of noise is not something that can be said and, as Large cryptically writes, 'not even the fact that not everything can be said can be said.'<sup>73</sup> This side occurs instead as the unravelling of the said, as a derangement of the order of the world without itself pointing to some world beyond it. These two slopes, then, are perhaps better thought as one, or as a rupturing within the one (active noise) via the multitude of the many (passive noise).

73 Large, *Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing*, 157.

74 Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 265.

There is a different temporality at work in the language of passive noise than there is in active noise, and with passive noise insisting within the language of the active, this means that the temporality of passivity must interrupt the temporality of the active. If time, as Levinas understands it, operates through retention, crystallising everything that is through representation and presentation thanks to memory and history, or as Heidegger would say, if everything is assembled in time, then this noise (passive noise) signals a lapse of time that cannot return to anything crystalline. But the alterity of noise and its inability to stabilise is not, we are arguing, because of a material alterity that is housed in the extreme actions of its components. This lapse in stabilisation is not, for instance, the result of Merzbow's apparent lack of organisation and structuration, because even this is itself a structuring idiom. And as Hainge reminds us, 'even if this music cannot be tied to objects in the real world via the



mechanics of representation, it is nonetheless dependent on objects in the real world for its expression.<sup>74</sup> Instead the temporality of passive noise is refractory to all synchronization as a non-temporality caught in a suspension of waiting. It transcends time in a way that is not absolute, as if exceeding time from its starting point in time, but instead it marks the falling out of phase with temporalization signalled within temporality itself. Passive noise is, simply put, the interruption of the temporality of the active as the absence that is internal to noise's very articulation. This demand of time comes neither before nor after the history of negativity as it is figured in the story of active noise, but instead as an interval within that causes active noise to be fundamentally out of joint with itself. It is, therefore, absolutely necessary to understand the temporal nature of active noise, and material accounts of noise, if we

are to fully comprehend the interruption of this temporality that marks the interiority of passive noise.

### Noise and temporality - first slope of thinking noise

Douglas Kahn argues that noise must be thought as 'interchangeably soundful and figurative'<sup>75</sup> and near impossible to fix in definition. But he is right to go on to note that historians attempting to explain noise often explain its genesis by pointing to 'increased social raucousness of a late-arriving industrialization in Italy and to the correlation of noise with other transgressive tactics within the avant-garde at the time.'<sup>76</sup> The reference here to a late industrialized Italy is a large part of the history of what we have been calling active noise. Part of the reason for noise's supposed essential negativity and supposedly inherent transgressive quality, is arguably a lasting ripple effect of the 1913 Futurist manifesto *The Art of Noises*, written by Italian artist Luigi Russolo. Although positive in its championing of the subversive potential of noise and commended for supporting those things usually ignored by the Western art tradition, the manifesto still mobilizes the negative in the hope of breaking out of the limited circle of sounds and conquering the 'infinite variety of noise sounds.'<sup>77</sup> The manifesto is arguably one of the first instances in which noise is figured strongly as something that is resistive, occurring violently as the radicalisation of the boundary between music and noise. In David Toop's words, the 'solid objects of European composition [...] were about to be dismembered'<sup>78</sup> in light of the manifesto. It was Russolo's belief that noise would broaden the vocabulary of music but it would firstly have to dismember it by introducing the outside, the unwanted, and the unbearable, inside the concert hall. The manifesto's aim was to mobilise the sounds of modern capital in order to reinvigorate the western tradition of music.

<sup>75</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), 20.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Luigi Russolo, 'The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto' [1913], in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 10-15 (11).

<sup>78</sup> David Toop, *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995), 78.

But in spite of such a proposed liberating end point, noise within Futurism starts negatively by 'reminding us brutally of life.' It is only once introduced and

mobilised, when the subversions begin to liberate, that we might approach something close to 'acoustical enjoyment itself.'<sup>79</sup> Futurism in this respect is not already playing music, but instead looks to offer something more noisy by introducing those non-musical sounds into music, in the hope of broadening the 'chromatic-diatonic system without destroying it.'<sup>80</sup> Futurism is arguably, then, a dialectical idea, where noise is said to be able to move from something characteristically brutal to something akin to aesthetic enjoyment. In other words, Futurism begins from the negative and moves toward the positive; it figures negativity as a precedent and essential attribute of noise, anchoring it to a dialectical progression that steadily loses its noisiness once it is mobilised. Futurism could be seen as a template for noise as it is thought through traditional notions of temporality.

<sup>79</sup> Russolo, *Art of Noises*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>81</sup> Irene E. Hoffman, 'Documents of Dada and Surrealism: Dada and Surrealist Journals in the Mary Reynolds Collection', *The Art Institute of Chicago*, 2001,

<http://www.artic.edu/reynolds/essays/hofmann> [Accessed 1 April 2009].

<sup>82</sup> André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* [1929], trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 241.

Although prevalent to the discussion of Futurism, the process of dialectics is complicated in more recent approaches to noise – postmodernity and poststructuralism being largely responsible for this theoretical shift – it is, nevertheless, from Futurism's emphasis on noise's ability to interrogate the limits of meaning that noise starts to shape its own history, albeit a very loose and disparate one. Stories of noise, particularly ones that build toward a descriptive account of the phenomenon of Japanese noise music, as with Hegarty's for instance often circle the events of Dadaism, Surrealism and Fluxus, precisely because each of these movements worked with ideas of anti-aesthetics and literary non-sequitur, attributes which seem appropriate when accounting for subversion and radicalism. The Dada Manifesto by Tristan Tzara, for instance, argues for an 'abolition of logic [...] the precise shock of parallel lines [and] absolute and unquestionable faith in every god that is the product of spontaneity.'<sup>81</sup> The importance placed on spontaneity is what inspired Dada's sister discipline Surrealism, as its emphasis on automatism and collage aimed to defamiliarise the everyday with the politically-driven hope to, as André Breton tells us quoting Marx, 'Transform the World.'<sup>82</sup> Fluxus might be understood as a culmination of these movements, bringing together an international network of artists

from varying disciplines and media to continue the Dadaist aim to 'shock, confuse and be messy.'<sup>83</sup> *Musique concrète*, *Art Brut* and free jazz might also be cited, as they are in Hegarty's account, as strong precursors to the phenomenon of Japanese noise music. It is true that the rhizomatic nature of noise, as a concept and auditory phenomenon with varying characteristics which appear in disparate ways and at unpredictable times, problematizes its historicisation and invites a non-hierarchical

understanding of its origins. But what is perhaps most interesting for a study that focuses specifically on Japanese noise music is the way in which Japan has contributed to the artistic malaise and unrest that the above movements were attentive to. In other words, it is important to acknowledge Japan's own history of artistic subversion and experimentation not only because this history is frequently overlooked in analyses of Japanese noise music but if passive noise is the instant of interruption in the temporality of the active, it is necessary that we make clear the specificity of the temporality and materiality that is being disrupted. This is not so that we might culturally ground the nature of passive noise as if it were distinct to Japan but to demonstrate the manner in which the possibility of culturally grounding any kind of noise, and conceptually figuring noise through negativity and radicalism in any discussion, is especially impossible in Japanese noise music, as if this impossibility reaches its theoretical limit and peak in this specific discussion. Its history of subversion, then, is necessary to the extent that it is made, arguably more than with any other history, absolutely unnecessary because of the impossibility that is distinctly Japanese noise music's predication and manifestation.

83 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 27.

84 Chris Magee, 'Criminal Dance: The Early Films of Butoh Master Tatsumi Hijakata',

Midnight Eye: Visions of Japanese Cinema, 2010, <http://www.midnighteye.com/features/criminal-dance-the-early-films-of-butoh-master-tatsumi-hijakata> [Accessed 8 December 2012].

There are a number of artistic violations that occurred in Japan prior to the formation of Japanese noise music and all of them could be argued to have played a part in this music's very formation. Some of these movements mirrored their Western counterparts whereas others were more distinct to Japan. Tatsumi Hijakata's pioneering dance group Ankoku Butoh, for example, roughly translated as the 'dance of utter darkness', looked to combine, as Chris Magee explains, the 'absurdity and deviancy of Genet, with the mandate to "reject form and incite chaos" of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.'<sup>84</sup> As a result, mutilation, rape, horror and the taboo, all featured

in early Butoh dance in a manner consistent with Artaud's aim to 'transgress the ordinary limits of art.'<sup>85</sup> Parallel to this was the Neo-Dadaist group Gutai (.. meaning Embodiment), founded by painter Jiro Yoshihara in 1954, which held a similar aim as Western Dada, emphasising the aesthetic/anti-aesthetic value of destruction and decay. Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, the avant-garde took a firm hold of Japan, not only with the guerrilla protests of the Fluxus group Hi-Red Centre, whose actions included painting all of the public toilets red in Waseda University, but the avant-garde also began to slowly take hold of cinema and music. By late 1967 and early '68, over half of Japan's film production was dominated by the erotic transgressions of Pink Eiga (Pink Film). As a style of pornographic film unique to Japan, Pink Eiga films avoid the more obvious pornographic tropes of titillation by favouring a more meditative exploration of more extreme, and arguably existential, human behaviours. Films by the likes of Koji Wakamatsu, for instance, according to Jack Hunter, transcended the 'limitations of exploitation' with 'brutally experimental/primal' explorations that were ultimately 'unequaled by any comparable sequences in Western cinema.' More than this, however, is the way in which Wakamatsu's films, for Hunter, inhabit a zone 'where logocentric notions of narrative are immolated.'<sup>86</sup> Similarly in the field of music, by the early 1970s there was a proliferation of artists testing the boundary between this notion of narrative but from within the territories of musicality and noise. Guitarist Masayuki Takayanagi, for

example, decided to explore free jazz during this period, with the aim of envisaging what he heard in his head: 'feedback, feedback and more feedback.'<sup>87</sup> And he was but a part of a long line of musicians who quickly became interested in dissonance and non-tonality as potential musical spaces.

<sup>85</sup> Antonin Artaud, 'The Theatre of Cruelty: First Manifesto' [1938], in Victor Corti (trans.), Antonin Artaud: Collected Works Volume Four (London: Calder & Boyars, 1974), 71.

<sup>86</sup> Jack Hunter, *Eros in Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema* (Michigan: Creation Books, 1999), 37.

<sup>87</sup> Julian Cope, *Japrocksampler: How the Post-War Japanese Blew their Minds on Rock 'N' Roll* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 68.

An almost parallel history of noise in Japan can be written next to the history of noise in the West. And while early accounts of experimentation with extremity, be they visual, musical or otherwise, often echo as a delayed response to activities first conceived in the West – Tatsumi Hijikata for instance was heavily inspired by Genet and Artaud, while Genpei Akasegawa, a member of Hi-Red Centre, conceived his

idea of Hyper-Art<sup>88</sup> over five decades after Duchamp's readymades – there is a sense now and has been since the late 1980s that Japan comes first when considering noise. Particularly with music, as Julian Cope suggests, Japanese rock and noise inform 'so much of the most interesting twenty-first century music currently playing'<sup>89</sup> in the West. But since this is not a study of origin this small account of noise in the Japan and Europe is sufficient enough to paint a transcultural image of excess that offers a certain degree of narrative to our idea of active noise. Accounts of noise are able to work rhizomatically across borders and cultures without infringing on the strategy of ethnomusicology precisely because more is at stake in the study of noise than the question of cultural specificity alone. According to active noise, what is noise in one culture might be perfectly acceptable in the other, but what makes them mutually exclusive is an engendered idea of the unwanted: 'we know they are noises in the first place because they exist where they shouldn't or they don't make sense when they should.'<sup>90</sup> In the history of active noise, noise has only ever existed negatively, as something interchangeably disruptive, chaotic, nauseous and challenging. In this sense it is a sickening and nauseous concept, the existence of which, as Kahn explains, 'implies a mutable world through an unruly intrusion of an other.'<sup>91</sup> But it is precisely this idea of mutability, exemplified in the embodiments of Japanese noise music, that outstrips the urgency to fix these ideas of 'unruly' and 'intrusive' to noise as essential characteristics. And it is this idea of mutability and heterogeneity that both Hegarty and Kahn are vigilant over but do not, as we will see, take far enough.

<sup>88</sup> The idea of Hyper-Art mirrors that of the readymade, where an ordinary everyday object is uprooted from its context and staged as a piece of conceptual art.

<sup>89</sup> Cope, *Japrocksampler*, 10.

<sup>90</sup> Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 21.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Albert Ayler, *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght 1970* (Water, 2002).

To think about noise negatively is to think noise temporally. It is about accommodating for the obscene and taboo as it might be said to emerge in opposition to the dominant discourses of a specific time. Put simply, it is about understanding an action by framing it in opposition to what qualifies as acceptable to that time and context. So when audiences 'screamed and booed' during Albert Ayler's first set at the Paris Jazz Festival in 1966, 'expecting some cosily nostalgic exercise in genre'<sup>92</sup> but hearing instead something completely different, the negativity of noise involved the audience rejecting what they heard under the claim that it was somehow not-jazz,

outside of jazz and in this respect noisy. A sense of the other, of something that was unfamiliar and incomprehensible to the discipline of jazz had intruded, and made for some an uncomfortable and unbearable listening experience. But Ayler's free jazz excursions were not simultaneously born and murdered that night. As David Keenan looks to argue with the very retelling of this anecdote, this night of equal excitement and disgust – by Ayler's second set of the night, word had spread and the 'faithful' took over the audience – was but one instance of jazz that would claim that jazz was never quite sure of itself and in return the question of 'what is jazz?' like Duchamp's question 'what is art?' was forced to be asked again. Free jazz would later form a loose sub-genre of jazz itself, brought together only by a shared dissatisfaction with what it saw as the limitations of such dominant trends as bebop, hard bop, and modal jazz. Temporally speaking, then, there is a very real sense in which Ayler brought noise into jazz negatively, but closer to the Futurists, with the aim to transgress and broaden what he saw as the limiting ideology of its antecedents. In other words, it might be said that Ayler actively worked against the limits of jazz in the hope of overtaking these limitations with the aim of broadening our understanding of what we might think of as jazz. In this respect, Ayler's music brings us to Kahn's generative understanding of noise, where noises are never just sounds but 'ideas of noise' that in turn can be 'tetchy, abusive, transgressive, resistive.'<sup>93</sup> But as Kahn rightly suggests, while the mimetic associations invoked by ideas and representations of noise might mimic the sounds of someone like Ayler, they might also make an 'actual audible event called noise louder than it might already be.'<sup>94</sup> Definitions of noise, as Kahn goes on to argue, only invite more noise upon themselves. Yet Kahn's text in this sense is not noisy enough. Noise is transgressive and transient in Kahn because he figures it only as a temporal phenomenon: as something that moves against the normative, which necessarily belongs to time, place and culture. In this sense Kahn's account is distinctly phenomenological. While mutable in its negativity, noise in Kahn still comes first as a negativity. But by placing negativity first Kahn seemingly forgets how alterity – not as a material 'thing' but understood as a Derridean non-materiality – has, if we follow Blanchot's philosophy, already outstripped and made mutable the very idea of negativity itself. Noise is not firstly negative and then somehow deterritorialized or de-essentialised from this negativity once it is put into

<sup>93</sup> Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 20.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

play. Instead, there is a noise within noise, as we choose to think the latter negatively, that has in fact already deterritorialized and de-essentialised those claims to negativity, making the story of noise in almost every respect an impossible one. Regarding jazz, Ayler did not upset the order of jazz by bringing something exterior to it inside. Instead, free jazz was born of an accentuation of excess and incomprehensibility that already existed inside the economy of jazz. That is to say, it

was not Ayler's actual notes and their auditory dissonance that housed the alterity of free jazz, but rather the language or the way in which this language was forced to its limit once the audience found themselves on the receiving end of something they had not expected. And similarly as we aim to show with Japanese noise music, the extreme sonic experimentations that constitute this music are not inconsequential to passive noise but equally they are not in and of themselves the site of its non-essentiality. They are significant to the extent that the language thus far proposed as attentive to its subversions is in fact predicated on an anterior impossibility that ruptures its certainty in the exact moment of its articulation. The music, in other words, serves as a reminder of something that has, in fact, already taken place. The mutability that prevents noise from remaining negative, then, is not generated from the social, cultural or material but instead must be said to belong to language as an anterior relation to absence and impossibility. That is to say, it belongs to passive noise as it is held in a different kind of temporality.

A different understanding of time - second slope of thinking noise

Impossibility is something that Blanchot forces upon his own narratives and characters repeatedly in his fiction without resolve. His novels are replete with impossible encounters and encounters with the impossible. As discussed in the introduction, this encounter is the exact instant from where the narrative begins. Arguably, however, this is most notable in *Thomas the Obscure*, having come first as his debut novel. Throughout the text, the protagonist Thomas is continually withdrawn from a sense of calm as he is 'locked in combat with something inaccessible, foreign, something of which he could not say.' Even at his most private, or perhaps most profoundly at his most private, when he is sure his solitude is complete, Thomas is just as sure that someone is there with him, 'occupying his slumber' and invading his very being. Standing, as Blanchot puts it, 'not nowhere and everywhere, but a few feet away, invisible and certain,' this presence that is present

only through a kind of absence haunts Thomas. But it is a haunting that oddly enough brings Thomas to life. As Blanchot writes, upon feeling this uncomfortable uncertainty, Thomas reaches out like a blind man who, on hearing a noise, 'might run to light his lamp.' But like the blind man and his light, both hopeful and hopeless, nothing, Blanchot writes, would 'make it possible for him to seize this presence in any shape of form.'<sup>95</sup> In *Thomas the Obscure* there is, as it were, an awful discomfort and uncertainty that keeps the characters both alive and uncertain, which is to say, alive in their uncertainty.

<sup>95</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'Thomas the Obscure' [1941] in George Quasha (ed.) and Lydia Davis (trans.), *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays* (New York: Station Hill, 1999) 51-129 (68).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

The language of active noise may likewise be thought as suffering from the same haze and exhaustion that keeps Thomas awake at night. Thomas is restless because of a kind of monstrous absence that is already pressing against his existence, and yet this absence is fully outside of time as something like an infinite distance, just like the distance of the inhuman song of the Sirens. What tests him is not present in any typical sense, but is present in its withdrawal and uncertainty. Similarly, we

might think the language of active noise like the forced insomnia of Thomas, continually pressed by an obscure presence that does not let it rest and refuses to let it be. This monstrous presence that is present only as a type of withdrawal, is how we are thinking passive noise in relation to activity; something is already pressing on the walls of the active that is never quite present or belonging within these walls. In other words, there is something within the language of active noise that prevents this language from ever settling and from ever being singular. Ideas of negativity and all that is projected in the history of active noise are never at peace or essential conceptualisations. Instead, there is always something that is not contained within them but which nevertheless uproots them, and which manages to strain and test the certainty of their own individual self-presence. But this terrifying presence is also what brings the language of noise to life. Where, for Thomas, this present absence makes him spring up and reach for the lamp, as he finds himself amid 'another void in which he is coming to life,'<sup>96</sup> the language of active noise reaches for the negative and the transgressive as a way of comprehending the mutability of noise itself. But like the blind man who cannot seize this mutability in any shape or form, both active

noise and Thomas fall deep into the absence itself, as they are gripped firmly by the impossibility of making this absence fully present.

The analogy of turning on the lamp, as if to illuminate what is hidden in the depths of our being, is fitting if we think this passive relation alongside Blanchot's reaction to Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*. For Heidegger, art is something that is held in a peculiar relation to truth, where what is seemingly hidden in the work of art is *aletheia* (unconcealed) in our experience of it as a work. When looking at Vincent van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes, nothing is immediately apparent according to Heidegger, 'not even clods of earth from the field.' And yet, as we look further at the painting something comes towards us: 'from out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth.'<sup>97</sup> What comes forth is what he calls the world as it rises out of the resistive power of the other side of art he refers to as earth. To avoid digressing too far into Heideggerian thought, it is enough here to think both world and earth alongside Blanchot's two slopes of art and literature. But where Blanchot wants to contest Heidegger is with the latter's belief that in the work there is a fundamental disclosure of world (here it is the truth of the peasant shoes as they are thought through the world in which they were worn) as it resists the inanimate materiality, which was already there but not yet manifest, of earth. In other words, there are two tendencies in the work of art for Heidegger: world as the disclosing power of the work of art as it sets itself against what resist any disclosure in the work (earth). In this way, truth in Heidegger is not propositional, nor is the truth of a work of art mimetic. Instead, the work of art is the 'setting-itself-to-work of truth'<sup>98</sup> as it manifests in our experience of the work itself. The origin of the work of art for Heidegger is thus significantly at odds with Blanchot, precisely because origin for Heidegger is this distinctive way in which truth unfolds in the work. Unlike Blanchot, origin has everything to do with truth for Heidegger. Where Thomas in Blanchot's novel reaches for the light in vain like a blind man, for Heidegger the turning on of this light would in fact bestow Thomas with the gift of sight. In Heidegger's theory, Thomas could be said to resist darkness in the way that the artwork reveals a world by resisting the darkness and concealment of earth. Regarding noise, Merzbow, if read through

<sup>97</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' [1935], in Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (eds. and trans.), *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

98 Ibid., 49.

Heidegger, might be said to resist the complexity and disorder of earthly noise by disclosing a transgressive world of avant-gardism that brings light to the world of resistive art. For Blanchot, however, neither Thomas nor Merzbow can bring light to the obscurity they find themselves within because the origin of the work of art is not found in truth, but rather in 'wordlessness, worklessness, and truthless origin.'<sup>99</sup> Blanchot's essay *Literature and the Original Experience*, written in response to Heidegger's original essay, has everything to do with combating what he sees as the violence done by Heidegger to the very possibility of art, a possibility that concerns its 'fundamental absence from itself, its essential inessentiality, its paradoxical impossibility.'<sup>100</sup> In this way, Merzbow for Blanchot might still be said to reach for the lamp like Thomas, but his reaching will never illuminate anything. Art and, by implication, the language about art, does not disclose anything other than the inessentiality and absence of meaning that is the only essential characteristic of art.

<sup>99</sup> Hill, *Extreme Contemporary*, 127.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 124.

If this is true of all art, then what is significant about Japanese noise music? Surely there is a danger that this music might appear to have been selected arbitrarily if the uncertainty of artistic language is as ubiquitous as has been suggested. But as highlighted previously what is significant about Japanese noise music is the way in which its extreme phenomenological manifestations invite a language about this music that is implicitly vigilant over the limits of meaning and impossibility. Even the theorists we have argued belong to active noise highlight the way in which Japanese noise music forces us to encounter the limit of musical meaning but they incorrectly attribute this encounter to the conscious efforts of the noise maker as an active mobilisation of negativity. The efforts of the noise musician cannot be essentialised to the concept of negativity because this language of negativity is conditioned by an absence that it can never exhaust. The alterity of noise comes not through our understanding of its material subversions but the way in which this understanding, as it approaches the limit of meaning, is forced to face the uncertainty of meaning that exists already within it. When read alongside Blanchot, the material phenomenon of noise is not the embodiment of the absence that haunts Thomas. The alterity of noise might seemingly come first as a material choice, a choice that makes it seem radical, but its alterity in fact occurs passively, beyond the intention of its authors as the silent disruption of language in language. Similar to what Serres makes

apparent throughout his text *Genesis*, we are thinking here about a 'second noise' that lodges itself in noise not as a 'fluxion, a tiny little meaning, a local concept' but as a fluctuation that is, as Serres claims, 'neither man nor petty god.'<sup>101</sup> This second noise takes place within active noise and conceptuality more broadly as a chaos and disturbance so chaotic and so disturbing that the very signification of these words fall away even from themselves, like a dissipating vicious circle. In fact, as Serres rightly claims, we are at a loss as to how to think this noise because we do not have a concept for it: 'all meaning has vanished from the place I call forth.'<sup>102</sup> This noise comes to us only when the language of active noise is spoken in response to the material activities of the noise artist, and only as a rupturing and unsettling presence that is the very absence and silence upon which this language is predicated.



101 Michel Serres, *Genesis* [1982], trans. Geneviève James & James Nielson (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 67.

102 *Ibid.*, 43.

103 Hill, *Extreme Contemporary*, 131.

104 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* [1980], trans. Ann Smock (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 87.

To call forth a space devoid of essential character is not to call forth any kind of truth or an idea of anti-truth as we might figure it through scepticism. This space, by contrast, would be in excess of any kind of positionality, any kind of truth, and any hope of temporality. It would, therefore, arrive with a different kind of temporality, sidestepping the logical modes of the visible and invisible, presence and absence, being and non-being, in favour of a neutral mode of thinking that interrupts this dialectic. This space is what Blanchot calls the neuter and what we are calling passive noise, as the space between language and object caused by what Hill refers to as language's 'homeopathic principle.' To think about this is again to think alongside Mallarmé's flower, and the double bind that language finds itself in as it tries to confer identity on what it names whilst simultaneously being forced to 'yield to the lack of identity that gives rise to the name and inhabits it as a condition of its deployment.'<sup>103</sup> As language falls back on itself and onto an infinite regress of meaning, what springs forth is a neutral space (the neuter) that is in itself neither a concept or name but the 'unnamed within the name,'<sup>104</sup> whose purpose is to conceptualise that which precedes all concepts. This neuter that is responsible for the very workings of language is always what simultaneously makes this language fraught and uneasy. For this study, this neutral space which is named here as passive

noise, is what makes the language and history of active noise (as a history of negativity and dialectics) unessential and but one story chosen from a multitude of others. For this reason, the neuter cannot be thought of as a concept as such or a thing-in-itself, because the neuter is not part of the temporal order of things. Although difficult to grasp and paradoxical in nature, the neuter is rather awkwardly that which interrupts temporality as the space outside of temporality that nevertheless exists within temporality as temporalities disorder. Framed more simply, the neuter is what prevents a concept from ever fixing itself into a static shape, belonging to a specific time and place. It comes from the idea that language cannot take place without exposure to that resistance of decision, which makes resistance an inseparable part of language. For us, the neuter is passive noise as it names the inability to ever fix the definition of noise in place. It is the noise that murmurs before the materiality of sonic and visual noise, as the unessential space from which all concepts of noise are derived. As Foucault writes in his essay on Blanchot, 'the fictitious is never in things or in people' – passive noise is not the sonic rebellion of Merzbow as some kind of transgressive commentary on contemporary Japanese life – but instead it is found in 'the void surrounding them, in the space in which they are set, rootless and without foundation.'<sup>105</sup>

105 Michel Foucault, 'The Thought of the Outside' [1966], in Brian Massumi (trans.), *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 153.

106 Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* [1982], trans. Richard Zenith (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 33.

## Terminal Nausea

In Fernando Pessoa's fragmented work *The Book of Disquiet*, a work he curiously refers to as factless, he recalls a time, at four o'clock in the morning, when he cannot sleep. Nothing he tells us, was keeping him from sleeping, not a troubling thought or physical discomfort. But instead, as he writes, 'the dull silence of my strange body just lies there in the darkness.'<sup>106</sup> His body feels strange precisely because he does not feel any pain and because his mind is not racing with restless thoughts. He is kept awake for some unknown reason and gripped in the darkness by nothing other than the darkness itself and the steady neutrality of his existence. As Pessoa writes of his existence in this time, caught in this night: 'Everything around me is the naked,

abstract universe, consisting of nocturnal negations.'<sup>107</sup> In this sense he is gripped by a night and a thought of existence that is more troubling and more difficult to comprehend than our typical understating of these things might invite.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Iyer, *Vigilance*, 64.

Similarly, Thomas in Blanchot's novel cannot sleep at night because he finds himself awake in a different kind of night. For Blanchot, the night in which we sleep is a night still attached to the day; a day in which possibility, meaning and action can unfold. As a night belonging to the day, we possess the possibility and power to sleep. And as day belongs to the realm of possibility, it is in the day that we might think of noise as something possible, negative, unwanted and active. But it is in this day that both Thomas and Pessoa lose the possibility to sleep at all, as they find themselves gripped by a more essential night, a night which Blanchot figures as the 'other night.' This night bears no relation to the day as a site of possibility, but instead keeps Thomas and Pessoa vigilant over a different kind of night, an essential night (absence) that comes forth only as the impossibility of the night which falls from day (a night where it might be possible to sleep). In other words, the essential night that keeps both awake is an insomnia that names the impersonality and impossibility which seizes and overtakes the realm of the possible. By keeping Thomas awake at night in his novel, Blanchot is conceiving of the economy of possibility as it finds itself 'inscribed within a space which it is unable to control.'<sup>108</sup> Blanchot wants to show a sense of familiarity once it is divided and ruptured by something unfamiliar; a possibility that has become fundamentally impossible; a night that somehow becomes more night. Yet for Pessoa, this night is not a fiction and arguably, unlike Blanchot, he is not trying to conceive of an economy other than that of power. Or perhaps, if he is, then he is doing so only because of the inevitability of this night that seized hold of him without invitation and which he can recall only fragmentarily and vaguely.

This is arguably because Pessoa is caught in, as we all are, the anonymous current of being as Levinas understands it. While Pessoa does not or perhaps cannot make this current explicit, precisely because of its anonymity and obscurity, the essential night in Blanchot appears to be a more explicit attempt at bringing this feeling to the fore, as Levinas had before him, even if this attempt is fundamentally

marred by impossibility. Where Mallarmé writes of an absent flower, Levinas will

write of the *il y a* of being; the simple 'there is' of existence when the 'is' no longer makes way for a particular quality. In the essential night common to both Blanchot and Levinas, as well as Pessoa, a darkness blacker than any possible night falls over everything around us, dropping particularity and specificity into blackness and thereby masking the this or that of being. As Levinas writes: 'when the form of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence.' All that is left is the there is of being, what Pessoa describes as the 'abstract universe': not pure nothingness but the anonymous murmuring of absence, that is as Levinas writes, 'in its turn, a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence.' 109

109 Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* [1947], trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 58.

110 Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum Books, 2010), 49.

The *il y a* and the essential night are ways of thinking that which resists the constituting and final grasp of consciousness and conceptuality. It is a thought experiment designed to bring forth the absence which, we have argued, grounds all of our language. More specifically for this study, the neuter, the *il y a* and the night, are ways of thinking synonymously about the delimiting power of passive noise. As the above account of active noise illustrates, the historiography of noise has for the most part up until this point thought the nausea of noise etymologically. That is to say, as a term deriving from the Latin *nausea* and the Greek *nausie* (meaning seasickness, motion sickness, evoking a feeling of being queasy), noise has been commonly essentialised as something negative and unwanted. Even when reterritorialized as a style of music like Japanese noise music, noise is still figured by various theorists and fans alike as something dangerous. When Voegelin writes about her experience watching Japanese noise guitarist and turntablist Otomo Yoshihide live in 2005, she writes of nausea and pain: his sound 'pins my ears to themselves: piercing them to tie them up in the extreme frequencies and volumes of the performance.' But rather than refuse Yoshihide's unbearable sonic assault, Voegelin submits to its demand, 'gloriously reeling in extreme sounds that verge towards something so loud it is impossible to hear.'<sup>110</sup> In this way, noise remains dialectical, but in a manner that is nothing short of masochistic. Hegarty certainly attempts to move away from this perception of listening but even he is able to do so only with the idea of failure; noise

music becomes genre only when it fails to remain as something negative and unwanted. Up to this point, then, it is fair to say that noise has kept a close relationship to its supposedly nauseating origin. Whether through masochism or failure, noise clings to its apparent negativity as if it were an essential and inseparable attribute of it. It would be tempting for a study that looks to navigate away from any kind of essential idea of noise to abandon the idea of nausea altogether. At the very least, we might follow Serres by reversing the language of noise where nausea would no longer speak of negations, but would instead be a positive chaos of indetermination and multiplicity.<sup>111</sup> But to reverse the order in this way is to simply replace the essential negativity of noise with a more favourable language. Serres is certainly correct to nod towards the multiplicity and heterogeneity of noise. But to frame this positively is to overlook the extremity and impossibility that is caused by

what must necessarily be a defiant multiplicity. In other words, rather than abandon the idea of nausea when thinking about noise one might think about it closer to the way Levinas thinks about nausea and the way Blanchot thinks about the essential night. Both Blanchot and Levinas share a single configuration of shared communication that allows us to think the nausea of noise no longer as a sonic negativity nor indeed as a positivity, but closer to a conceptual malaise that drops everything into darkness in a manner that makes us weary and out of control. In this essential night, we would no longer be thinking nausea as a way of conceptualising our response to the multiplicity of noise, as if cordoning off its heterogeneity with negativity. Rather, nausea would evoke the anterior space of passive noise as it exists as a malaise deep within the economy of the active. For this reason, it is fair to say that with the concept of nausea and passive noise we can locate a noise within a noise and by consequence, a nausea within nausea, just in the way Blanchot speaks of a night within the night. And like Blanchot's night which is darker than the night we know, nausea would be said to be terminal – a terminal nausea that makes the very concept of nausea repellent even to its own definition.

111 Serres, *Genesis*, 98.

When Levinas writes about the *il y a*, particularly in his earlier texts such as *On Escape*, he makes explicit the likeness this thought has to that of nausea. As Jacques Rolland explains, we have a feeling of nausea when thinking the *il y a* because, like the feeling of seasickness, we are similarly at sea in the there is of

being. We are, as it were, 'off the coast', we have lost sight of meaning. More dramatically, 'the earth has gone, the same earth into which, ordinarily, we sink our feet in order, in this position or stance, to exist.'<sup>112</sup> To think about nausea in this way might be to listen to *Homunculus*,<sup>113</sup> the third song from Mike Patton and Merzbow's collaborative project *Maldoror*, at sea. It is to begin on the shore with familiar sonic sign posts, playful electronic loops and characteristic Patton vocals that slowly cascade in pitch. But at sea, fifty eight seconds into the composition, we begin to drift, as this familiarity is submerged by indistinguishable walls of Merzbow's feedback. Here it could be said, in a similar way as Rolland explains about nausea, that we are 'off the coast' musically, having lost sight of all the initial sonic familiarity; as if our sonic landmarks have been overtaken by a seemingly infinite horizon of sonic possibility. But this would still be thinking nausea ontologically, which is to say, thinking nausea through possibility and as a possibility. With Blanchot, however, the state of nausea is taken even further as he pushes beyond ontology and possibility. The nausea of the *il y a*, which Blanchot expresses instead through ideas of the neuter and the night is, as Levinas rightly explains, no longer an event of being or an event of something, but is instead an event which is 'neither being nor nothingness.'<sup>114</sup> To make this applicable within the theory of noise developed here, the nausea of noise is no longer a sonic fact. It is not, as Voegelin writes, a feeling physically gripped by a sonic perversion, or being cast off shore as Merzbow's sonic excess drowns Patton's tonal vocal. Nausea for Blanchot is a sense of being when it is detached from the fixity of being. It is the silent, anonymous, neutral rumbling of being that grounds our very experience and the language we use to understand it. Nausea in this way must be thought of as terminal in that it is no longer an aesthetic judgment. It is, on the other hand, the space in which all matter of 'states of the soul', which is to say, all matter of 'objectivising, consciousness [and] psychological inversion'<sup>115</sup> fall into the darkness of the night. Specifically for noise, it is about the very definition of noise, specifically those that cling to the etymological 'nauseous' perspective, falling into a conceptual groundlessness that makes this very

112 Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape* [1935], trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 17.

113 Maldoror, *She* (Ipecac Recordings, 1999).

114 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* [1981], trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 50.

115 Ibid.

definition impossible. As Levinas explains about Blanchot's work, it is always 'necessary to unsay what one says.'<sup>116</sup> Particularly for noise, there is, as it were, the possibility of speaking noise negatively or masochistically, but what is necessary when read through Blanchot is what comes before: a passive and terminal impossibility (noise) that ruptures and splits the certainty of this negativity. It is in this passive noise that the complexity of noise must be thought if we are to sustain noise at all as any kind of nausea or heterogeneity.

116 Ibid.

It is at this point that the language of transgression can be rethought and thereby reclaimed as a valuable tool when accounting for the alterity of extreme artistic expressions, and particularly, Japanese noise music. This is because if we understand transgression as Libertson does, that is, in a manner close to Blanchot's ideas of the neuter, nausea and the night, then it no longer accounts for the phenomenology of an activity. Transgression certainly has a history of disobedience and with its underlying emphasis on excess and sacrifice, it almost certainly finds its master in Bataille whose erotic fiction and sexually opulent philosophy are typically thought as the embodiment of transgression's liberating power. But under Libertson, transgression loses its power as a liberating activity of disobedience when it is internalised and framed passively as the constitutive inevitability of impossibility made manifest in the very phenomenology of experience. In short, transgression is necessary for considering the worldly subversions of Japanese noise music not in an active sense but passively. It is, in other words, a naming of not the way in which this music tries to escape the world but the way in which the language we use to understand this escape attempt manifests in proximity to an impossibility that ruptures both our understanding of the attempt and the attempt itself.

## Chapter 2. Practitioners of Contamination

### Masters of Nothing

If we are to understand Japanese noise music alternatively to its active appropriation then it is essential that we free the concept of noise from the properties of affliction and physical suffering that are typically attached to it. Namely, it is essential that we bring light to the reality of the rupturing delimitation of passivity in the language of active noise otherwise its excesses will be left to a limiting voluntarism. Although the first chapter mapped the theoretical dominance of active noise, while exposing the epistemological fissure upon which this language is propagated, it did not thoroughly

explain the way in which Japanese noise music is, in this language, regularly understood through ideas of physical suffering, masochism and most importantly transgression. This chapter will demonstrate the way in which a number of theorists writing about Japanese noise music account for their listening experience of this supposedly 'extreme' music via a masochistic dynamic. Often the sounds of the noise musician are said to be so excessive and abrasive that the listener can only submit to its oppressive power. But this submission is often described positively as if it were a liberating experience that might, somehow, allow us to stretch the boundaries of meaning and definition. Theorists who make a case for Japanese noise music in this way often use Bataille as their theoretical starting point. But what we will demonstrate in this chapter is that this understanding of Bataille is not only incompatible with the Bataille that both Blanchot and, particularly, Libertson admired so much. By doing this, we will also be able to show how the understanding of transgression and affliction might be rethought in relation to Japanese noise music. If we follow Libertson's line of inquiry, that is if we believe transgression to be a passive concept rather than a physical phenomenon, a very different account of impossibility and alterity might be approached. Here, transgression will be held in a space no longer accounted for by physicality but rather by a radical passivity. The necessity of thinking transgression in this way, to reiterate, is to reclaim noise from a language of negativity that is blinded by its reliance on pain and suffering while simultaneously legitimising Japanese noise music as a practice that is more nuanced than the kind Reynolds dismisses so readily. Certainly, as this chapter will illustrate, a number of Japanese practitioners are complicit in the masochistic aestheticisation of

noise music. But what this chapter will equally show is that beyond the literal surface of violence murmurs a relationship with impossibility that escapes representation, and that perhaps not only is this the real demand of thinking the concept of transgression, as Libertson accredits to Bataille, but equally this relationship is the practitioner's real urgency.

'[I]f the thought of the impossible were entertained,' Blanchot tells us, 'it would be a kind of reserve in thought itself, a thought not allowing itself to be thought in the mode of appropriate comprehension.' In this regard, it would be a 'strange thought' which is proposed not 'in order to make thought capitulate' but 'in order to allow it to announce itself according to a measure other than that of power.'<sup>1</sup> Yet when impossibility is entertained under the affirmation of transgression this alterity of impossibility is unknowingly and therefore inadvertently reduced to the region of familiarity and comprehension. For instance, the type of transgression which Anthony Julius traces, from its theological entry into the English language during the sixteenth century to its secularisation into a broad concept of rule breaking,<sup>2</sup> accounts for impossibility through intentionality; the extent to which something 'succeeds' as a transgressive effort is dependent on the efforts of the rule breaker. Possibility and impossibility in this understanding are both tied to volition which is, typically, positively accredited. 'To describe an artwork as "transgressive"' Julius writes, 'is to offer it a compliment.'<sup>3</sup> And it is precisely this compliment, the idea that transgression is an 'absolute value,' which Ashley Tauchert antagonistically writes against in her aptly named text *Against Transgression*.<sup>4</sup>

1 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* [1969], trans. Susan Hanson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 43.

2 Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 19.

3 Ibid.

4 Ashley Tauchert, *Against Transgression* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 2.

5 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 44.

But this idea of associating voluntarism/action with the concept of transgression is something Libertson will argue was never meant to be part of transgression. In both Julius and Tauchert's account, transgression is said to engage with ideas of the outside (what aims to escape the confines of meaning and boundary) through both extreme physical and conceptual activity. But as Blanchot reminds us, often when we believe we are thinking 'the strange and the foreign,' we are in fact thinking the familiar: 'we think not the distant, but the close that measures it.'<sup>5</sup> In the

case of active noise this involves thinking the foreignness that is proper to the dimension of alterity via a antagonistic relationship. Regarding transgression, this involves the reduction of impossibility as it is proper to the region of the outside to the familiarity of activity and possibility. The yearning for the outside in transgression, which Tauchert laments, is not a yearning of any sort familiar to us. Tauchert references Bataille saying 'we yearn for our lost continuity,'<sup>6</sup> as if, taken literally, this yearning might lead to an active searching for what is lost. But if we stay with Blanchot and also follow Libertson reading Bataille, it is not a yearning, on part of the subject, for any particular thing. It is rather, as this chapter will demonstrate, equivocal to Levinas's idea of desire which is not desiring of anything specific but the modality of subjectivity as it proceeds from differentiation itself. In other words, transgression names not a yearning for excess on the part of the subject but the interiority of subjectivity as it is already animated by an excess, before it has the capability of action. Regarding Japanese noise music, this means that its transgression is not physical but rather equivocal to the nature of interiority, in language, as it displaces noise's essential meaning. If we follow both Libertson and Blanchot closely then it is made clear that transgression was never, despite what some interpretations of Bataille would have us believe, about activity but rather the way in which our understanding of these activities is animated by an impossibility it cannot contain. And similarly with Japanese noise music, it will be argued that its violent and erotic performances and gestures, despite appearances, do not account for the outside because the outside precedes, passively, the possibility of subjectivity.

6 Tauchert, *Against Transgression*, 17.

The account of transgression which will be put forward near the end of this chapter, and the deprivileging throughout this chapter of physical suffering and eroticism as aesthetic essentials for understating noise, will allow us to understand the excesses of Japanese noise music through the idea of interiority. However, by doing this, we are not trying to account for practitioner intent. In a distinctly Barthesian fashion, the aim is to illustrate how the character of impossibility is never in the author's control exactly because of his/her fraught position within language and meaning. The actions of the Japanese noise practitioner, then, starting as we will with the masochistic performance of Mayuko Hino, only ever exposes us to the impossibility of their actions, regardless of intent. The difference with this account of

impossibility, from accounts which measure impossibility according to the successes and failures of possibility, is accounted for by the idea of passivity which refers to the

way in which subjectivity and meaning are predicated on a region of impossibility. This is why Bataille is considered here because, just as we have argued that the alterity of noise cannot be sustained if it is solely thought through a language of negativity, or indeed any conceptual system that looks to familiarise the exigent heterogeneity of noise, the alterity that Bataille's work is vigilant over is reduced to a 'destructive negativity'<sup>7</sup> if transgression is thought solely in the realm of the active: as a means of rebellion, antagonism and attempted escape. It is true that mutilation, sacrifice, eroticism and death are all significant for Bataille. 'Generally speaking,' Bataille writes, 'philosophy is at fault in being divorced from life.'<sup>8</sup> But what distinguishes Bataille in Libertson's reading from other readings of his work, such as Julius's and Tauchert's but particularly those often deployed in analyses of Japanese noise music, is in what Libertson sees as the passive refusal of intentionality in his thought. Eroticism and sacrifice are efforts used not as a means of escape or a resistance to taboo but a vigilance that exposes us to a pre-originary relation that subjectivity is said to have with alterity. When read through the unique lens of Libertson, in what we might think of as a Libertsonian-Batailleanism,<sup>9</sup> Bataille moves away from the active and closer to our understanding of passive noise. That is to say, he moves closer to Blanchot as a philosopher of the radically passive, allowing us, in turn, to reframe the erotic aesthetic of noise through interiority as opposed to exteriority.

7 Joseph Libertson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), 23.

8 Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957), trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 12.

9 It is necessary that it is made clear that the reading of Bataille, which will dominate this chapter, is one heavily indebted to the unique way in which Libertson reads Bataille. Not least because this chapter will focus on Libertson's writing more than Bataille's own, but because his reading is not necessarily the most agreed-upon version of Bataille, which is why the reading is unique. Through Libertson, we are able to glimpse a passivity in Bataille's work that allows us to reframe the nature of transgression and, with it, the typical understanding of Japanese noise music that has dominated discussions about it.

The alterity that will be said to belong to this understanding of transgression will be internalised and framed passively in conjunction with what Libertson calls proximity. Moving away from the idea of volition, the transgression of noise which

signifies its alterity will be framed instead as the 'insistent exigency of closure'<sup>10</sup> which, through a motion of paradox, involves Japanese noise music's closure, which is its very mobilisation, as proximity. Put another way, as was demonstrated in chapter one, the inevitable insistence of active noise in looking to close the definition of noise is always exceeded and dispossessed by a radical passivity, an alterity without power. And it is precisely this passivity that conditions noise's closure; a silent murmuring of alterity that takes part in the constitution of noise as the unsteadiness of noise's exigency. The idea of closure, then, which has to do precisely with the effort of essentialising meaning, is constituted only by a discontinuity that is not activated by will but there already as the 'tense centre of thought [noise] itself.'<sup>11</sup> For us, this has to do with the way in which the impossible expression of passive noise constitutes the possibility of noise as negativity and radicalism. Transgression and eroticism will therefore be said to move like passive noise, as a shadow that comes to us only because through the language of the active yet as that which



infinitely resists every attempt to mobilise it within the active. Our final point of this internalisation will be explained visually by reference to Shinya Tsukamoto's film *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*.<sup>12</sup> For, it is only when the protagonist of *Tetsuo*, commonly referred to as the salaryman, looks into the mirror that he first acknowledges his mutation. It is only when he notices the small piece of sharp metal protruding from his cheek, which we learn is sharp when he quickly withdraws his finger and gasps after touching it, that he first realises something foreign is inside his very being. This, we will argue, distinctly visualises the idea that it is only when we try and write of a 'world behind or underneath the possible'<sup>13</sup> that we are attentive to the real nature of Japanese noise music's transgression, because transgression concerns passivity and not activity.

10 Libertson, *Proximity*, 122.

11 Joseph Libertson, 'Bataille, and Communication: Savoir, Non-Savoir, Glissement, Rire', in Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (ed. and trans.), *On Bataille: Critical Essays* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 228.

12 *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* [1989], directed by Shinya Tsukamoto (London: Tartan Video, 2005).

13 Libertson, *Proximity*, 120.

### Ecstatic Noise - from Simone Weil to Mayuko Hino

When Adam Harper writes about the songs of Californian singer Julia Holter he does so by first referring to Simone Weil's idea of decreation which he defines as 'the dissolution of the way we differentiate between one thing and the Other; in that case the divine.'<sup>14</sup> If we recall Weil's understanding of holy creation from chapter one – an understanding which believes divinity is felt and made present through a withdrawal and absence – decreation follows Weil's propensity for irregular and paradoxical thought. It is a way of trying to match the infinite withdrawal of God to our finite existence. Weil wants us to 'renounce being something'<sup>15</sup> by coming to the understanding that we are, at our core, essentially nothing. With decreation, Weil moves close to some of the formative ideas of Buddhism found in the Upanishads by conceiving of a movement where what is created is said to pass into the world of the uncreated, or perhaps more precisely, a movement where being is said to relinquish being-with-ego. How this occurs is never fully clear or linear because Weil formulates the idea in the shape of a paradox. The idea that one can uproot one's sense of self 'from every earthly country',<sup>16</sup> which for Weil is fundamentally necessary in our approach to decreation, is frustrated by the unavoidability of being-in-the-world as an integral form, that is, as a conscious subject. To lose oneself absolutely can only ever be an effort made on the part of the subject embedded in the world, which fundamentally contradicts the nature of losing oneself. Despite this, Weil tried and encouraged among her readers a nomadic lifestyle, as if constantly moving from one country to another and never confining herself to any particular religion or political allegiance might eventually loosen the strictures of subjectivity. This is why Weil, in spite of her theological beliefs, refused to be baptised so that she could 'move among men of every class and complexion.'<sup>17</sup> For Julia Holter, the paradox of decreation involves her own creative goal of 'feeling one with something,

but...not.' In a music that evokes, as Harper writes, a grand operatic sense of antiquity, featuring characters from Greek mythology while modelling itself on the Greek poet Sappho's idea of Ekstasis,<sup>18</sup> yet all the while framed by a DIY pop aesthetic, Holter's

14 Adam Harper, 'Lo-Fi Goddess', *The Wire*, no. 337 (March, 2012), 28-31 (29).

15 Simone Weil, 'Decreation' [1952], in George A. Panichas (ed.), *The Simone Weil Reader* (New York: David McKay Company, 1977), 350-357 (351).

16 *Ibid.*, 356.

17 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (1951), trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 6.

18 While also the name of Holter's album, ekstasis as Harper understands it, also refers to the Greek definition of standing outside oneself.

paradox has to do with the way a projected ethereality in her music is grounded by a necessity, similar to Weil's, of being-in-the-world; 'Greek goddesses singing about their grief in 21st century train stations.'<sup>19</sup> Holter's approach to ekstasis, then, is much like the paradox of Weil's decreation in that it is the materiality of a pop idiom (worldliness) that inevitably grounds her mystico-religioso-lyrical leaning. Just like Weil, Holter can never truly embody the spirituality of which she sings. But like Weil, who nevertheless writes and in writing names the nothingness 'God,' Holter makes music regardless, as if the impossibility of embodying the transcendence of which she sings were in fact possible. Her music lives in this tension just as Weil's writing, and lifestyle, lived in the hope of decreation.

19 Harper, 'Lo-Fi Goddess', 29.

20 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 26.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, xv.

But Weil's investment in contradiction and her argument for decreation is more afflicted than Holter's. Although Weil understands her openness to divinity as something deeply rooted in her outlook from birth, it was only during ten days spent at Solesmes in 1938 when, after following each liturgical service from Palm Sunday to Easter Tuesday, she first experienced the 'possibility of loving divine love'<sup>20</sup> and daring to name it God. At the time and consistent with most of her life, Weil was suffering from unbearable migraines which made every sound at the service painful to hear. It was, however, as Weil writes, only through concentration that she was able to 'rise above' what she calls her 'wretched flesh' to find the 'pure and perfect joy' in the chanting. Divine love was found for Weil only in the 'midst of affliction'<sup>21</sup> and only because of her attempt to decreate herself in that moment of affliction when the sounds became too much to bear; only by leaving her 'wretched flesh' was she able to allow the Passion of Christ to enter into her. Affliction had already been a typical pattern of response to human suffering by Weil. As Leslie Fiedler explains, Weil had even refused to eat sugar at the age of five, denying herself what some of the most unfortunate were denied, in this case what was deprived of the soldiers on the front line,<sup>22</sup> but after her experience of divine love affliction became more than just a name given to physical suffering.

According to Blanchot affliction refers not only to the state of physical suffering but also an untypical sense of temporality felt in the state of this suffering.

As he understands it, in the moment of suffering 'one can neither suffer it nor cease suffering it,' thereby stopping time<sup>23</sup> in the way it is typically understood as a progression to an end. In this way, affliction not only names the state of physical suffering itself but also the temporality, or lack thereof, we undergo in the state of physical suffering. Despite hoping for an end to suffering, a hope one would imagine is felt by anyone who has experienced prolonged sensations of pain, the realisation that no end or resolution is immanent creates, for Blanchot, a dreadful sense of the infinite. In this respect, affliction relates to the fear that one's physical suffering might never end. In this fear, time is suspended and ultimately lost in such a way that it also 'makes us lose the world.'<sup>24</sup> So, just as Weil withdrew from herself and the place around her in her own suffering, supposedly leaving her wretched flesh behind, the individual experiencing physical suffering withdraws from the usual temporality constitutive of subjectivity and into a temporality seemingly without end. The present, if we understand it as the closure of individuality, withdraws into an infinite abyss that de-familiarises the world and the individual. This withdrawal, as Weil understands it, is essential to the thinking of decreation.

<sup>23</sup> Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>27</sup> Weil, *Decreation*, 356.

But how, then, was Weil able to overcome the 'horror of being where being is without end,'<sup>25</sup> (which is Blanchot's very understanding of affliction in the work of Weil), and enter into a rapturous relationship with the divine? It is because affliction for Weil was an enlightening experience that involves the limit of what we understand the human condition to be and the way in which this limit is tested and interrogated in the moment of physical suffering. When Blanchot quotes Weil as stating that 'thought finds affliction as repugnant to think about as living flesh finds death repugnant' he is reminding us that the 'centre of thought' during affliction 'is that which does not let itself be thought.'<sup>26</sup> Or in the words of Weil: 'appearance clings to being, and pain alone can tear them apart from each other.'<sup>27</sup> It is only in affliction in which the self, as a stable and self-contained entity, is challenged and withdrawn from the temporality that gives it its shape. The infinite suspension that supersedes the present in the moment of affliction, as a suffering without end, withdraws our subjectivity from its corporeality in a moment of decreation that

gestures toward the divine withdrawal itself. It is clear when reading Weil's description of decreation that violence is a key component to escaping the rigidity of subjectivity and taking us closer to an absence like that of divinity. Violence tears being apart from appearance thereby helping one move closer to the image (lessness) of nothingness and absence that is paradoxically God's presence.

If we momentarily refrain from following Blanchot's reading of Weil through to the end, which is to say if we think affliction, momentarily, only in terms of the active, then we might think Weil closer to the discourse that surrounds Japanese noise music and active noise more broadly. This would involve thinking Weil alongside the masochistic tendencies of noise pioneers such as Mayuko Hino as opposed to Julia Holter who, in neither performance nor recording, has any explicit connection to the idea of affliction. The temptation when thinking about noise particularly in relation to Japanese noise music is, as Hegarty reminds us, to read its extremity as a form of ecstasy in terms not unlike Weil's motion for decreation: 'taking individuals out of themselves by forcibly rooting them in bodily experience.'<sup>28</sup> Noise is typically thought in the language of the active as a disorientating and punishing music that frustrates the constitution of the subject who listens as well as the one who performs it.<sup>29</sup> The experience of losing oneself is more eroticised in Japanese noise music than it is in Weil but its affirmation is regularly argued to be ecstatic and likewise born of affliction. As Hainge explains when discussing Merzbow, 'His work seems to spring, indeed, from a desire not only to make a great deal of sound, but to make so much sound that the physical properties of sound are physicalized.'<sup>30</sup> And if this sound is understood negatively, then surely its physicalisation can only be thought via affliction leading to a masochistic exchange between practitioner and listener.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007), 155.

<sup>29</sup> The mutual risk involved for both performer and audience, of giving oneself over to the sonic painfulness of noise, is why Hegarty chooses to follow Deleuze in the abandonment of the term sadomasochism in favour of masochism. As Hegarty argues, principally this is because of consent, wherein sadism is about the absence of consent as opposed to masochism where the 'search for physical pain and/or humiliation, is all about a contract' (Paul Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace', 137.). For the purpose of discussing the discourse of eroticism in the language of active noise, which is a common theoretical and aesthetic reference used to understand Japanese noise music, the privileging of masochism over the misleading and conflicting economies of sadomasochism will be used here. A contract of mutual submission to the sound persists in the performance space and private listening to noise music. Both performer and listener, with the exception of anomalies where someone might find themselves in a concert hall they did not want to be in, enter into the sonic space of noise mutually. The debate of whether or not this space is masochistic and what, in turn, this masochism might mean, is precisely where passive noise will be emphasised.

<sup>30</sup> Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 261.

If we take, for instance, Voegelin's account of listening to Merzbow's album 1930,<sup>31</sup> she speaks of a 'tight reciprocity'<sup>32</sup> that is willingly entered into; a masochistic undertaking that ties the body to a sonic physicality that is both sharp and piercing. Entering into the space of noise evokes a space, if we follow Voegelin reading closely, akin to Weil's mode of affliction. For Weil, it was the sound of chant which, because of her migraines, arrived agonizingly at her ears whereas for Voegelin it was the overwhelming feedback of Merzbow's electronics that entered her ears, as she describes, like shards of glass. But in a mutual submission to these different sonic afflictions both Voegelin and Weil welcome an untying of the temporal order of the self and an entry into a space that is no longer designated for the self but for that which exists outside of the self. Voegelin even goes so far as to liken her listening, which she does in a closed and darkened room, to the moment before an alien abduction. Her listening is, she explains, a preparation readying herself to be 'beamed up by their own beam of light.'<sup>33</sup> Voegelin is evoking, quite literally, the sense of

losing oneself, or at least hoping to lose oneself, to the dimension of the Other, that is, to a space completely away from the present. This description is entirely representative of the tendency by theorists to understand Japanese noise music as an activity which, literally speaking, pulls one away from one's stable sense of selfhood. This is partly because, as Hainge explains regarding Merzbow, the desire to physicalise this sound is also a desire to 'create a volumetric space whose physical properties are tangibly different to what exists in time and space outside of the music's particular duration,'<sup>34</sup> thus leading a number of theorists, like Voegelin, to attempt to conceive of what might exist outside of this time and space. There is thus, in various accounts of listening to Japanese noise music, a striking resemblance to decreation where the stability and fixity of subjectivity evoke, in their withdrawal, a different mode of temporality. In the language of active noise, this involves insisting on the idea that Japanese noise music is essentially about losing control and losing one's relationship with the world and music. Disorder and disorientation displace the

31 Merzbow, 1930 (Tzadik, 1998).

32 Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum Books, 2010), 67.

33 Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 68.

34 Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 261.

thinking subject in what Michel Henritzi describes as a 'music of catharsis and hysteria.'<sup>35</sup>

35 Michel Henritzi, 'Extreme Contemporary – Japanese Music as Radical Exoticism', in Franck Stofer and Christian Aupetit et al (eds.), *Japanese Independent Music* (Bordeaux: Sonore, 2001), 31-37 (34).

36 This term is deliberately loaded. It is used here to show how active noise, with its emphasis on negativity, necessitates a rigid understanding of both noise and music. The language of active noise is assumed here only to expose it to the theoretical instability on which it is predicated.

37 Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 68.

38 This type of aesthetic was more typical of Merzbow's early releases whereas his more recent outputs have involved more militant references to veganism and animal rights.

39 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 134.

40 Pink eiga (Pink Film) is a broad cinematic term in Japan that encompasses a number of films with adult content.

41 Butoh is a form of Japanese dance theatre that emerged in the late 1950s.

There is, if the language of active noise is to be believed, a very different temporality at work in the listening to Japanese noise music because of the way in which it mirrors the ideas of decreation and affliction through its excessive volume and extreme performances. If noise is an unbearable sound then the time of listening to it must be afflicted and therefore, following Weil, apparently infinite. What distinguishes Japanese noise music from ordinary musicality<sup>36</sup> is this affliction which forces, as we have seen with Voegelin, the listening subject out of itself. Physical

suffering is what forces the self to think other than itself precisely because of its unbearable insistence. In the case of Japanese noise music this suffering refers to what, according to the discourse of active noise, forces us out of the rigidity of subjectivity, the world and ultimately music as musicality and meaning. As Voegelin writes, when listening to Merzbow, 'I [...] merge with the thinging of noise,' thus becoming a 'noisy thing myself.' This experience, then, supposedly scatters her from her own sense of 'material objectivity' allowing her to live on in the 'dense ephemerality of sound as itself.'<sup>37</sup>

For Hegarty, this account of listening is mirrored in the physical performances of certain Japanese noise acts, particularly the likes of Merzbow<sup>38</sup> and C.C.C.C. who in both album artwork and live performance, respectively, used the aesthetic of rope bondage. According to Hegarty, this rope bondage signifies a 'certain listening: bound for aesthetics'<sup>39</sup> that parallels the temporality of afflicted listening. For instance, when Mayuko Hino (ex-Pink Eiga<sup>40</sup> actress and Butoh<sup>41</sup> dancer as well as a founding member, along with Hiroshi Hasegawa, of Japanese noise outfit C.C.C.C.) ties her naked self in rope and proceeds to pour hot red wax over her exposed breasts, in one

of her most famous live performances,<sup>42</sup> she arguably visualises the temporality of listening as its accords with affliction. That is to say, just as she is bound and experiencing pain, the listener of Japanese noise music, according to the language of active noise, is tied to an experience of listening to a supposedly punishing music which, because of the temporality of affliction, seemingly 'denies completion, control' and ultimately as Hegarty will argue, the point of 'orgasm.'<sup>43</sup> This lack of orgasm is Hegarty's way of suggesting that the way in which we experience pleasure when listening to Japanese noise music is of a very different sort than when listening to other types of music. The emphasis on negativity assumes a teleological refusal, a denying of an end point, in favour of a persistent and seemingly infinite wall of sound that is neither recognisably musical nor ordinarily pleasurable. Instead, its temporality, if the language of negativity is assumed, belongs to that of affliction which makes, as we have seen, any sense of 'settling and dwelling'<sup>44</sup> difficult. If negativity is assumed, then, the listening subject of Japanese noise music must be said, like Hino, to be bound to a temporality without end. And without end the subject is cast out to sea, left nauseous and disorientated, hence active noise's inability to let go of the negative reading of nausea.

<sup>42</sup> Art Demolition 4 – C.C.C.C. (1995), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3NFbXDU2IU> [Accessed 14 October, 2013].

<sup>43</sup> Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 134.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>45</sup> Brett Woodward, *Merzbook: The Pleasuredome of Noise* (Preston: Extreme), 27.

At the moment when Hino pours hot wax over her exposed body, her expression does not change. The performance arguably visualises the detachment of typical subjectivity during the encounter with noise music. Despite the discomfort of having hot wax meet her bare skin, Hino can appear unhurt arguably because the self that burns and the self that hears noise is, in the language of the active, no longer present in the manner it was before the experience of affliction. According to Akita, the 'serious and sad face' that is never laughing in Japanese rope bondage is what differentiates a good 'submissive model'<sup>45</sup> from Western-style bondage that is usually,

according to his interpretation, more titillated and visibly excited. It is, for Akita, this seriousness that distinguishes the uniqueness of Japanese rope bondage from Western-style representation of sexual gratification. And this is where Hino appears to position her own relation to bondage and noise: as an expressionless indifference not simply as a mode of titillation but rather a detached subjectivity overwhelmed by

affliction once denied the possibility of orgasm/end. It is arguably an emotionless withdrawal that, in the language of the active, might be said to constitute a present self that has been emptied of the emotional/affected subject that previously constituted it. For instance, as we have already seen, noise music for Voegelin is to be understood as an 'aesthetic effort of carving me out of the mould of collective humanity into a solitary existence ready to take off.'<sup>46</sup> In keeping with this, it could be said that Hino's expressionless face mourns an existence that has taken off in the midst of an erotic, excessive music. In the moment of excess that constitutes both the listening experience and the enacting of physical suffering, Hino's performance visualises the moment in which the present-self is lost to the temporality of affliction that is never fully present and is ultimately without end.

46 Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 68.

47 Eugene Thacker, 'Bataille/Body/Noise: Notes Towards a Techno-Erotics', additional contribution in Bret Woodward (author.) and Roger Richards (ed.), *Merzbook: the Pleasuredome of Noise* (Preston: Extreme, 1999), 57-66 (62).

48 Henritzi, 'Extreme Contemporary', 32.

49 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* [1954], trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (New York: State University of New York, 1988), 53.

With this emphasis placed on violent activity as a way of disrupting the restricted economy of the self, Bataille is often referenced. Thacker in his essay 'Bataille/Body/Noise: Notes Towards a Techno-Eroticism' relies heavily on what he sees as Bataille's 'heterogeneous materiality'<sup>47</sup> to account for a displaced subjectivity in the rupturing encounter with this music. And as Henritzi explains, 'Noise critics have invoked and convoked Sade and Bataille, building an entire discourse on these literary references alone,'<sup>48</sup> a discourse we are, in this instance, referring to as active noise. This is because Bataille is often misunderstood within this language as a thinker of extreme activity. If taken at face value, Bataille's philosophy seems to encourage an active disruption of the self and the modalities that restrict it. As Bataille writes in his account of what he calls inner experience, the ipse (self) 'abandons itself and knowledge with it.'<sup>49</sup> The exuberance of Bataille's early work is easily read as framing a mode of abandon similar to Weil's mode of affliction but with emphasis on an erotic, violent and excessive voluntarism that privileges heterogeneity in a manner out of which Japanese noise music similarly finds an aesthetic. Like Weil, this experience is both fragmentary and paradoxical and not so naive as to suggest an escape without return. As we have seen, Weil's affliction

brought herself divine love just as Holter's Ekstasis<sup>50</sup> comes to us in her singing of the everyday. In other words, it could easily be argued that the disorientating experiences of inner experience, decreation, and listening to noise music is where the subject not only finds a sense of self but this self is felt as a rapturous and excessive self, a self that is argued to be strangely constituted by its lack of self. In this moment the subject

would be said to push beyond itself and its limits toward a self without containment, where difference and multiplicity replace consistency and identity. And out of this experience would emerge a new self. As Bataille writes of the inner experience: 'ceased to abandon myself – I remain there, but with new knowledge.'<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Julia Holter, *Ekstasis* (RVNG, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 53.

<sup>52</sup> Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace', 136.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 142

With this idea in mind it seems that even the motionless live performances of a number of noise practitioners are equally symbolic of this unusual and paradoxical space of listening. In his most recent writing on noise music, Hegarty shows an even interest in the static performances of such acts like MSBR and the physicality of performance mentioned above, which he explores through the live performance of Osaka-based noise musician Masonna (Maso Yamazaki), which often involve Yamazaki screaming while hurling himself into strategically placed pedals and drum sets. In this analysis Hegarty complicates the idea of masochistic performance with the suggestion that, contrary to what we have just discussed, its transgressions are not simply physical. Transgression is not, he explains, restricted to 'bodily fluids and violent imagery'<sup>52</sup> but rather to the attestation of the giving-over of control that can be seen in both the static and the hurled body. Where Yamazaki, like Hino, displays an 'auto-erotic' type of masochism that pushes the body beyond usual modes of performance and pleasure, the static performers lose the performing-self equally by becoming, themselves, machine-like. For Hegarty, the 'Batailleian noisemaker, apparently in cold control, is trying to lose the sense of the body as a tool, of the person as means rather than end, by excessively being those things, "in order to be broken."<sup>53</sup> But despite the differences in strategy these two modes of performance, in Hegarty's analysis, are still bodily and physical, as both share a physical willingness to lose oneself, as if to give up one's own subjectivity to the unusual temporality of affliction. Although Hegarty appears to complicate the tendency of thinking the

transgressions of Japanese noise music violently, with his inclusion of static performance, he is still giving emphasis to the activities of the noise performer as possible embodiments of noise music's transgressions. What we will argue in chapter three is that this suspension of action, which evokes a type of stationary waiting, does not in fact embody the real complexity of waiting. But for now it is enough to suggest that even when analysing the more restrained performances of Japanese noise music, the discussion of transgression still remains physical and volitional in the language of active noise.

While familiar readings of Bataille in relation to noise music avoid the naive promise of absolute escape, they nevertheless emphasise a voluntarism that privileges the idea of manifestation over differentiation. In the language of active noise there is a favouring of the heterogeneous instant that understands noise as radicalism and that is said to actively work against normalisation and meaning as a process of a defiant alterity. The alterity of noise thought actively proceeds from its own substantiality. In other words, alterity is understood firstly as possibility and power and not impossibility and passivity. While Hegarty, Voegelin and Thacker all refer to a mutable space of listening that never arrives at a firm position of meaning, this space



is nevertheless arrived at only by physical noise that rebels against the homogeneity of music and identity. Japanese noise music activates this erotic space of listening and this encounter with a time outside of time. For Hegarty and Thacker in particular, Bataille's emphasis on the erotic helps aestheticise this excessive music as it helps ask the questions of musical and performative taboo. But latent in Bataille's early work is an idea of passivity and contamination that compromises the active subject in a manner that must frustrate this kind of active-transgressive thinking. It is precisely this contamination that we find in the idea of decreation if we follow Blanchot's reading of Weil's through to the end. It is the contamination which, highlighted by Libertson, not only allows both Blanchot and Bataille to 'speak in the voices of the other,'<sup>54</sup> sharing, as they do, a mutual interest in passivity, but enables us to think noise away from the dominance of negativity and radicalism and closer to an alterity irreducible to the language of affliction as it is thought physically.

<sup>54</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 3.

### Noise as Proximity

According to Hegarty, Merzbow's noise is equal to Bataille's notion of excess. As he explains, this excess is not just about more but also 'an attempt to be more that sacrifices itself as it goes along (i.e., loses itself in excess, but also as excess, we get used to it).'<sup>55</sup> As explained earlier, this excess is the perversion of orgasm that manifests in the masochistic listening relation held in the space of Japanese noise music. It is equal to Hino's expressionless face as hot wax touches her naked body and Voegelin's purged sense of self as it is scattered in the moment of listening. For Hegarty, excess is without end which, we are arguing, invokes a similar temporality to the idea of decreation. The temporality of excess for Hegarty is continual and seemingly infinite as a perpetual 'negotiation of the normal, the taboo, the structured' instead of an arrival at an 'ultimate moment' or an 'ultimate noise.' In characteristically Bataillean fashion, Hegarty is saying that transgression escapes is what determines the taboo. It is precisely because of this temporality that Hegarty is able to frame Japanese noise music's continual failure, a failure which enables it to work as a continual negotiation of the limits of musical meaning. For Hegarty, Japanese noise music knows it cannot rid itself of the world and music once and for all but it nevertheless 'acts as if it does' working against the 'normal economy of music'<sup>56</sup> as a threat. Noise, like transgression in Bataille's thought, breaks with the Hegelian process of dialectics in filing to escape the taboo/music. As such, it remains within this economy as an excessive gesture against that economy.

<sup>55</sup> Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 155.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>57</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Solar Anus' [1930], in Allan Stoekl (ed. and trans.), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 5-10.

If Japanese noise music is considered in this way as a continual negotiation of

the limit rather than an absolute detachment, then it is clear to see how it might be framed according to the exuberance of Bataille's early writing. In essays like 'The Solar Anus',<sup>57</sup> Bataille urges his reader towards the heterogeneous quality of certain sexual activities. These activities involve an arousal without an end, which is to say, they are activities that do not involve typical understandings of orgasmic pleasure as the end-point of the sexual act, but are rather defined by such things as scandal, horror and terror. His identification of the heterogeneous involves the phenomenality of objects or actions which, as Libertson explains, exceed 'their capacity of

assimilation by a logic of non-contradiction whose principle of coherence was the notion of utility.<sup>58</sup> The heterogeneous, in Bataille's early texts, is identifiable not by its completion but by its continual interrogation of limits and meaning. In the case of 'The Solar Anus', Bataille violently describes his inability to consummate the penetration of an eighteen-year-old girl's anus. This failure, according to Steven Shaviro, marks the limit of a new kind of male sexuality that is marked off from 'traditional prerogatives' by a 'nonhegemonic [...] economy of desire.'<sup>59</sup> Bataille's mesmerisation with the anus and his obsession with its penetration stems from what he believes would be the scandalous violation of fecundity that would refuse the productivity of reproductive sex. And this failure to consummate the act marks the unavoidable completion of the excessive act. The scandal is thus an excessive impossibility in that it disrupts the possibility of reproductive sex and even the possibility of the scandalous act itself. It is, as Shaviro describes, part of an economy of 'nonproductive and unregulated erections, of transformations and openings'<sup>60</sup> that is ultimately not concerned with completion. What Bataille is trying to do is frame excess – the irreducibility of certain phenomena to ordinary meaning – as neither a "merely subjective" impression nor an objectively suitable predicate.<sup>61</sup> In this way, Bataille's discussion of the anus is not so far removed from our discussion of masochism and rope bondage because it similarly refuses, as is the case with the sad and serious face of a 'good' rope bondage model according to Akita, the mitigating point of orgasm. It is, therefore, a useful example when trying to understand why Hegarty deploys the idea of excess when discussing Japanese noise music. Hegarty is able to frame the negativity of noise music through masochism because he believes it to similarly resist the usual points of utility and pleasure, just like Bataille's story of the anus and his inability to penetrate it. What would account for the normativity of reproductive sex would account for the 'normal economy of music'<sup>62</sup> categorised by harmony, rhythm, tonality, and temporality. And what would account for the incommensurable and incompleteness of non-reproductive sex would equivocally account for what is incommensurable to the economy of music as the non-musical.

<sup>58</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Steven Shaviro, *Passion and Excess: Blanchot, Bataille, and Literary Theory* (Florida: Florida State University Press, 1990), 95.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>61</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 155.

The mobilisation of the former involves a subversive opening and transformation in the economy of sexual activity and in the latter a challenge to the normal economy of

music, both, however, without absolute escape.

If the language of active noise is categorised by excess, which is understood as the perpetual interrogation of meaning and limits, then it necessarily has to assume that noise begins always from the negative. Equally this language must assume the category of music as one definitive of meaning and positivity, necessitating the understanding of any movement against it to be a radical one. And in-between must exist the idea of failure where this noise, as negativity, cannot be experienced as pleasure (music) without losing what is negative within it. Otherwise, the language about Japanese noise music would only be dialectical, which it is not. Put simply, according to the language of active noise in the theory of Hegarty, Japanese noise music stops being noise the moment it becomes a desirable and therefore a pleasurable category of music. In the instance of failure we lose the possibility of experiencing noise both conceptually and ontologically. But because these categories of pleasure and negativity are perpetually changing, the definitive closures of noise and music are forever impossible. This is how active noise is able to describe the heterological space of noise and its excess; Japanese noise music is able to persist as a resistive form of music because a negativity can always be assumed against a positivity as it both determines and interrogates these limits without end.

The possibility of noise music existing as a genre of music amid this impossibility involves the temporal suspension of manifestation of noise as negativity that equally suspends the idea of music as we understand it through normalisation and meaning. In short, for Hegarty, noise music works as a music resistive to homogenisation. Despite the inevitability of failure, which involves the recuperation of this heterogeneous zone into a genre of music, it exists for Hegarty as a genre tied together precisely as a question of genre. In other words, noise music is frequently thought of as a genre of music that is assimilated precisely because of a multiplicity that is resistive to strict definitions of both noise and music. The excess of, for example, Merzbow's music, then, is not only to do with volumetric levels or the number of releases to his name<sup>63</sup> but, according to Hegarty, the way in which his

<sup>63</sup> Merzbow releases at a rapid rate, often in limited numbers and on speciality labels. Excess is very much a part of his physical output as is obscurity. This makes calculating the actual total number of his discography difficult.

noise is filled with 'infinite possibilities' giving us a sense of an 'alternative world being built.'<sup>64</sup> Akita himself claims noise to be a 'nomadic producer of differences'<sup>65</sup> which is why he often uses European theory such as that of Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida and particularly Bataille, as reference points for his noise. However, despite these different reference points and connections, it is Bataille's discussion of heterogeneous reality in his essay 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' that provides a composite framework for the language of active noise when thinking about Japanese noise music through ideas of 'force and shock.'<sup>66</sup> While homogeneous reality 'presents itself with the abstract and neutral aspect of strictly defined and identified objects' the heterogeneous is sustained, in this work, as delirium, madness and eroticism. Most importantly for us, however, is that in his early work, Bataille seems to align the heterogeneous with the 'active,' coming from 'persons or mobs' working toward 'breaking the law of social homogeneity.'<sup>67</sup> Heterogeneity in this understanding would encompass such things as Ruka Mikami's live performance with Japanese noise band Hijokaidan,<sup>68</sup> where she caused people to flee the room by stepping off the stage and violently attacking people in the audience. Prior to this, Mikami urinated on the stage and proceeded to jolt and fit in her own urine before

throwing it towards members of the audience. Mikami's masochism is a violent eroticism turned outward, where she forces her audience to physically flee the scene of where music once held them. Transgression in this sense involves challenging assumptions of correct/appropriate performance. The act of physically fleeing the scene, caused by her stepping off the stage and subverting the delimited performance space, would account for a physical understanding of transgression that is typical of the language of active noise.

64 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 156.

65 Woodward, *Merzbook*, 9.

66 George Bataille, 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' [1933], in Allan Stoekl (ed. and trans.), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 137-161 (143).

67 *Ibid.*, 142.

68 .... KING OF NOISE, Hijokaidan live at Eggplant, Osaka (19th September, 1989), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDmwI8GwtEw&list=RDSmwI8GwtEw#t=360> [Accessed 23 March 2013].

This would be Hegarty and Thacker's understanding of noise as a heterogeneous zone. Japanese noise music is rendered heterogeneous in this language as it resists a stable space for it and its subject to persist. The listening subject(s) who

are attacked by Mikami, the expressionless face of Hino, and the taboo that sustains the limit of musical qualification, are forced away from the space, body and language that once held them, and toward an erotic heteronomy resistive, but not entirely extricated, from the economy of music and meaning. In this language therefore homogeneity, understood here as music, is the source of noise's negativity and failure as a site of sonic prohibition. As Bataille writes: 'production is the basis of social homogeneity' as the reduction of human relations to 'fixed rules' that are based on the 'consciousness of the possible identity of delineable persons and situations.'<sup>69</sup> This consciousness is limited by the difference of exteriority; by the Other that is irreducible to the language of the Same but nevertheless constitutive of what it means to belong to the Same. There is, as it were, an excess that persists over comprehension's closure as an irreducible remainder of the notion of utility. The homogeneity of music works broadly as a rhythmic and tonal structure of meaning that naturally excludes noise as a non-musical remainder. Understood actively, noise relates to this homogeneous world through its own heterological world in which, once mobilised against this homogeneity as its very own music, 'continually structures and destructures the listening subject and music.'<sup>70</sup> Japanese noise music's framing of an erotic aesthetic, then, is not only to do with the masochistic and violent bodily gestures of Hino and Mikami but the way in which 'bodies as defined unities,' in this case music, become 'lost in a flux of material disorientation'<sup>71</sup> once the rules of music and meaning are purged. With the temporality of excess, the point of orgasm is refused in the language of the active in favour of a 'kind of sonic, pornographic, deconstruction'<sup>72</sup> wherein familiarity and the usual tropes of musical qualification are actively and continually interrogated by being placed at their own limit.

69 Bataille, 'Psychological Structure of Fascism', 138.

70 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 139.

71 Thacker, 'Bataille/Body/Noise', 59.

72 *Ibid.*, 64.

The consequence of arriving at a music full with noise is, for Hegarty and Thacker, a complicated phenomenology. Hegarty, in particular, rightly problematises the opposition of noise and music through an interwoven reading that refuses noise an end-point, as the absolute abolition of music, while simultaneously insisting on the possibility of noise as music, both of which work through his idea of failure. Thacker similarly complicates the duality of noise and music through the idea of 'material

disequilibrium,' in which the 'material/heterogeneous/excremental body' is said to be 'constantly going out of but not superseding itself' in a movement of '(dis)embodiment.'<sup>73</sup> In both instances, noise never quite arrives but continually pushes against meaning and subjectivity as a music 'expiring even as it grows.'<sup>74</sup> Voegelin's writing looks to engender the heterology of noise through the idea of immersion. The act of listening to noise is overtly masochistic for Voegelin, where the listening body becomes a shattered and fragmented self which can only ever 'scream but not talk'<sup>75</sup> in the moment of listening. There is a very real sense in Voegelin's work that the listener, in the moment of noise, momentarily escapes in some way from the structures of the self, returning significantly as an extended noise body which is vigilant over its own limits. But to understand excess in the way Voegelin does is to understand it via a very traditional understanding of constraint, something which Bataille himself seem very conscious to deliberate. Certainly Derrida's reading of Bataille, in 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,' is one suspicious of any such understanding and one which would have us question any discussion of noise that is so believing in the revolutionary potential of excess. His idea of deconstruction manifests, as Libertson explains, a 'deliberate indifference to any telos of revolutionary escape from classical "constraints."<sup>76</sup> As we saw in chapter one, *différance* would be what prevents the possibility of Voegelin's idea of escape and the possibility of noise reaching the point of orgasm. Language, and particularly that of philosophy, is the site of its own deconstruction that exhibits a tension resulting from the continual 'solicitation of its own limits.'<sup>77</sup> After Derrida, the heterological moment cannot be privileged and cannot be said to manifest (no matter how fleetingly), as is claimed in the noise body of Voegelin, because it does not exist in reciprocity to the region of homogeneity. Both terms are instead conditioned by an alterity that persists as a dissymmetry which for Libertson 'forecloses their self-coincidence.'<sup>78</sup> Like the absence we have argued to be the silent condition of meaning, terms are held only in proximity to one another

73 *Ibid.*

74 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 155.

75 Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 69.

76 Libertson, 'Bataille and Communication', 220.

77 *Ibid.*, 220.

78 Libertson, *Proximity*, 19.

through this dissymmetry which is the possibility of their condition only to the extent that it makes them impossible as closed terms.

According to Libertson, it is this awareness of dissymmetry in Derrida's own writing that makes him a uniquely equipped reader of Bataille because of the passivity that Libertson sees as vital to Bataille's own work. Although, for Libertson, an erotic exuberance thematises the discursive tendency of Bataille's early work – where attention is drawn to the 'heterogeneous instance which defies totalization'<sup>79</sup>– latent in this work and explicit in his later work is a dissymmetry that is less active and more passive. For Libertson, if we read 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' closely, the idea of 'force and shock' does not concern radicalism as it is understood through action. Excess is not something that is gained through action as a gesture mobilised against the normativity of meaning. In this way, alterity as heterogeneity is not about Mikami's onstage urination or the way she forced people away from the space of Hijokaidan's performance. Where Thacker understands the heterogeneous as a transgressive wound opened up within totalization through excessive/erotic acts, Libertson wants us to think of a 'force in being' where shock and disruption concern passivity and not activity. To an extent, then, the ability to physically shock is not consistent with the nature of alterity because alterity involves an irreducibility of heterogeneity to the region of manifestation, which is also simultaneously 'the production and conditioning of manifestation.'<sup>80</sup> Alterity is not concerned with destruction or the dispersion of interiority and does not come from the outside as a subversive power mobilised against meaning. What this means is that noise is not exterior to music. But, coming from inside, noise would be the passive displacement of interiority which is, simultaneously and paradoxically, the production of this interiority. For this reason, Libertson thinks Bataille closer to Blanchot and Levinas wherein subjectivity is said to 'proceed from differentiation itself.'<sup>81</sup> In his reading of Bataille, Libertson shares in our insistence on the idea of passivity but also adds the words contamination and proximity to figure a pre-originary relationship that subjectivity, meaning and conceptuality are said to have with alterity.

79 Ibid., 12.

80 Ibid., 11.

81 Ibid., 18.

This idea of contamination can be explained through the Levinasian idea of desire, which is for Bataille, when read through Libertson, the meaning of prohibition

and hegemony more broadly. Desire, for Levinas, is metaphysical and it differentiates itself from need in its desiring 'beyond anything that can simply complete it.'<sup>82</sup> The modality of interiority is equal to desire as its urgency for closure can never be satisfied and is more importantly constituted by something beyond the realm of satisfaction. Or as Libertson writes, the 'exigency [of interiority] is an economic tendency toward closure whose animation is excess.'<sup>83</sup> Stated more simply, the formation of closure (meaning) is one dependent on excess. If we think of this in relation to music – and for the purpose of clarification uphold active noise's tendency to think noise and music as heterogeneous and homogeneous zones respectively – desire would be constitutive of the urgency to think music away from noise. But the impossibility of music's closure from noise, and the relativity and temporality that

continually stifles the solidification of musical language, is precisely the excess from which this desire originates. In other words, we can only understand music at the risk of it not being music, or being noise. Just as we can only understand the *interdit* (prohibition) via the danger of its transgression; without the latter, the former has no meaning. Music, in this way, is constituted by a desire whose exigency is an impossibility which, by virtue of the exigency, makes the very constitution of music one of impossibility. If we are to apply Libertson's reading of Bataille to music, in what would be a very Derridean reading, then music must be said to be inherently contaminated and constituted by an excess that both grounds it and makes it inaccessible. And this excess is what we have been calling passive noise.

82 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961], trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 34.

83 Libertson, *Proximity*, 59.

The notion of desire is, in one respect, responsible for the mode of radicalism in the history of active noise. With Derrida and Cage, noise finds itself inside music as an irrefutable reminder of music's infinite demand. Desire is what makes the closure of music impossible and it is this impossibility which both contextualises and inspires the radical gestures of the avant-garde. In short, the impossible demand of desire leaves room for the radical implications of noise. The insistence of active noise begins from this point, as a language that looks to frame the negativity/radicalism of noise against the impossible homogeneity of music, which is impossible precisely because of this implicit radical demand that is homogeneity's excess. But by emphasising the impossible closure of music, and not equally the mutual

dissymmetry and weariness of both music and noise, active noise typically implies an understanding of alterity that is said to consciously resist the idea of closure as an act of radicalism. The excess that both constitutes and delimits the interiority of music is, significantly, equal to the excess that is neither determinate nor illimitable to the language of noise. There are certainly moments in Hegarty's writing that seem to be vigilant over this mutual dissymmetry. In his most recent essay, 'Brace and Embrace: Masochism in noise performance,' the aesthetic and qualitative idea of negativity appears to give way to a negative eschatology, where the idea of 'inherently and autonomously noisy' sounds are refused for a noise defined always in opposition: 'noise must be heard in relation to not-noise.'<sup>84</sup> And in the same way, Hegarty argues, music too is this negativity. But Hegarty's insistence that noise can be found in a series of 'historical negations' as a 'sequence of avant-garde moves' sustains the idea of noise as disturbance; noise as the active and conscious effort to 'renew and/or destroy existing practice.'<sup>85</sup> In this way, the alterity of noise is reduced to its radical potential as something mobilised in opposition to music, as a privileged site of heterogeneity. While the potential for pleasure in noise seemingly refuses to consolidate negativity as something essential to it, the insistence of failure, in Hegarty's work, inevitably sustains noise as a negativity; noise only stops being negative when it fails in a fundamental way to stay noisy. However, there is a contradiction in Hegarty's thought. If noise stops being noise, fails, the moment it loses its negativity then its negativity is never really lost because it is no longer noise in the moment of loss. Hegarty tries to address this through his idea of failure which relies on the opposition between noise and music. But if the interiority of music is animated by the excessiveness and negativity of noise, as we have argued, then this negativity must be said to be equally constituted by its determination through the interiority in such a way that the opposition to positivity passively unfurls. Passivity

here concerns the way in which the opposition unfurls before it is ever determined as an opposition and also with the idea that passivity is equal to the opposition itself. This means that the understanding of noise as negativity and radicalism is marked by an alteration that exceeds its negativity and therefore exceeds its failure. Noise is not excess itself as a qualitative negativity, but suffers excess, as a lack of

84 Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace', 133.

85 Ibid., 134.

commensurability both in and away from music, beyond the parameters of possibility and before its opposition to music can be thought.

Hegarty is right to insist on an idea of failure but the understanding of this failure cannot be said to be recuperated through any kind of language or understanding. Noise must be said to have already failed before the aesthetic understanding of failure and before the possibility of conceptualisation. Noise, music and subjectivity fail radically, as passive noise has already displaced their modes of possibility. Understood in this way, heterogeneity is not constituted by a negativity that works as a moment of radicalism. In other words, it is not an active will toward dispersion and destruction but is the 'economic investment of unicity itself, in its excessive and incomplete closure.'<sup>86</sup> As we saw with Blanchot's essay on Mallarmé, the reduction of alterity to a definable mode of understanding results in a profound contamination within the reduction itself. For Blanchot, this constitutes the dead space of the world of things which is not inert but the very condition of possibility as a fundamental impossibility. This paradox lies in the manner in which alterity persists within the language of the active. For Libertson, homogeneity names a reduction and heterogeneity names the incomplete and inherently unstable manner of this reduction which is also, fundamentally, the very possibility of the reduction. This contamination within the interior is what conditions the aesthetic opposition of noise and music but is also, strangely, what makes this opposition impossible. Heterogeneity is passive noise as it resists stable modes of understanding by contaminating our language of both music and noise simultaneously. Or as Libertson has it, it is only in the 'time of alteration,' the neither/nor space that refuses both noise and music's commensurability as diametrically opposed terms, that 'the Same can be what it is, and never be entirely what it is: separation as exigency, in the approach of the Other.'<sup>87</sup>

86 Libertson, Proximity, 9.

87 Ibid., 343.

88 Sachiko M, Salon de Sachiko (Hitorri, 2007).

Following the idea of heterogeneity as an antecedent passivity that constitutes the realm of meaning via a mutual manifestation and dispersion, we might hear Sachiko M's Salon de Sachiko<sup>88</sup> as a sonic gesture that delimits the transgressive quality of the other side of noise music in the hope of partaking in a different kind of subversion. Where Mikami and Hino indulge in masochistic projects that question

modes of 'correct' performance and musicality, through an ardent and explicit eroticism replete with bodily fluids and excessive volume, Sachiko M explores an



eroticism that is arguably less overt. Her noise has less to do with excess and more with the lack of sound as she composes on the fringe of silence, interrupting the empty spaces of her recording with intermittent high pitched, near inaudible, bleeps and deliberate sonic glitches. The near silent spaces of Sachiko M's compositions arguably look inward for alterity and toward contamination. Rather than filling up the listening space with a sonic excess that hopes to overflow the limits of musicality and the listening subject, as in Voegelin's description of Merzbow, Sachiko M's music makes us highly aware of the space we inhabit. We become very deliberate listening subjects vigilant over our sonic environment which, in a distinctly Cagean fashion, becomes part of the composition itself. But our connection to this environment, which is sustained in the silencing of the once musical space, is interrupted, even if only barely, by unpredictable, sporadic blips. It is as if, for Sachiko M, alterity were not over and beyond music, attainable only once the listening subject is scattered and submerged by sound, but somewhere inside a hollowed musical space; deep within the furrow that separates sound and silence, and somewhere between the audible and 'non-cochlear sound.'<sup>89</sup> This would be where Hegarty positions her music: as a potential 'fate of Japanese noise'<sup>90</sup> once excessive volume and overt eroticism have been exhausted and normalised.

<sup>89</sup> Will Schrimshaw, 'Non-cochlear sound: On affect and exteriority', in Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (eds.), *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorising Sonic Experience* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 27-45 (40).

<sup>90</sup> Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 148.

The mistake in hearing Salon de Sachiko in this way, however, according to the exigency of passivity and contamination, is emblematic of the general mistake of theorists we have categorised as belonging to the language active noise and theorists who have mischaracterised Bataille as a thinker of liberation. When Derrida reads Bataille, he slips between an active and passive commentary wherein, for Libertson, the correctness of the latter modulates the incorrectness of Derrida's language of the former. Although seemingly a uniquely equipped reader of Bataille the inconsistency of Derrida's reading upholds the more general tendency, implicit in active noise's misappropriation of Bataillean terminology, to understand transgression as a violent inclination toward the impossible. Derrida's tendency to read Bataille's work as a

'strategic twist'<sup>91</sup> toward the non-servility of an economy without reserve (general economy) is where the language of active noise understands impossibility as a gesture of radicalism. Sachiko M's recording, if understood as a strategic gesture turned inward, would arm itself with heterogeneity as a deliberate interruption to the dialectic of music and listening. But the inclination of understanding Salon de Sachiko by way of a deliberateness ignores the way in which this deliberateness is, in Bataille's writing, itself in fact constituted by an incessant relation to the impossible that is passively embroiled within it. It is as if, in Derrida's reading of Bataille, he fails to acknowledge in spite of himself how passivity, which figures in his own writing as an unequivocal loss,<sup>92</sup> occurs prior to any form of action in Bataille's own texts. Libertson refuses the idea of interruption completely by describing the extent to which, unapparent to Derrida himself, transgression can be thought next to *différance*; Bataille's writing does not actively subvert and interrupt the dialectic of meaning but partakes in the dialectic as a silent constitution which marks impossibility within it. Impossibility is what initiates movement itself; therefore, interruption cannot be said to disrupt the limit as an act of will precisely because the limit is already this interruption.

91 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* [1967], trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 333.

92 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 342.

93 Libertson, 'Bataille and Communication', 228.

The idea of interruption, then, can only be said to work if we understand it, as Blanchot does, passively. In this way, the understanding of Sachiko M as an attempt to interrupt music, or play a radically different kind of music, has already been interrupted by a passive displacement that comes before the dialectic of activity. Impossibility, as interruption, is already the condition of discourse and meaning as an interior excess/desire prior to the temporality of possibility. Passive noise (as impossibility) is the condition and manifestation of active noise (noise understood through a language of radicalism and negativity) as an excess within manifestation which marks the incompleteness of manifestation. For Libertson, Bataille's interest in transgression, and ours equally, is not concerned with projects, action or any kind of intention or volition, despite what Derrida tells us. But it is, before the will, an 'anguished, entirely ambiguous question' which questions like Blanchot as a 'loss beyond calculation, situated in the heart of calculation itself.'<sup>93</sup> Proximity is

Libertson's way of reading transgression, in Bataille, away from bodily fluids and through an interior relation. In this respect it mirrors our discussion of passive noise. The aim of both is to ultimately demonstrate how any language that emphasises heterological practice as the proper site of transgression is already in proximity to an alterity that exists deep within it and therefore exceeding it. In this way, negativity and radicalism, as essential traits of noise, lose their hold.

This eroticism of loss which typically constitutes the language about noise and Japanese noise music is explicitly structural as it refers to the efforts of a radical individual or collective. While the likes of Hegarty and Kahn are aware of the manner in which limitations are constituted by the possibility of their crossing, 'transgression itself is shown, signposted by "transgressive" content,'<sup>94</sup> this mutual constitution is both productive and voluntary. As Kahn writes: 'the line exists as a reservoir and not a residue.'<sup>95</sup> But it is this residue which persists as a cloudy contamination inside the walls of conceptual manifestation that begets, according to Bataille, a 'comic necessity' which 'demands that one dramatize.'<sup>96</sup> The necessity of dramatization stems from the need to try, in the language of the active, to make the experience of noise accessible in order to communicate and avoid falling into silence. Masochism, eroticism, and immersion are modes of thought often used in the language of the active that elicit, due to the lack of emphasis on passivity, a voluntarism hopeful of rendering impossibility, possible. Japanese noise music itself, in this language, is thought to be an active display of excess that interrogates the limit of musicality as a sonic excess that forces this limit toward 'new' ground. The comedy of this endeavour, however, has to do with the way in which this dramatisation can only ever be an ironic act. It is, as Libertson writes, an irony belonging to the sacrifice 'which cannot accomplish what it nevertheless accomplishes so overwhelmingly.'<sup>97</sup> This irony is not complicit with Hegarty's failure, where the alterity of impossibility is recuperated into a language of possibility. While Hegarty assumes the position of a subject able to reach for the impossible he fails to interrogate the very nature and condition of this subject that is said to reach. Bataille's position, on the other hand, as emphasised through Libertson, is more radical as the subject of radicalism is

94 Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace', 136.

95 Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), 72.

96 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 117.

97 Libertson, *Proximity*, 63.

implicated by the region of passivity. Impossibility, in this region, comes before the subject reaches and before the day in which one can reach intelligibly, making the very constitution of this subject, a problematic one. Bataille's transgression comes 'from that moment of night, non-knowledge'<sup>98</sup> which, as discussed in our description of night and day in chapter one, frames impossibility as the very condition of possibility.

98 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 124.

99 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One* [1883], trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 180.

100 *Ibid.*, 175.

101 *Ibid.*, 178.

102 Hill, *Fragmentary Writing*, 206.

The irony that is implicit to the discourse of Japanese noise music is not irony in the way we typically know it, but an irony which concerns a Nietzschean kind of laughter that is 'no human laughter,' but a laughter closer to desire as it exceeds subjectivity in a 'longing that is never stilled.'<sup>99</sup> This is why Zarathustra laughs even 'at himself'<sup>100</sup> when he approaches the topic of the eternal recurrence, for it is the thought that makes the possibility of any approach impossible. The eternal recurrence, which affirms the idea that 'time itself is a circle' leaving an 'eternity [...] behind us,'<sup>101</sup> shares in the exigency of Levinasian desire which, as we have seen, distinguishes itself from the possibility of need as a thirst that cannot be quenched. Similarly, the eternal recurrence supervenes in the region of subjectivity as the impossibility of a living present. It names the impossibility of possibility and teleology. For Pierre Klossowski reading Nietzsche, as Hill explains, the return was never about an affirmation of a living present but instead about no present at all, no moment, and therefore 'no selfhood that was not already traversed, multiplied, and expropriated as a fortuitous sequence.'<sup>102</sup> Laughter is the impossibility of existing in the thought of the eternal return which is without presence and, consequently, possibility. It is the mode of impossibility and alterity as it is thought outside of the realm of the active but inside as a contamination and a passive refusal. Similarly Bataille's 'comedic necessity' must be thought here as an ironic laughter that is our mode of being as it conditions and contaminates the dramatisation of being. We can laugh in the dramatisation of noise as it is framed by the language of active noise not because its content is comedic but because laughter announces the impossibility of its affirmation; laughter is the eternal return of passivity; the persistence of impossibility

that is not a destruction but contemporaneous to possibility. Laughter is what occurs when the Said is in excess of itself, which is precisely the exigency of the Said. The dramatisation of Japanese noise music, then, as an ecstatic radical music, can only be said to be possible if 'ecstasy already belonged, to some degree, to the one who disrobes himself.'<sup>103</sup> This is why Japanese noise music might be said to be an ironic music, a music 'which is not what it is.'<sup>104</sup> The non-human nature of this laughter is the characterless alterity that resists noise as negativity and music as meaning.

103 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 123.

104 Libertson, *Proximity*, 63.

105 Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names* [1976], trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, *Proper Names*, 1996), 56.

106 Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship* [1971], trans, Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 290-291.

The exuberance of Bataille's writing, which is usually thought as an affirmation toward a willed subversion and eroticism, is, for Libertson, what places him in proximity with Blanchot; it is what places him in proximity with passivity. What is unique about Libertson's reading is the way in which homogeneity is contemporaneous with heterogeneity to such a degree that the dependency becomes affirmation. Bataille's work is not overtly negative in the way that Derrida's has been accused of being, where deconstruction is said to uncover the impossibility of presence as a kind of intellectual flattening (this was Levinas's contention with Derrida, that deconstruction leaves 'nothing [...] inhabitable for thought'<sup>105</sup>). Bataille wants us to live in the world and his proposal is precisely the affirmation of impossibility. This is why his work is often mistakenly read as a manifesto of excess. What constitutes and allows us to live in the world is, according to Bataille, excess, which is why a tangible eroticism features so heavily in his writing. But this eroticism is not to be read as a literal sacrifice but a technique of fiction designed to circle the nature of impossibility as it is evoked by the gestures of excess. In this way, it is not a manifesto at all but a mode of writing about our being as it exists already in excess of itself, as an absolute impossibility. But because Bataille so heavily emphasises the erotic, he might be said to differ from Blanchot whose interest in alterity, closer to Derrida, is one of a passive interruption which brings us to the horror of the *il y a*. But Blanchot is able to write so fondly of Bataille, in his essay 'Friendship',<sup>106</sup> because he saw in his relation with Bataille a kind of withdrawal that was not accounted for by the exuberance of his writing. This withdrawal Libertson accounts for through his

idea of proximity, which allows him to read Bataille closely next to Blanchot and which goes some way to clarifying their mutual fondness of one another. Where Bataille, for Libertson, emphasises a subjectivity as an 'excess in the basic moment closure,' Blanchot writes of subjectivity through 'vertigo' and 'strangeness' that reveals the 'latent insistence of the radical passivity of its closure.' For both thinkers, subjectivity is 'involved in a pre-originary economy with the *dehors* or exterior.'<sup>107</sup> It is this involvement that enables us to re-think transgression away from its and Bataille's mischaracterisation in the discourse of Japanese noise music, by moving it closer to Blanchot through the idea of passivity.

107 Libertson, *Proximity*, 79.

108 Simone Weil, 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God' [1942], in George A. Panichas (ed.), *The Simone Weil Reader* (New York: David McKay Company, 1977), 44-53 (48).

If we recall Blanchot's essay on Weil, which started this chapter, and expand on his understanding of her notion of attention, then our reading of Bataille as a thinker of contamination might be thought more clearly. According to Blanchot, there is a mode of attention present in the depths of Weil's language that is quite at odds with the explicit certitude of her work. Blanchot delineates two modes of attention implicit, although not explicit, in the work of Weil that echo our relationship between active and passive noise. In the first a 'kind of muscular effort'<sup>108</sup> is required for one to be attentive. Although Weil denies this as an actual mode of attention – suggesting that it is an understanding of attention that constitutes the discourse of concentration in the education system but in fact fails to acknowledge what is necessary in the moment of attention – Blanchot figures it as 'average, personal attention' that is subject-object orientated. In this type of attention, Mayuko Hino could be said to focus deliberately on the hot wax as part of a masochistic evocation of a subject devoid of the usual modes of pleasure/pain. Her 'attention' refers to her effort to escape; it names the material and aesthetic tools she uses to configure a new type of experience that aims to be unrestrained. It is, as it were, a mode of attention that actively looks to go beyond the interdict of correct performance, music and pleasure. The second mode of attention, however, 'consists of a suspending of our thought, leaving it empty and ready to be penetrated by the object.' In contrast to the first, attention here must be thought of as waiting (this idea of waiting will be explored thoroughly in chapter three) which stops us from 'seeking anything,' as we wait to

'receive in its naked truth.'<sup>109</sup> This second mode of attention is fundamentally idle and before the muscular attention of the active. Coming before the active, this attention must likewise be thought before the idea of passivity that is thought in opposition to activity. Or, more specifically, it is attention as passivity, as a 'reception of what escapes attention [muscular], an opening upon the unexpected, a waiting that is the unawaited of all waiting.'<sup>110</sup> This is why Weil denies the muscular understanding of attention the aggregate of proper attention; attention is engaged with passivity and not activity.

109 Ibid., 49.

110 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 121.

111 Ibid., 122.

112 Georges Bataille, *The Story of the Eye* [1928], trans. Joachim Neugroschal (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 46.

This second type of attention is, however, as Blanchot rightly explains, absent from much of Weil's private life. Although Weil renounces the first type of attention her activities often appear at odds with this renouncement. Much like Hino, Weil actively sought affliction as a way of liberation. She saw it as a way of opening up the space of attention, as a means of pushing beyond the everyday of subjectivity and toward the divine withdrawal. But in the depths of her writing, and beneath the certitude of her action contaminated within the folds of activity, is an 'uneven evenness'<sup>111</sup> that persists resolutely as a radical impossibility to the manifestation of this activity. In a similar way, the activities of Hino are undoubtedly muscular, but in

the language that brings her masochism forth persists a reserve that cannot be rendered present. This reserve is the second mode of attention that suspends the activities of the first in a perpetual state of waiting; it preserves, within language, a passivity before the mode of muscular attention that mirrors Weil's distinctive characterisation of divine withdrawal. But the reason Weil's ideas do not always coincide with her actions, and the reason why her idea of attention is paradoxical, is because the persistence of passivity is found only as a rupture within the language of activity. It is only in the manifestation of muscular attention and effort that passivity arrives at all, as the absolute refusal of this manifestation. In relation to this, it can be said that Bataille's erotic writing similarly does not actively transgress anything. Simone's boredom with the terrestrial world, in his novella *Story of the Eye*, is not overcome 'by way of orgasms.'<sup>112</sup> Her masochism described in the prose, shared by the unnamed narrator and Marcelle, is said to be nothing other than a deformation and

transformation, into the 'lewest of meaning,'<sup>113</sup> that betrays the exigency of the acts themselves. This exigency is a mode of attention that is not satisfied by Simone's drastic efforts as it waits in reserve from any act that might be said to complete it. Through this kind of attention, eroticism has with subjectivity the same relation transgression has with contamination and the divine with absence. Attention does not belong to the subject just as eroticism is not bodily, precisely because 'attention has already detached me from myself.'<sup>114</sup> Transgression, therefore, does not work outward but is an inward persistence that resists the subject of radicalism just as attention, for Weil, persists as a profound type of waiting. Noise, then, is what waits in reserve. It is the second mode of attention that manifests through the possibility of the muscular as an irremediable weakness. Its possibility as a transgressive force, in this case, seems little different from its impossibility.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>114</sup> Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 121.

<sup>115</sup> Daniela Cascella, *En Abîme: Listening, Reading, Writing* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2012), 79.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 80.

## Internal Mutations

When reading *A King Listens* by Italo Calvino, Daniela Cascella thinks about the practice, if indeed it can be called a practice, of listening and writing about sound, which as explained in the introduction, she refers to as writing sound. In order to avoid the potential solipsism implicit in writing from one's own listening experience, an avoidance that is exhibited in Calvino's book according to Cascella, one must reach beyond the listening self and toward the Other as it is understood through the 'many I's, she's and he's.'<sup>115</sup> In other words, for Cascella, listening must be communicated and 'attached to something outside itself, otherwise it falls into a status of isolation and self-referentiality.'<sup>116</sup> Writing sound is, then, fundamentally

concerned with the 'mapping of experience' in which places, people, and memories are 'woven again and again into the now' by the demand of writing which comes, ultimately for Cascella, as a way of 'seeing and telling the world.'<sup>117</sup> Yet, the inclusive temporality that Cascella gives over to the writing of sound is how she avoids the essentiality and rigidity of sound as abstraction. The impossibility of fixing sound to a

specific time, place, or person is how Cascella attends to what appears to be the impossibility of communicating our experience of sound and music. By her own admission, she inhabits sound, writes over it with her personal encounters, only to then exceed the limits of these encounters by giving it over, in the space of communication, to the other and with it, his/her own personal experiences.

This is not, however, a regression to an immemorial subjectivity and nor is it, by consequence, a mode of scepticism. Cascella does affirm the possibility of writing sound but her writing never regresses into a mere autobiographical account of listening. In her fragmentary and non-linear writing, she calls us to enter into the space of sound which, in our communication of this space, necessitates a kind of Deleuzian temporality where the simultaneity of past and future pull in the formation of an incongruous listening present. Where, in the opening pages of Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, Alice cannot, in Lewis Carroll's work, be said to become larger than she was without simultaneously being smaller than she becomes, one cannot be said to listen without, at the same time, implicating another mode of listening that is absent. This might be the fact of having listened to this music elsewhere in a different place, a place where one no longer is. It may also be the reality of having never listened to it before this moment and equally, like Alice becoming different, the reality that you will listen to it again in a time and place entirely different to the present encounter. This is the idea of simultaneity the characteristic of which, for Deleuze, 'is to elude the present.'<sup>118</sup> While not explicitly Deleuzian, Cascella's writing of sound is nevertheless overtly sustained in a 'double movement of estrangement' which does not 'call for synaesthesia but for a cohabitation of worlds.'<sup>119</sup> This cohabitation is thought, in light of the self-reflective way in which she writes, as a simultaneity of past and future that constitutes, as discussed in the introduction, the beginning of the narrative. It is also why she writes frequently in reference to other writers, as if her own prose, frustrated as it is by impossibility, reaches beyond the walls of its own signification. Her writing stretches out toward the likes of Giorgio Manganelli and his notion of 'literature as a lie,' which for Cascella, circles the 'ineffable, persistent quality'<sup>120</sup> of writing, in a manner which agitates meaning and

<sup>118</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* [1969], trans. Mark Lester (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), 1.

<sup>119</sup> Cascella, *En Abîme*, 73.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

which inspires her own circular efforts. The sonic object, for Cascella, is never fully audible. Our communication of it, as a mode of writing, is therefore like an 'apparition in a landscape, a flickering hallucination' that is always 'blown away by a gust'<sup>121</sup> that is equal, for her, to the dislocation of conceptuality and language in Pasolini, Manganelli, Melville and Gaddan, and for us, in Blanchot.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

122 Ibid., 130.

123 Dean Lockwood, 'Spread the Virus: Affective Prophecy in Industrial Music', in Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (eds.), *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorising Sonic Experience* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 120.

This is why Cascella's writing can be said to be fragmentary. It not only offers itself as a series of short and non-linear disjointed sections, but in proximity to the distance that is inherent in language as the disjunction between image and object, the irreducible disjunction between writing and listening. By her own admission, her writing is at first a remnant of a story, a 'trace of the experience that made it,' and 'then it is a book.'<sup>122</sup> This recalls our introductory comments on Blanchot's 'The Song of the Sirens' where the tale begins as a human story only to begin again, properly, when Ulysses encounters the inhuman song of the Sirens. It is only in the remnant, and in the absence of the experience of the sonic object itself for Cascella, that writing begins but only as an impossible writing that never quite captures the experience in question. For this reason, Cascella's writing might be said to begin, like Blanchot's account of writing, from impossibility and not possibility. It begins from the outside, from difference itself, and forecloses manifestation and consolidation through the disquiet of the fragment. Noise, then, in Cascella's text is given over to a passive persistence instead of a sonorous quality, just as Blanchot frames it through the non-origin of the Sirens. It is not noise in the way that Dean Lockwood, writing about Sheffield industrial group Cabaret Voltaire, thinks of noise. Noise for Cascella is not about 'traitor prophets' who 'turn away from and betray the dominant order to open up a route into a new reality.'<sup>123</sup> Lockwood's explanation of the contemporaneous counter-flows of productive capital as a resistive impossibility of the closure of this capital, dramatizes transgression without Nietzschean laughter. Impossibility for Lockwood comes after possibility as a dialectical recuperation that formalises the radical potential of noise akin to the idea of failure in Hegarty's writing. In quoting Brandon Labelle in proximity to Nietzsche, Lockwood emphasises a voluntarism and active language, with use of Nietzsche's notion of the

'untimely,' that is precisely at odds with the passivity true of this notion. His belief that the heterogeneity of noise, as a potential to radicalise, can be 'processed, echoically shaped and othered,' which is to say, brought forward in the hope of something new, overstates the latter part of Nietzsche's maxim ('let us hope, for the benefit of time to come') at the cost of what comes before in the quote as Nietzsche's actual notion of the untimely: 'acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time.'<sup>124</sup> Although quoting from *Difference and Repetition*, Lockwood misses the point of Deleuze's explanation of Nietzsche's idea, where the untimely is positioned as a radical impossibility more profound than any kind of dialectic. The untimely, and noise as we figure it, is not the 'prescient announcement of what shall eventually come forward'<sup>125</sup> as a hope for a future to come, but the 'originary "nowhere" and the displaced,'<sup>126</sup> as a pre-individual singularity. What passive noise is, and what the likes of Cascella is attentive to, is what active noise overlooks and what Lockwood misses, which is precisely this originary nowhere – in Liberton a contamination, Blanchot the neuter and Bataille an excess – that is the antecedent involvement our language and subjectivity is said to have with noise. An involvement that 'happens before categories'<sup>127</sup> as both the condition and uncondition of meaning.

124 Ibid., 125.



125 Ibid.

126 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* [1968], trans. Paul Patton (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), xix.

127 Cascella, *En Abîme*, 70.

128 Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 126.

The writing of listening is, then, for Cascella, a contaminated affair. It is never present as a here and now but a myriad of memories and times to come, all of which constitute an idea of listening as something always before and after itself. What is grasped of listening in the act of writing is therefore always dispersed by a passive multiplicity. As Hill reminds us regarding the fragmentary in Blanchot: 'In the beginning may be the word, but the beginning is always more than the word, since no word is ever in itself a beginning, only ever an abyssal response to another word coming before and after.'<sup>128</sup> The word in this sense might be illustrated, figuratively, by the chordal guitar playing of Boris' guitarist Wata, while the static noise of Merzbow might be thought as the 'endless murmuring and rustling [...] a constant

chattering and noise' that persists 'behind my words.'<sup>129</sup> Their collaborative effort, *Sun Baked Snow Cave*,<sup>130</sup> begins reluctantly. An electronic noise eases its way into the sonic frame in a sound reminiscent of a field of buzzing Gryllidae. The sound is so restrained one would be excused for thinking Wata's first chordal strum, at one minute and eight seconds, to be the beginning of the record. The familiarity of the chords that interrupt this ubiquitous noise stretch for a further twelve minutes, only to then be drowned out themselves, eighteen minutes into the recording, by the same inaugural noise that slowly gained sonic prevalence and volume almost clandestinely behind the chords. It is only at the point when the noise reaches a certain volume, sonically overwhelming the chords, that we realise this noise has been there from the beginning. In this sense, the temptation to hear the recording as a sonic 'drowning out' of musical familiarity is not only frustrated by the melodic guitar notes that emerge clearly out of the dissipating noise near the end of the recording, but by the persistence of noise that is never silent nor victorious at any point in the recording. If Wata's guitar is the word, it comes after Merzbow's noise as musical intelligibility. Yet it mobilizes, in the form of closure and intelligibility, the 'non-totalizable movement of difference'<sup>131</sup> that is heard as the chordal impossibility to persist clearly and presently without the ubiquity of this primordial noise. In *Sun Baked Snow Cave* musical familiarity is always in proximity to supposed 'non-musicality' where the persistence of both illustrates their commensurability. At a point, it evokes Cascella's notion of memory where, even at its noisiest when the chords cannot be heard, they linger in close proximity like an echoing past which, because of its musicality, makes the presence of noise all the more noisy. In this way, something other is always at work within the recording that exceeds its total sonic attributes. The 'chattering and noise' that persists behind 'my words,' and behind Wata's guitar, is more than the Gryllidae-like noise of Merzbow, in that it exists as proximity; as the impossible manifestation of noise and music equally. An impossibility that is more than Merzbow's opening noise and less than Wata's fading guitar as the irreducible remainder of both. Where Liberton writes 'the "too much" of Bataille excess ("All that is...is too much") is the "too close" of exteriority' we can write the 'too much' of

<sup>129</sup> William Large, *Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot: Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing*

(Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2004), 97.

130 Boris and Merzbow, *Sun Baked Snow Cave* (Hydra Head, 2005).

131 Libertson, *Proximity*, 181.

Merzbow's noise is the too close of passive noise, which is to say 'its excess over the possibility of phenomenality.'<sup>132</sup>

132 *Ibid.*, 20.

133 *Ibid.*, 98.

134 *Ibid.*

135 Cascella, *En Abîme*, 47.

The idea of excess as something 'too close' is precisely the way in which we have been thinking transgression and eroticism away from the pejorative discourse of radicalism and negativity. Excess is not 'too far' as something outside and beyond the limit of meaning and acceptability that might be reached by subversive gestures. Excess, instead, is 'too close' to these modes of understanding in having been directly involved in their constitution. Excess over the possibility of phenomenality is, therefore, the way in which what is 'too close' is what is inaccessible in the very articulation of meaning and the Same; it is the disturbing proximity of alterity within the Same. Subjectivity, meaning and identity, as procedures of the Same, are always produced and given cohesion by the very movement that forecloses their possibility. Impossibility, in this way, is given a different expression than the mode of failure in Hegarty. It is true that any movement of noise, understood as negativity, that restores this negativity to the economy of utility must be said in some way to fail, as a by-product of a failed possibility. But this unicity of negativity that Hegarty sees as the common thread between all languages of noise is already constituted by a radical impossibility that is more than antithetical possibility. This is equal to Blanchot's idea of the night, as an expression of alterity that resists the 'communion of day and night'; an alterity that 'cannot be appropriated or superceded.'<sup>133</sup> Noise, in the expression of passive noise, preserves the value of transgression through contamination instead of contradiction. To introduce into 'illumination the "excess" of the nocturnal'<sup>134</sup> is to acknowledge, without reservation, that which resists our efforts of communication; whatever is said, or whatever memory Cascella tries to write, is always more than the measure of its expression. 'Against the writer's abundance of words,' she is trapped by her own admission in a 'wordlessness'<sup>135</sup> that begets a hollow interior.

Shinya Tsukamoto's visualisation of human mutation is a useful metaphor for helping us think transgression as an interior and not exterior concern. And by proxy, the visual metaphor of mutation allows us to visualise passive noise away from the aesthetic of an actively masochistic eroticism and toward the hollow interior the likes

of Cascella and Blanchot circle. Much like the aesthetic of Japanese noise music, Tetsuo: The Iron Man is most often read actively. In a recent example, Steve Brown argues that Tetsuo visualises a Deleuzian 'war-machine';<sup>136</sup> a rhizomatic assemblage of techno-eroticism that expresses, as Tom Mes sees it, Tsukamoto's most ardent theme: the idea of rebirth through destruction.<sup>137</sup> It is true that, on the surface, Tetsuo

is easily framed as an overt type of eroticism concerned with a muscular subversion and destruction not unlike perceptions of Bataille's early writings. The opening scene, which sees the metal fetishist insert a ribbed metal tube into a crude incision on his leg, displays according to Brown an act of 'self-castration and self-penetration'<sup>138</sup> that is consistent with some of the more dominant motifs of the film. The act of self-mutilation, the first stage of the fetishist becoming machine, empowers him with the capacity to cause the involuntary mutations of others – the fetishist becomes a demonic possessor of other people within the film, turning them into grotesque chunks of metal under his control – which visualises, according to Brown, a 'bitingly transgressive parody that subverts the status quo of heteronormative state capitalism and the mechanisms of social dominance that maintain it.'<sup>139</sup>

136 Steven Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 108.

137 Tom Mes, *Iron Man: The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto* (Surrey: FAB Press, 2005), 66.

138 Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 64.

139 *Ibid.*, 10-11.

140 *Ibid.*, 92.

141 Shinya Tsukamoto (dir.), *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* [1989], (London: Tartan Video, 2005).

One such mechanism which Brown is referring to is the dominant mode of sexuality in Japanese society during the 1980s. Much like the performance of Hino, the jouissance of the monster Tetsuo (meaning iron man) is a mixture of pleasure and pain in a site 'of a new and transformed kind of identity and experience.'<sup>140</sup> While the transformation between the salaryman and the fetishist is occasionally depicted according to the dominant understanding of sexuality, through a hypermasculinity and phallicism, sexuality is more broadly displayed as something out of control, which allows it to equally overthrow the limits of heterosexual and masculine dominance. The salaryman is not only sodomized by his girlfriend<sup>141</sup> in a nightmarish vision that blurs the reality between the real and dream state, but the final machinic amalgam of the salaryman and fetishist, a towering phallic assemblage of metal, cable and junk, displays for Brown not only a latent engagement with homosexuality but, for its time, was 'cyberpunk's first coming-out film.' The salaryman's metamorphosis

into a monstrous machine, in which both the fetishist and he became one, is said to be a 'metaphor for coming to terms with his homosexuality in a heteronormative Japanese society.'<sup>142</sup> The fetishist's own status in the film is at odds with the salaryman's, displaying 'lower class, blue collar, and homosexual' identifiers against the dominance of 'middle class, white collar, and heterosexual'<sup>143</sup> behaviour.

142 Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 107.

143 *Ibid.*, 106.

144 It is questionable how much weight this concept carries today. Arguably the salaryman is a more suitable way of describing workers in Japan prior to its so-called Lost Decade, Japan's economic collapse in the 1990s. Nevertheless, at the time of *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, the image of the salaryman was the prototypical image of the Japanese, middle class male.

145 Alan Wolfe, 'Suicide and the Japanese Postmodern: A Postnarrative Paradigm', in Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian (eds.), *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), 215-235 (230).

Tsukamoto's choice to name his protagonist the 'salaryman,' which occurs in the credits alone as he goes unnamed in the film, is also a very deliberate one just like the choice to clothe him in suit, tie and glasses. The idea of the salaryman in the West has become a noun for the Japanese white collar businessman<sup>144</sup> and a prototype for corporate, middle class ideals. Pitting the fetishist in opposition to him helps frame a Marxian class struggle that is made all the more interesting by the post-apocalyptic setting. This setting is even more significant being located in Japan, where the apocalyptic imagination is distinctly post-nuclear. As Alan Wolfe explains, in Japan the content of the post-apocalyptic imagination is concerned with 'whether survival is possible' in a prefigurement of the end of the world, but 'how to survive in what has always been recognised as a precarious existence,'<sup>145</sup> post-World War Two. In other words, the barren, desolate and almost characterless landscape of *Tetsuo*, made all the more vacant by the black and white film, contextualises characters inhabiting a post-nuclear world. The few characters that do appear in *Tetsuo* could be said to be living on even after the end, in a state of perpetual apocalypse; the apocalypse is not the end but the murmuring stagnation of existence in a post-nuclear world, where the end has already arrived. And the subversively erotic shock tactics of the fetishist might be said to work as a creative destruction of a sexually and economically restricted economy, that sustains this characterless existence as it was epitomised by the 1980s Japanese businessman.

For Brown, the transgressive emphasis on voluntary subversion which he sees as the dominant motif within the film is reinforced all the more by the noisy *mise-en-scène* created by Chu Ishikawa's industrial noise soundtrack. Noise and metallic

percussion are sonic tools that help frame a visual sense of disorder which he explains through his idea of 'velocity images.' Both the salaryman and the fetishist are propelled across the scrapyard-like Tokyo landscape by 'mini-rocket-engine-augmented-feet.' The use of stop-motion filming helps visualise, for Brown, the image of speed itself that is both disorientating and confusing as it finds itself 'unattached to the subject as an organising principle or reducible to a single, static point of view.' The idea of the velocity image, then, characterises an interest in a de-humanised and machinic speed that mirrors the Futurist interest in industrialisation, as well as their interest in noise. Speed, industrial clatter and man's involvement with machines in *Tetsuo* is best likened to, according to Brown, Marinetti's motto 'that a roaring motorcar...is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace.'<sup>146</sup> In both, there is the sense that noise might be the catalyst for transformation and change, which through 'rebirth and destruction' might bring about, in a rather Attalian idea, a 'new and better life.'<sup>147</sup> In this sense, the noise of *Tetsuo* is read in line with the negativity of active noise as a 'destabilization of the codes by which we make sense of the world.'<sup>148</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 104.

<sup>147</sup> Mes, *Iron Man*, 77.

<sup>148</sup> Simon Reynolds, 'Noise' [1990], in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 55-59 (55).

149 Brown, Tokyo Cyberpunk, 98.

This is precisely where Brown positions the Deleuzian emphasis of his interpretation. His identification of the 'tentacle motif' in Tetsuo is explicated by his understanding of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the rhizome. Brown's interest in this concept appears to reside with the idea of the 'new,' wherein the multiplicity of becoming – in which heterogeneity and the potential to be Other is reified by the idea of the 'assemblage' which implies something constituted by many – forms the 'assemblage machine' functioning for 'new affects, new concepts, new bodies, new thoughts.' Tsukamoto's constant depiction of the fetishist tangled in wires and cables, and the assorted metal ligatures that combine the salaryman and the fetishist in the final scene, help visualise, for Brown, 'connections being formed between heterogeneous elements and forms of organization.'<sup>149</sup> But this idea is in fact slightly at odds with Deleuze and Guattari's own idea of multiplicity which substantiates the idea of the rhizome as something passive before both subject and object in a region of

'determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions.'<sup>150</sup> In other words, despite multiplicity naming for Deleuze and Guattari the bodiless potential of becoming, Brown favours a voluntaristic language that positions the salaryman and the fetishist as instigators of this new assemblage. In this way, the fetishist as possessor, depicted by highly eroticised images of violence, mutilation and bodily penetration, is close to Hino and Mikami in the language of the active, in that all three emphasise in their own way the exteriority of excess. The fetishist mutilates himself and inserts a metal rod into his own flesh whereas Hino pours hot wax over her naked body. Although the former is arguably more extreme, both acts display a voluntaristic deconstruction of the bodily image and its typical modes of pleasure. After his self-mutilation, the fetishist becomes a visualisation of exteriority in a tentacle-like rhizome. And he is able, now that he is part machine, to approach the space of the salaryman like Mikami approaches her audience, forcing them to flee the space that once held them, which in the case of the salaryman is depicted as an involuntary mutilation of his flesh and middle class image.

<sup>150</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 9.

<sup>151</sup> Brown, Tokyo Cyberpunk, 91.

<sup>152</sup> Reynolds, 'Noise', 56.

In the final image of the Tetsuo monster both the fetishist and salaryman have become physically immersed and overcome by metal. Their faces, although partly mutilated, are their only distinguishable features as their bodies have been reappropriated into a machinic assemblage of a modern Japanese kaiju (..). Tetsuo, in Brown's reading, is not only a noise film because of its sonic attributes, but, like the velocity image, it is invested in an idea of immersion, where the 'fusion of bodies and subjectivities [...] radically reconceives the status of corporeality and "identity."<sup>151</sup> The loss of identity to the heterogeneous space of the mechanical monster mirrors Voegelin's disembodied listening which is typical of the mode of active noise. At the point of excess (noise) the self is said to lose itself in the 'obliteration of meaning' where identity becomes 'ecstasy (literally, being out-of-oneself).'152 Tsukamoto's vision of a 'new world' depicts, for Brown, a similarly masochistic jouissance where, despite the fetishist saying 'I feel great,' the pained

expression on his face and the silver bodily fluids running from his mouth suggest something quite different, perhaps a transformed kind of identity and experience. In

this new experience, exteriority is still preserved, as the new machinic amalgam of fetishist and salaryman declares its intent on transforming the world into an image of its new found identity: 'we can mutate this whole world into metal.' The final machine of fetishist and salaryman works like the radical avant-garde that actively looks to bring alterity into meaning as a wilful disruption of the ordinary. In this way, alterity is preserved as something outside meaning that can be mobilised against meaning in the act of transgression as it is typically understood. Eroticism and self-mutilation within the film would, in this understanding, be complicit in Reynolds's 'shock tactics,' designed to interrogate the limits of normativity epitomised by the character of the salaryman. This is why Brown positions the final monster next to the idea of the 'war-machine,' which he quite literally figures as a machine of war determined to destroy the world in order to give birth to something new.

But the language of active noise as it might be visualised through these tentacle-like ligatures, the idea of immersion, and the machinic kaiju war machine, is complicated if we examine the mirror scene in *Tetsuo* alongside Brown's own analysis of this scene. While Brown makes reference to a confused linearity both within the film itself and the various interpretations of it, he nevertheless privileges a narrative of active noise in his emphasis of subversion and wilful perversion. The velocity image, for Brown, is not only about speed but the way in which the editing of *Tetsuo* actively works against any stable narrative. As he rightly suggests, the entirety of the film could be interpreted as an 'extended nightmare, or more precisely, a stream-of-consciousness dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream.'<sup>153</sup> Past and future fold into the present in such a way that cause and effect are not clearly determined. In other words, what is signified in *Tetsuo* is not explicit but for Brown 'its lack of transcendental signifiers does not mean that it has no intellectual import or that it was simply an exercise in surrealist automatism.'<sup>154</sup> *Tetsuo* finds its significance, for Brown, in the language of the active where an emphasis on a general economy of eroticism and violence (fetishist) takes precedence over a restricted economy of heteronormativity and utility (salaryman). The victory of the former is visualised by the eventual submersion of the latter. Yet, the privilege of active noise in the interpretation of *Tetsuo*, which is held in the ideas of exteriority and the new – where the transgression of identity and heteronormativity is said to come from an exterior

<sup>153</sup> Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 62.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

alterity in the early stages (the fetishist), while ending on a machinic amalgam of exteriority (kaiju) – follows the reductive exigency of the Same; the non-linearity of *Tetsuo* is replaced by a loose narrative of active heterogeneity that is visualised by the erotic mutilations of the fetishist. What withdraws from this reduction, however, is what comes before the visualisation of exteriority within the film and what, more broadly, comes before the idea of possibility. Although the implication, later within the film, is that the fetishist has somehow taken hold of the salaryman's body, mutating him from outside, the initial indication of mutation occurs when the salaryman is alone, looking into the mirror. As he shaves with his electric razor, he notices a sharp metal point protruding from his cheek. While it is unclear, as Brown reflects, whether the metal is growing from inside or whether it is lodged in his face

from a recent hit-and-run car incident with the fetishist, it is nonetheless indicative of the 'profound changes the protagonist is starting to undergo.' What is most significant about this scene is the privacy in which this alterity occurs. The sharp metal object does not belong to him nor is it clearly attributable to the fetishist. Standing alone in front of the mirror, the salaryman faces not only the image of himself but something deeply foreign that does not belong to this image of himself. A different kind of alterity is at work in this scene, which is no longer about exteriority and wilful, violent subversion, but contamination as it is thought in Libertson. In his own analysis of this scene, Brown gives room to this idea of alterity, where he argues that the private moment works as a 'metaphor for the inhuman otherness that is growing underneath the surface.'<sup>155</sup> But his final emphasis on the Deleuzian war-machine – as opposed to a sustained discussion of this passive interpretation – privileges a language of active noise in a manner consistent with wilful transgression. That is to say, it is a manner consistent with active noise as opposed to passive noise.

<sup>155</sup> Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 77.

<sup>156</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 19.

To think about passive noise is to think about the idea of transgression away from this idea of agency and in avoidance of the idea of dialectical recuperation. Noise is no longer about active subversion and failure once subversion becomes normalised. It is instead concerned with an approach; a profound kind of waiting wherein the subject who waits is said to be already contaminated in her waiting by the exteriority for which she waits. In other words, transgression is about being 'approached by the limit, in an incumbence analogous to that of death'<sup>156</sup> rather than

approaching the limit through voluntary subversion. When Libertson makes reference to Deleuze he is very cautious of the types of volitional interpretation Deleuzian concepts, such as the war machine, can invite. This is why Libertson makes more of the idea of the body without organs for he sees it as equal to the neuter in Blanchot and transgression in Bataille. To visualise a physical body that is without organs is to imagine a frame 'populated only by intensities.'<sup>157</sup> This has to do with the mode of desire that is constitutive, as discussed previously, of subjectivity. The body without organs, for Libertson, illustrates how desire does not 'proceed from a constituted interiority' but instead from a 'differential exigency which invests all interiority precisely as an "impossible" intensity of closure within an economy of general heteronomy.'<sup>158</sup> The mirror sequence in *Tetsuo* takes on a much greater significance if we understand the body without organs this way and if we allow the protruding piece of metal to symbolise the differentiation of a fraught interior. The inexhaustible intensity of desire that constitutes a subject always, as Libertson argues, produces a body without organs where closure (the body) can only be understood via the simultaneity of dispersion (without organs). The protruding piece of metal coming from inside the salaryman, which will later develop into a full body mutation, not only suggests 'all is not right with his body'<sup>159</sup> but visualises desire as it is understood as a 'principle of differentiation'<sup>160</sup> that exceeds the limits of a totalised/holistic interior (with organs). This is why the piece of sharp metal is piercing through his flesh; the salaryman's interior, and the interiority of totalization more broadly, is more than it can contain because it is constituted by desire/differentiation. While the final machinic amalgam might visualise a literal war-machine that would emphasise the voluntaristic language of Deleuzian philosophy, the self-reflexivity of the mirror sequence that exposes a hollow and excessive interior energises the latent passivity that is conspicuous in the idea of the body without organs. More importantly for us,

however, the mirror sequence allows us to visualise a body (salaryman) without organs as a way of explicating an idea of transgression away from voluntaristic shock tactics.

157 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 169.

158 Libertson, *Proximity*, 181.

159 Brown, *Tokyo Cyberpunk*, 76.

160 Libertson, *Proximity*, 181.

In this interpretation, Tetsuo cannot simply be read actively, where the masochistic and sadistic perversions of the fetishist chaotically subvert the heteronormativity of Japan. Due to the confused temporality of the narrative there is no clear causal chain that would privilege this idea of exteriority. Instead, Tetsuo must be equally understood as a commentary on impossibility and passivity where, as Wolfe so rightly argued, the precariousness of our existence is held in equal esteem to its overcoming. The muscular effort of the fetishist to actively mutilate his own existence and that of others is but one way of understanding transgression as it actively reduces the thought of alterity to dialectical contradiction. But horror as Libertson understands it, and eroticism as we have framed it in the idea of passivity, involves interiority and contamination that 'consists of a presence correlative to a breach in closure.'<sup>161</sup> The salaryman first notices signs of his mutation in the mirror because mutation and alterity begin from the excessive exigency of desire that is constitutive of who we are. As Large argues, the self is already orientated toward the other and already outside of itself before the constitution of the subject that can physically self-mutilate. It is this orientation toward the other that comes before, even, the specific face of the other, which for the salaryman would be the fetishist. This, for Levinas, is the very space of communication as we exist among others; we are always orientated beyond the walls of ourselves. Regarding Japanese noise music, this explains the way our language of noise, as it is often appropriated through the mechanisms of the erotic, affirms itself in the simultaneity of excess and closure. Passive noise is the 'antecedence of nonbeing – the nothingness fatherland or motherland – a silent communication'<sup>162</sup> that comes before the exteriority of the fetishist and performance of Mayuko Hino. Our active interpretations that emphasise the material subversions of noise are thus the same as the mirror scene in Tetsuo. What stares back at us in the presentation of this language is not anything definitive or assured but something internally fraught. We stand in front of this language in the hope of facing meaning but what we in fact face is the animation of meaning by an uncertainty we cannot explain or account for. Ultimately in the language of active noise, we face impossibility.

161 *Ibid.*, 59.

162 Maurice Blanchot, *A Voice from Elsewhere* [2002], trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 28.

To the extent that all experience is, in part, an excess beyond our modes of conceptualisation all experience can be said to be transgressive. Transgression, in this way, is no longer about will or inclination, but passivity as contamination. It is no longer to do with an act that is qualified as radical, or the disappointment of those



acts/gestures that have, through a cultural dialectic, lost their radicality. Transgression persists as a contamination within subjectivity and conceptuality as a simultaneous displacement and manifestation. What is unique about Japanese noise music, Hino and Tetsuo is the way in which each looks to visualise and give sound to impossibility as it constitutes its modes of possibility. In this way they can be thought, next to Casella, as a frustrated kind of presence that only finds meaning as an impossible gesture. But this impossibility does not signify failure in the manner that Hegarty sees it. Hegarty's failure is in keeping with contradiction and dialectics, where impossibility is said to come after a recuperated alterity. But the alterity that truly conditions Japanese noise music and the salaryman is beyond recuperation as it is beyond the temporality of the day. The conditions of impossibility are pre-voluntary and are sustained infinitely in a never-ending moment of waiting which not even death, as we typically understand it, can interrupt.

### Chapter 3. Waiting for Noise and Death

#### Rethinking Death

The idea of passive noise enables us to hold on to the language of transgression through the notion of contamination. The excess which is so ardently expressed in the language of active noise by Hegarty, Thacker and Voegelin – where Japanese noise music is argued to be an excessive style of music that tries to push beyond rigid definitions of music and meaning – is thought instead as an interior excess that strips the language of noise before it might be put to any kind of action. Passive noise names the hollow interior of the active where the language of negativity and radicalism, which have become endemic in the discourse of Japanese noise music, cannot hold sway as essential understandings of noise. If we follow Blanchot, and

after him, Libertson (as well as Wall and Large<sup>1</sup>), then the language of noise must be said to be already other to itself, predicated as it is on a fundamental absence and death that is anterior to any sort of configuration. In other words, as we have seen, transgression need not refer to subversive action. The ontological dimension of transgression is impossibility, which does not exist in any dialectical capacity (where the eagerness of noise to be 'outside' of music is assimilated, through a process of normalisation, into music as genre) but insists as a permanent and irreducible dimension of alterity that is already in play within the language of noise but never put into play by the radical gestures of the noise musician. Passive noise, then, is not something that is known or under control because it is what frustrates the realm of the known by being outside the temporality in which we have the capacity to act. Yet we nevertheless recognise it in the language of active noise, a language which is uncertain precisely because it seems to circle an irreconcilable chaos. The recognition of this uncertainty and discontent is what, according to Blanchot, 'destroys the power in me to know' as it makes 'what cannot be grasped into something that cannot be relinquished, the inaccessible that I cannot cease attaining.'<sup>2</sup> The transgression of

1 What connects these three commentators of Blanchot and Levinas (Libertson also includes Bataille in his analysis and Wall, Giorgio Agamben) is an urgency to think alterity via an interior relation as opposed to an exterior relation. The outside, the other, alterity and transgression, are all thought as coming before subjectivity as a complex moment that at once engenders yet simultaneously ruptures the constitution of subjectivity and meaning with it.

2 Maurice Blanchot, 'Essential Solitude' [1955], in George Quasha (ed.) and Lydia Davis (trans.), *Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays* (New York: Station Hill, 1999), 401-417 (411).

Japanese noise music is this withdrawal; it is the uncertain centre of signification which by necessity pulls the language about this music away from any essentialist claims it makes toward negativity and radicalism. But this withdrawal is, oddly, what constitutes this language of volition and antagonism. As Blanchot expresses it, it is as if 'there were beings only through the loss of being, when being is lacking.'<sup>3</sup> This is a very difficult idea made all the more complex by the assertion that any expression of noise occurs as a simultaneous withdrawal of expression. But this simultaneity is the exigency of thinking noise and, with it, Japanese noise music.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 405.

5 Ibid.

'The writer's mastery does not,' according to Blanchot, 'lie in the hand that writes.'<sup>4</sup> The hand that writes is sick and is incapable of letting go of the pencil. The hand that writes is, in other words, infected and seized by something it cannot control. This something belongs to the shadow of meaning, the empty space of language that is pursued by literature and is proper to the origin of art as Blanchot understands it. The space of literature and the origin of art are not found in the written word or the object in front of us because they come from a space that cannot be reached, from the inhuman song of the Sirens. The meaning of art is, in short, always more than the author's intended capacity to mean and is always less than the implication that it means anything at all. Mastery is, then, 'always the achievement of the other hand, the one that does not write, the one that can intervene just when it has to, grasp the pencil

and take it away.' It is only in our capacity to not make art and our 'power to stop writing'<sup>5</sup> that we have any control over the space of art at all. For, once we pursue art we are, according to Blanchot, in pursuit of a space without meaning, or perhaps more accurately, a space whose meaning is one constituted by alterity, an alterity that is radically passive in our capacity to control. And once we are in the space of creation, acting as painter or musician, we give ourselves over to a space beyond our control and in doing so the centrality of signification falls and with it the certainty of meaning. Just as transgression has been argued away from the action of violence, the hand that writes, for Blanchot, is incongruous with the words that are written. The hand has, like all action, already been seized by an alterity the likes of which it will never command.

This is true of the language about Japanese noise music, where we are arguing that the anterior tumult of meaning, which Levinas figures through his idea of the *il y a* and Blanchot sustains through the neuter, conditions the confusion that is proper to thinking noise semantically to such a degree that its confusion is no longer thought as the antithesis of meaning. In other words, the language about this music withdraws from its typical modes of referral, existing instead as the radical passivity of noise. It subsists as a reserve in meaning which derives its power through alterity and difference, pushing our understanding of noise beyond its active subversion. The ubiquity of noise that is given consistency via a language that emphasises the commonality of chaos, disorder, subversion and meaninglessness, is thereby given over to a more drastic mode of meaninglessness which, far from contesting meaning through any kind of power, works as the manifest moment of meaning passively. To clarify, noise does not yield an ontology if we allow it to be thought through Blanchot. It becomes a questioning of ontology where what constitutes the thinking of noise is the unspeakable condition of thought itself; noise bears witness to an interminable difference that is its only point of origin. The relationship thus becomes far more nuanced which is why the idea of contamination is the preferred way of thinking noise here. With contamination noise is no longer about opposition and therefore no longer reliant on 'the unproblematic retention of a common sense definition of the term noise,'<sup>6</sup> which consequently implies a rigid understanding of music; if noise is meaningless then music, by implication, must be meaningful which is exactly where Hainge contends with ordinary definitions of noise. Similarly here, the use of contamination allows us to complicate the binaristic logic of active noise with the idea of one language possessing a split centre. To this degree, noise must be said to have already subverted and transgressed itself before any kind of dualistic thinking.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 260.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain our final way of thinking about passive noise, which will be through an understanding of death which is counter to any idea of death as an end-point. There is a symbiotic connection between the image of death and the concept of noise that is made apparent in the extreme aesthetic of Japanese noise music and thematised in the language of active noise. In its fullness,

that is, with the 'harsh noise' of Merzbow and equally with its lack of fullness, that is, with Sachiko M and the often associated sub-genre of onkyo, music is said to face its abolition or death. In both styles of sound, the idea of music survives but only barely, reclaimed at once through an excessive style of music (Merzbow) and a minimal,

almost silent, expression of music that is informed by a Cagean style of listening (Sachiko M). Thacker is keen to explore death in relation to the former, which he frames through his reading of Bataille which is, as explained in chapter two, a rather literal reading of Bataille that ignores the passivity present in his work. Where Bataille writes that erotic activity is any activity involved in 'assenting to life up to the point of death,'<sup>7</sup> Thacker takes this to mean an eroticism and death which has the capacity to mobilise the subject into a 'zone of affectivity, where what is normally a stable, defined, organised sense of individual being, is radically ruptured, dispersed, and opened.'<sup>8</sup> If noise is what causes, according to Wilson in his discussion of amusia, 'subjective fragmentation, even heralding death,'<sup>9</sup> then death would name the final point of noise, constituting the musical subject at its most radical and extreme just before it passes over into the complete abolition of both music and the subject. Although Hegarty never explicitly frames it so, the promise of death is what conditions his idea of failure where the impossibility of living in an absolute moment of noise (in death) constitutes the endeavour of a radical music.

7 Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* [1957], trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 12.

8 Eugene Thacker, 'Bataille/Body/Noise: Notes Towards a Techno-Erotics', additional contribution in Bret Woodward (author.), *Merzbook: the Pleasuredome of Noise* (Preston: Extreme, 1999), 57-66 (58).

9 Scott Wilson, 'Amusia, noise and the drive: towards a theory of audio unconscious', in Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan and Paul Hegarty (eds.), *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 26-40 (27).

10 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 305.

Without making any direct references to Heidegger, theorists belonging to the discourse of active noise can nevertheless be said to be implicitly Heideggerian because of the way in which they equate alterity with excess and volition. The impossibility of death, thought as the impossibility of continuing to exist in and beyond death is what, according to Heidegger, orientates the self, what Heidegger refers to as *Dasein*, toward the specificity of its own, individual, existence. The ontological dimension that is characteristic of *Dasein* is the 'the very ground for an existing Being-towards-death.'<sup>10</sup> 'Death does not just "belong" to one's own *Dasein* in

an undifferentiated way,' Heidegger writes, but 'death lays claim to it as individual *Dasein*.'<sup>11</sup> In other words, it is by facing up to the fact that I will die, that no one can take my place in my death, that my existence can be understood and taken in its uniqueness and singularity. My death is mine alone and with it I am able to claim my existence as my own. Active noise maintains a similar ontology with its emphasis on failure and negativity as conditioning moments of noise music's extremity. When Hegarty suggests that noise 'strives for a pure expression where it is other in a way that listeners and performers are also made other' and that this other only makes sense in opposition to the 'restricted economy of meaning and rationality,'<sup>12</sup> there is a sense that, like *Dasein*, which comes to itself through an anticipation of the impossible, noise music exists as a music-towards-death (impossibility). And just as *Dasein* cannot have death as an actuality – the actuality of death would mark the end of the ontological specificity of *Dasein* as a being-towards-death – but can only live on through its anticipation, Japanese noise music cannot actualise noise absolutely as a 'pure expression' that makes its creator and listener other to the supposed corporeality

of music and meaning. Instead, as Hegarty argues, 'noise is going to fail, and noise is this failure, making itself as if it will not fail, and living on this failure, as residue.'<sup>13</sup> Japanese noise music, in the language of the active, is said (even if only implicitly) to be a music-towards-death where the impossibility of reaching this death (thought as the end of music and meaning) is what conditions the possibility of its radical gesture.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 308. Emphases in original.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (New York and London: Continuum, 2007), 147.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The problem of understating death in this way and of equating the radicalism of noise with the Heideggerian possibility of understanding death, is the same as understanding transgression as volitional and noise as active. All of these accounts demand a reduction of alterity to the region of assimilation in a gesture which is fundamentally at odds with the nature of alterity. Therefore, to account for the nature of alterity as it properly relates to the region of impossibility death must be thought passively. This will allow us to rethink Japanese noise music's relationship to death as an unavoidable and unthinkable pre-ontological condition rather than a gesture of extreme behaviour. The contestation of active noise through the language of passivity, then, is equal to Blanchot's understanding of death as it differs from Heidegger's and as it challenges the act of suicide, which we will analyse through the

ritual suicide of Japanese author Yukio Mishima alongside Masami Akita's involvement with the *Onna harakiri sakuhinshû* film series.<sup>14</sup> For Blanchot, death insists in the 'arrière-monde of impossibility.' A term taken by Libertson from Nietzsche – used by Nietzsche in referral to that "'other world", that inhuman, dehumanized world which is a heavenly nothing [...] the belly of being [that] does not speak to man, except as man'<sup>15</sup> – the arrière-monde names 'impossibility as a permanent and irreducible dimension of subjectivity's appearance in the general economy.'<sup>16</sup> For death to insist in the arrière-monde, which translates as the background world, of impossibility is to position death like Libertson positions transgression: death referring no longer to a possibility of being but the ontological dimension of being whose resistance is the fact that its own predicate is one of impossibility. What Libertson writes of transgression is true of Blanchot's death, that is, it is 'real without being actual.'<sup>17</sup> It is not something that moves toward a 'point,' which for Japanese noise music would be the point of musical abolition. Death is for Blanchot, like transgression is for Libertson and radical passivity is for Wall, 'the passivity with which interiority, in an economy without power, exceeds its own closure, its locus and its punctuality.'<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> This films series was comprised of six films produced by Yuuri Sunohara in 1990. It was released by Right Brain Productions. All of these films depict the ritual suicide of uniform wearing women.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One* [1883], trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 59.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Libertson, *Proximity: Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), 64.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

18 Ibid., 68.

19 Maurice Blanchot, *Awaiting Oblivion* [1962], trans. John Gregg (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 52.

Death for Blanchot is equivalent to the idea of waiting as it is thought proper to the temporality of passivity. Like his reading of affliction in the writings of Weil, the temporality of waiting is of a different order than the temporality of active noise. 'The thought of waiting,' Blanchot writes, is a thought which waits 'for that which does not let itself be thought, thought borne by waiting that is adjourned in this waiting.'<sup>19</sup> The complexity of this circular affirmation is clarified by Hill who writes that waiting, by definition, is 'neither active nor passive,' just as the object, person, or time for which one waits can never be 'properly present nor properly absent.' This is because, Hill goes on to explain, 'it is possible to wait for something only if it cannot be obtained in the present (for if it were to be made present, there would be no

waiting at all).'<sup>20</sup> The time of waiting, then, is one that is suspended; it is a time that is 'prior to activity and passivity in the conventional sense,' as one exposed to a 'passivity beyond passivity.'<sup>21</sup> This idea of passivity is what we have been referring to as, following Wall, a radical passivity. Death is complicit with the temporality of waiting, for Blanchot, because it can never arrive other than as the definitive end of possibility and thinking; if death were made present, then the being which waits for death in his mortality would no longer be the being that waits for death and would thus no longer be a being. In this sense, Blanchot follows Heidegger up until the point at which impossibility can no longer condition the possibility of living. Death for Blanchot is resolutely inaccessible to thought and activity; naming what marks the end of the world and the day, death can never be brought into the thematisation of possibility. It can, then, only ever be a deferral which, like the unassimilable thought of passive noise, traverses 'the possibility of experience and the experience of possibility'<sup>22</sup> with impossibility at every turn. Death mirrors the persistence of passive noise within the realm of the active as what refuses to be accommodated by the light of thematisation. And away from any kind of voluntarism it exists only as a kind of waiting that is without end or beginning, equivocal to the *il y a* in Levinas and the empty space of signification in Blanchot.

<sup>20</sup> Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 131.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* [1955], trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 91.

The aim of this chapter is to reiterate the complexity of passive noise, as it has been expressed so far, through this language of death. The importance of death in relation to noise and the idea of transgression cannot be understated if we are to understand the idea of extremity away from voluntarism and Japanese noise music away from its rather played-out expressions of negativity and radicalism. In the realm of the active, the thematisation of the day, death represents the final point of extremity. As Blanchot writes, 'death is the extreme' and he 'who includes death among all that is in his control controls himself extremely.'<sup>23</sup> It is with the extremity

of death that Japanese noise music coalesces into arguably its most ardent form of expression; at the limits of musicality and the extreme of social behaviour, Japanese noise music flirts with the image of death by looking beyond the limits of the world

to a world without limits, a world without world; or, as Hegarty writes, death as extremity is what allows this music to rally against the 'limits of the non-noise world, a world of taboos, controls, limits, normalised behaviours and so on.'<sup>24</sup> To discuss Japanese noise music in relation to death is to think about noise at its final point and again to think about the idea of transgression as it is typically thought in the language of the active. But to stress the idea of impossibility that is proper to death as something belonging to the endlessness of time, to a time outside of time, is to move away from this image of death as it is typically thought in the world of possibility and subversion and to move, once again, away from the typical version of transgression. It is to think about death as we have thought about transgression: an excess that persists as the incompleteness of manifestation in the realm of the active; a radical passivity that contaminates the interiority of noise's thematisation before any act of subversion. The kind of death we will be thinking about in this chapter will be one that comes before one's ability to think about death as a possibility and before one's ability to 'manage' death in the act of suicide. But like the preceding chapters, we can only reach this point if we follow the typical understanding of death, death as possibility, up to the point at which it ruptures. By beginning the chapter by explaining the Heideggerian notion of death, which will then be analysed through an examination of Yukio Mishima's *seppuku* (..) and the film *Jogakusei: Harakiri*,<sup>25</sup> we can start to see how Blanchot wants us to think death differently from this notion of death and, in so doing, we can begin to see how death might name what is proper to noise in a gesture that is unlike any kind of mortal fatalism. In other words, we can consider the act of noise and the expression of Japanese noise music's extremity as one of waiting, where the act of volition is suspended, giving way to a community of noise practitioners and listeners that is, in fact, unlike any community that might be thought through the familiar concept of a musical 'scene.'

<sup>24</sup> Paul Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace: Masochism in noise performance', in Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (eds.), *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorising Sonic Experience* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 135.

<sup>25</sup> Yuuri Sunohara (dir.), *Jogakusei: Harakiri* (Los Angeles: Right Brain, 1990).

## A Heideggerian Noise

'The task of culture has,' according to Blanchot, 'always been to restore a kind of purity to death, to make it authentic, personal, proper – but also to make it possible.'<sup>26</sup> The culture Blanchot is referring to is that culture belonging to Western history, which sees in 'action, language, and death' aspects of 'one and the same movement.'<sup>27</sup> The physical fact of death and the eventuality of its coming are less significant moments for Blanchot than the forgetting of the impossibility of knowing death in favour of its authentic overcoming. According to Blanchot, Rainer Maria Rilke, in his

only novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*,<sup>28</sup> even goes so far as to hide the real ending of the book at the beginning in order to demonstrate the kind of possibility that remains even at the advent of death. All of Brigge's experiences at the start of the book, as Blanchot reads them, 'tend to undermine life with proof of its impossibility.'<sup>29</sup> If we follow Blanchot's reading it becomes apparent how the early pages are replete with references to an irrecoverable impossibility. In the early passages of the novel Rilke writes such things as: 'there is a place within me of which I knew nothing,'<sup>30</sup> as if reminding us of the impenetrable density of a certain aspect of experience. Yet for Blanchot, the book only then goes on to develop 'in order to forget this truth' and to demonstrate that death is not, contrary to the irrefutable impossibility of death (death is logically impossible to experience because it takes away the very consciousness necessary for registering experience), that 'frightful final line after which there is nothing more to say.'<sup>31</sup> Rilke looks to restore a certain kind of power to himself in the face of the bottomless and unknowable space that is proper to the finality of his death. In so doing, Rilke's novel is not an image of death as something unknowable, impossible or something to be feared, but instead an image of the ultimate moment of possibility. As Blanchot tells us, Rilke's forgetting appears to say: 'my death might be the moment of my greatest authenticity.'<sup>32</sup>

26 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* [1969], trans. Susan Hanson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 180.

27 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* [1955], trans. Ann Smock (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 240.

28 Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* [1910], trans. Michael Hulse (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

29 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 130.

30 Rilke, *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 4.

31 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 131.

32 *Ibid.*, 128.

The idea of totality as Levinas elicits cannot be thought without the final destination of death. His criticism of Heidegger, which forms the basis of his ethics in *Totality and Infinity*, comes at the point at which the ethical relation is subordinated to ontology. Despite Heidegger's efforts to address the importance of intersubjectivity – Heidegger introduces the phrase *Sein-bei-Andere*<sup>33</sup> (Being-with-Others) to overcome the charges of solipsism that were previously put towards Husserlian phenomenology<sup>34</sup> – his lesson is nevertheless one of freedom as opposed to justice; freedom that one should 'maintain oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I.'<sup>35</sup> The alterity of the other is never sustained, in Heidegger, in the manner Levinas and Blanchot look to sustain alterity. There is always a reduction, what Levinas will call a violent 'suppression and possession'<sup>36</sup> of the other in favour of the individual self, or what Heidegger calls *Dasein*. While the ethical ramifications of thinking noise passively might only be implied in this chapter it is important to note that Heidegger's belief in authentic existence is constituted at the point at which *Dasein* is able to pull away from a collective sense of living, *Das Man* (they-self; the idea of collectivity and impersonality taking precedence over individuality and ultimately authenticity), and



become individuated. The key to understanding the difference between authentic and inauthentic living can be found in the German *Eigentlichkeit* (authenticity) which derives from *eigen* meaning 'own.' Authentic existence belongs to one's own individual mastery at which point intersubjectivity gives way to a resolute, individuated idea of the self. Death is essential in achieving this authenticity because it is with the thought of death that *Dasein* is able to see its existence as its own belonging, as it does, uniquely to it. It is what gives existence a certain finality and closure; it is the end-point before which existence is mine and mine alone. To reiterate what was quoted above death, for Heidegger, 'does not just "belong" to one's own *Dasein* in an undifferentiated way,' but 'death lays claim to it as individual

33 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 153.

34 Samuel Moyné, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelations and Ethics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 62.

35 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961], trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 46.

36 *Ibid.*, 46.

*Dasein*.<sup>37</sup> That death is mine and cannot be avoided is the thought that both individuates and compels my existence.

37 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 308.

38 Joseph Suglia, *Hölderlin and Blanchot on Self-Sacrifice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 73.

39 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68.

40 *Ibid.*, 304.

41 Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 172.

42 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 305.

Like Rilke before him, death for Heidegger is what conditions the possibility of existence at its most extreme and most desperate. As *Dasein* projects itself towards its death it is able to take possession of its own existence; 'in freeing itself for its death [...] *Dasein*'s existence is pushed into its finitude'<sup>38</sup> and therefore reaches, in Levinasian terms, towards its totality. The anxiety suffered in existence by thinking the inevitability of death is what forces *Dasein* to think about its existence as a whole because with the thought of death, existence is under threat. The ontological characteristic that is distinctive to *Dasein* is the capacity to reflect on the very nature of its being: '[t]hat being which is an issue for this entity in its very Being, is in each case mine.'<sup>39</sup> This is why Heidegger characterises the intimacy between *Dasein* and death through the compound phrase *Sein-zum-Tode* (Being-towards-death).<sup>40</sup> But the orientation of a being-towards-death is not intended to evoke some kind of nihilistic futility in living life. The inevitability of death refers to *Dasein*'s relationship with death in life, where the abyssal opening given to it in the realisation of death brings together, as Keiji Nishitani writes, 'the totality of beings and renders possible all "creative" activity as the activity of the self.'<sup>41</sup> The idea of being-towards is what

qualifies the idea of death as a possibility as it suggests the idea of "'Being out for" something possible.'<sup>42</sup> And because it belongs so distinctly to individual Dasein, creating a sense of individual existence, we are able, according to Nishitani, to exist as creative, individual, subjects.

But this possibility is of a different nature to the everyday understanding of possibility that is characterised as the potential of actualisation. The possibility of Dasein's death cannot involve the actualisation of death for such a thing would not only bring about Dasein's demise but would, fundamentally, deprive it of the ontological specificity that is characteristic of Dasein, which is to say, 'the very

ground for an existing Being-towards-death.'<sup>43</sup> This is where Heidegger's paradox is introduced, where the possibility of death is thought as the impossibility of 'every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing';<sup>44</sup> that is, the impossibility that one will continue to exist. It is, as Heidegger suggests, the anticipation of death as opposed to its actualisation and its possibility as opposed to its realisation, which sets free the potential for Dasein to exist as individual Dasein. And as Blanchot writes, 'this the philosopher expresses precisely by saying of death that it is "the possibility of impossibility."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 305

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>45</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 240.

<sup>46</sup> Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 147.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Suglia, *Hölderlin and Blanchot*, 77.

The language of active noise is dominated, as we have seen, by a tendency to think its extremity through violent subversion and eroticism. Active noise typically associates Japanese noise music with a Batailleian excess where the likes of Mikami's onstage urinations (as discussed in chapter two) claim an eroticism proper to the sacrificial urgency of a Batailleian general economy which looks to leave the world of limits and meaning. Yet the condition of failure, as Hegarty understands it, is what dialectically prevents this music from ever escaping the world of musicality and meaning completely, making transgression an act fundamentally conditioned by failure. In this sense, Japanese noise music is equally orientated by failure but it nevertheless 'makes itself as if it will not fail [...] living on this failure, as residue.'<sup>46</sup> The condition of its possibility in the language typical of active noise, then, can be thought of as Heideggerian. That is, impossibility, proper to Hegarty's understanding of failure, sustains a music of extremity living on the periphery of musical meaning as residue. When Hegarty suggests that noise 'strives for a pure expression where it is other in a way that listeners and performers are also made other' and that this 'other' only makes sense in opposition to the 'restricted economy of meaning and rationality,'<sup>47</sup> there is a sense that, like Dasein which comes to itself through an anticipation of the impossible, Japanese noise music exists as a music-towards-death (impossibility). For, just as death, by definition, 'excludes the possibility of experience,'<sup>48</sup> noise, likewise, in its antithesis to meaning cannot be experienced as an

extricable pure expression. The idea of failure and extremity that instantiate the discourse of active noise works to describe this impossible experience.

Death in Japanese noise music is not only about its frequently macabre imagery but the manner in which this imagery helps visualise the desire to control music up to its most extreme point: 'the often pronounced death of music.'<sup>49</sup> Where death marks for Heidegger 'the event even by which man departs from the possible and belongs to the impossible,' it works, nevertheless, as Dasein's constitutive moment, that is, it remains proper to him and 'within his mastery' as the 'extreme moment of his possibility.'<sup>50</sup> Like Mayuko Hino who ties herself to the temporality of listening, the promise of this death in Japanese noise music shares in Heidegger's affirmative paradox. That is, it is a peculiar kind of promise where death stands for a 'dream of non-death,'<sup>51</sup> where the impossibility of experiencing death conditions the possibility of death's dream and the possibility of a radical music. It is the impossibility of escaping music once and for all that frames the radical and subversive gestures of Japanese noise music in the language of active noise, a language which, as we have seen, substantiates the thematisation of the complexity of noise. The fact noise never escapes music and the world completely is what allows it to remain within the world and music as a subversive musical and social gesture. In this way, the possibility of Japanese noise music, as it is understood radically in the language of active noise, is conditioned by the impossibility of death's demand. In short, it is conditioned by the inevitability of remaining in the world as an extreme type of music. In the discourse of Japanese noise music, death is often said to be mastered as a crucial aesthetic signifier of this music.

<sup>49</sup> Michel Henritzi, 'Extreme Contemporary – Japanese Music as Radical Exoticism', in Franck Stofer and Christian Aupetit et al (eds.), *Japanese Independent Music* (Bordeaux: Sonore, 2001), 31-37 (32).

<sup>50</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 240.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Hegarty, 'A chronic condition: noise and time', in Michael Goddard, Benjamin Hlligan and Paul Hegarty (eds.), *Reverberations: The philosophy, aesthetics and politics of noise* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 15-26 (13).

The eroticism which is commonly associated with early Japanese noise music, and the frequency in which this eroticism is deployed when discussing this music, is where the discourse of active noise veers away from Heidegger. This is perhaps why Heidegger is rarely discussed in relation to this music with a certain Bataille vocabulary taking precedence. Where Heidegger emphasises authenticity in response to death, active noise follows a literal interpretation of Bataille in its emphasis of

ecstasy, something that was explored in chapter two. As the absolute limit of human behaviour and experience, eroticism and death are what push the self beyond itself, not into annihilation, but into what might be thought of as an ecstatic non-self, an experience of the self where the limits of the self and the alterity upon which the self is constituted form the experience of the self in this ecstatic moment. This is how Voegelin listens to Merzbow, where the experiential space of noise is said to give to her 'formless subjectivity the concreteness of its particularity.' In the extremity and overwhelming excess of Merzbow's sonic space, Voegelin claims to be 'besieged by noise' where she is at once 'the singular body of my formless thinging, speechless but ecstatically me.'<sup>52</sup> In this description, however, there is still a Heideggerian paradox that is retained where what takes her into a singular, individuated body, is a degree of

impossibility; the ecstatic experience of noise, as Voegelin wants us to think it, is an experience wherein the self is able to experience itself as formless and, to a degree, without a self. Or better yet, the self undergoes an experience of the impossibility of death in its living through this individuated experience as an ecstatic self.

52 Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum Books, 2010), 48.

53 Nishitani, *Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 172

Despite the immediate differences between active noise and Heideggerian language, the former being more about ecstasy and eroticism as opposed to authenticity, both stress an idea of death working in the world. That is, impossibility and experiences thought to be impossible are, in the languages of both Heidegger and active noise, what constitute our profoundest moments of possibility, founding our most ontologically telling moments of experience and in the case of Japanese noise music, our listening experience. Both might be thought, then, as sharing in Nishitani's 'unity of creative nihilism and finitude'<sup>53</sup> which he identifies in the work of Heidegger. Death is an abyss, the stepping into which would be the stepping into annihilation which makes the step into death, in fact, no step at all. Death is impossible to experience. Yet for Nishitani, the inevitability of its coming marks the limitation of being to such a degree that a creative potential, a possibility, is unveiled. What Nishitani argues, following Heidegger, is that with death in sight, one can act at the absolute limit of one's existence. According to the language of active noise Japanese noise music is said to do just this, as it looks toward the death of the listening subject and the death of music in a gesture equivocal to Nishitani's creative

nihilism. For instance, as Hegarty tells us, Japanese noise music knows all too well that its hope of death is doomed to fail, living on within music as a subversive sonic statement, but nevertheless it creates in this nihilistic hope.

So the arguments made on the side of active noise might be said to follow Heidegger in this idea of creative nihilism, where both languages urge us toward a kind of mastering of death thereby giving death's impossibility over to possibility as it is framed through authenticity and creativity. Ecstasy and eroticism are ways in which the language of active noise observes a relation with impossibility in the realm of thematisation and possibility. It makes of death, as Heidegger does, action. As it were, Japanese noise music's connection to death is easily established. As Henritzi writes in his essay 'Extreme Contemporary – Japanese Music as Radical Exoticism', one often recalls 'Mishima Yukio and a blurred relationship to fascism when speaking of this music, due to its perpetual fascination with death [...]'.<sup>54</sup> While Mishima's own death seems inherently bound to his fascism,<sup>55</sup> the fascistic potential of noise music is something Hegarty addresses when he argues that the overly determined need to transmit a clear message, on the part of extreme right groups, is 'merely the extension of rationalised liberal society.' Beyond the surface level of certain noise and industrial acts using extreme imagery that might be aligned with fascism, noise cannot, as is proper to its want to break out of music and meaning, 'carry content'<sup>56</sup> so it cannot be overtly fascist. Whether or not Hegarty is right in this argument is not a matter of debate here because the relationship we are interested in, between Japanese noise music and Mishima, concerns not the idea of fascism but the way in which this music relates to the apparent strength and mastery involved in the act of seppuku, which

54 Henritzi, 'Extreme Contemporary', 32.

55 As one of Japan's most distinguished and prolific authors of the twentieth century, Yukio Mishima, was also known for his extreme right-wing and nationalistic views. Mishima went so far as to form his own private militia called Tatenokai (...) in 1968, a group dedicated to traditional Japanese values and the veneration of the Emperor. On November 25th 1970, Mishima and four members of Tatenokai took hold of a commander's office in the Ichigaya camp of Japan's Self-Defence Force. They barricaded themselves in the office where Mishima then delivered a speech from the office balcony to soldiers below. His speech was intended to rally the troops toward restoring sovereign rule to the Emperor. After his speech was met with laughter and jeers Mishima returned to the office where he committed seppuku and was beheaded by Hiroyasu Koga, Mishima's kaishakunin (...): the appointed second responsible for beheading the one who commits seppuku. While it could be argued that Mishima's act of seppuku was a result of a failed coup, the laughter and jeers of the soldiers below contributing to his suicide, the glory he places in the hour of death, in his book *Sun and Steel*, suggests that this was his plan from the beginning. One might even go so far as to say that the coup was only a pretext to his death, a death which, if Tamotsu Yato's photos are anything to go by (before his death Mishima had a photo shoot with Yato, where he posed as if dead) had been dreamt of long before his military action.

56 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 12

Mishima carried out on November 25th 1970 and which Merzbow visualised and scored through his involvement with the *Onna harakiri sakuhinshû* films.

### A Suicidal Music

If death is, as Heidegger suggests, the moment of impossibility that allows a subject to coalesce into its unique sense of being, then the ultimate gesture of being, it would seem, would be one closest to death and perhaps even suicide. This is arguably why Mishima commits seppuku. No longer content in the world of words and the living, he looks towards death as a 'euphoric sense of pure being.'<sup>57</sup> In his fascination with death Mishima begins with a belief in language that is not unlike what we have discussed in Blanchot but he does so only to move away from this belief as if to reclaim the possibility of action against the impossibility of a determinate language. The efficacy of words is, according to Mishima, indebted to a void over which signification hangs, the 'canvas on which words are painted.' Here we might recall, from chapter one, Blanchot's discussion of a murmuring silence that at once conditions yet frustrates the double gesture of language. For Mishima, this void belongs to the 'present progressive tense,' which in its lack of certainty leaves us waiting 'for an absolute that may never come.'<sup>58</sup> Insofar as Mishima, like Blanchot, sees words as the foundation of existence and the necessary condition for understanding existence, there would always be a void at the heart of experience. In order to surmount this, he saw it as necessary to fling himself 'bodily on the side of the phantom evoked and radiated by words.'<sup>59</sup> This is where we find his hope in death, a death which, as Mishima writes, 'began from the time when I set about acquiring an existence other than that of words.'<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Sun and Steel* [1968], trans. John Bester (Tokyo and New York; London: 1970), 66.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

59 Ibid., 63.

60 Ibid, 67.

Mishima has his very own relationship to Bataille that can be characterised by a willingness to move from the literary gestures of impossibility in Bataille's writing, found in the erotic and macabre, to the physical enactment of such dramas. Mishima chooses to write the introduction to Bataille's novels *My Mother*, *Madame Edwarda*,

*The Dead Man*<sup>61</sup> because he sees in Bataille's writing an impossibility that is fundamentally at odds with the writing itself. 'The sacred quality hidden in the experience of eroticism,' Mishima writes, 'is something impossible for language to reach.'<sup>62</sup> Yet despite the inaccessibility of impossibility which persists in the possibility of language, Bataille makes work of this inaccessibility by turning us toward this resistance through the erotic encounters of his characters. This is why, despite the subversive act no longer being a site of transgression after Libertson, the erotic gesture is not entirely impotent. There is something which occurs within this language, that captivated Mishima, which allows us to glimpse what cannot be properly glimpsed through thematisation alone (and this is precisely the idea we have been developing when emphasising a radical passivity as it insists within the language of active noise; in what is said, there is always something other to its content). Impossibility is not thought, according to Mishima, as a 'mere full stop in the novel,' but instead emerges in the 'sub-plot towards the erotic experience of witnessing God in the last scene.' In other words, in these sacred moments where characters are pushed toward their metaphysical limit, we catch a glimpse of the 'darkest abyss of human existence'<sup>63</sup> and the void upon which both Blanchot and Mishima see as inextricable from signification. But with Bataille's emphasis on the erotic, which looks to expose the void within us, Mishima finds vindication for his desire to leave the world of words in pursuit of that of the flesh. Bataille's literary expressions of the erotic can only ever be impossible because the sacredness to which his writing urges us is always beyond the unavoidable and necessary limits of signification. To make impossibility the theme of writing is to expose the writing to a frustrated narrative and to force its characters into impossible encounters. This is how we understood Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure* in chapter one, as a frustrated narrative that emphasises the inaccessibility of impossibility through expressions of the night. But while Mishima sees in Bataille's writing a 'vivid, harsh, shocking and immediate connection between metaphysics and the human flesh,'<sup>64</sup> writing

61 Yukio Mishima, 'Georges Bataille and Divinus Deus' [1968], in Georges Bataille, *My Mother*, *Madame Edwarda*, *The Dead Man*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1995).

62 Ibid., 11.

63 Ibid, 15.

64 Ibid., 11.

ultimately cannot satisfy, no matter how impossible its expression, his want to feel existence in all of its fleshly humanity and physicality.

'When one has discovered an exceptional ability in language for absence and questioning,' Blanchot tells us, 'one has the temptation to consider the very absence of language as surrounded by its essence.'<sup>65</sup> This was, as discussed in chapter one, Mallarmé's belief that a certain poetic arrangement of words might imitate the essence of language. Mallarmé belongs to the authors in question who Iyer sees as hoping to 'end everything in silence' by stopping finally at the 'blank page.' This is but one resort taken by certain writers who look to meet the void of language head-on and who hope to 'wreck this ship of literature' as if to 'plunge it into meaninglessness.'<sup>66</sup> Mishima himself would often construct poetically grandiose emulations of this void. His description of the Golden Pavilion in his novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, for instance, comes close to emulating the uneasy relationship we have with this void in language and existence. The Pavilion is at first said by the stuttering Mizoguchi to be 'so utterly indifferent to me and to tower into the air outside myself,' only to then become, as he later expresses, what 'completely engulfed me' allowing 'me to be situated within its structure.' It is as if the Pavilion, 'so huge that it encompassed everything,'<sup>67</sup> stands for the void of language itself: at first seemingly outside of being, expressed via Mizoguchi, in its majestic withdrawal, only to then be realised as the mitigating structure of meaning, within which we all inevitably find ourselves and in which, Mizoguchi in particular, finds momentary clarity. But Mishima constructs this image only to then destroy it, as Mizoguchi's relationship with the Pavilion becomes increasingly disturbed resulting in the young Buddhist acolyte burning it to the ground. Again Mishima's gesture is figurative; it is as if he cannot bear what he sees as a restrained intentionality explicit in even his most opaque literary moments. This is why, finally, Mishima leaves literature behind: 'he becomes a bodybuilder, a martial artist; he forms his own militia. In the end he commits ritual seppuku, opening his interior regions as to the blazing sun.'<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire* [1949], trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 34.

<sup>66</sup> Lars Iyer, *Blanchot's Vigilance: Literature, Phenomenology and the Ethical* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 14.

<sup>67</sup> Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* [1956], trans. Ivan Morris (London: Vintage, 2001), 118.

<sup>68</sup> Iyer, *Blanchot's Vigilance*, 14.

With this act of ritual seppuku Mishima looks to take control of the void. 'All we are left with,' Mishima writes, 'is the freedom to choose which method we will try out when brought face to face with that void in the progressive tense.' These methods are what Mishima refers to as our spiritual development belonging to the desire that lurks in the deepest recesses of all humanity 'to fashion ourselves, however unsuccessfully, in the image of the "absolute" to come.'<sup>69</sup> But this desire, Mishima argues, no matter how sincere, is destined for failure if left to the endeavour of writing alone. Both Mishima and Blanchot share in the estimation that in language a certain death speaks. This death is the impossibility of conceptuality in the form of atomistic thinking where the living-on through this death, in the writing and reading of the literary work, marks the interminable experience of conceptual dislocation that is explained by Derrida's discussion of the aporia.<sup>70</sup> The fact we live on, in writing, through this conceptual uncertainty is what makes, for Blanchot, the impossibility of death the possibility of the literary work (we will return to this idea momentarily). But for Mishima, 'the production of works of art [...] possess a weird eternal life'

which to all intents and purposes holds death in check while cushioning the seriousness of this existential void by turning it into fiction. In other words, the end that should be proper to death never arrives with certainty: 'action – one might say – perishes with the blossom; literature is an imperishable flower.'<sup>71</sup> What Mishima is saying is in fact close to Blanchot. He is arguing that death persists in literature as a persistent impossibility and arrival. But where they differ is in Mishima's belief that death in fact can occur and indeed should occur if the self is to be true to its purest sense of being. This occurrence, however, can only be outside of the realm of words and in the region of action. With his act of seppuku, then, Mishima looks to put an end to death in life by acquiring an existence, or better yet a death, 'other than that of words.'<sup>72</sup> In a way, like Heidegger before him, Mishima looks to make the impossibility of death the ultimate possibility of his being. Death is brought into the world actively, not as something that resists the clarity of thought, but as the final action of a steady and resolute subject. As Mishima writes, 'Seeing alone was not

69 Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 69.

70 Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 16.

71 Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 50.

72 *Ibid.*, 67.

enough to bring me into contact with the basic roots of my sense of existence,'<sup>73</sup> and so he strode fervently into the realm of material action.

73 *Ibid.*, 66.

74 Libertson, *Proximity*, 76.

75 Masami Akita (dir.), *'Shitsurakuen': jôbafuku onna harakiri*, (Los Angeles: Right Brain, 1990).

76 Masami Akita, 'The Beauty of Noise: An Interview with Masami Akita of Merzbow by Chad Hensley', *Esoterra*, 2004, <http://www.esoterra.org/merzbow.htm> [Accessed 3 May 2014].

If we follow Blanchot's presentation of death then Mishima's death and suicide, thought more broadly, are seen to 'domesticate death' by removing its 'futurity and indefiniteness' subordinating it to 'identity and power.'<sup>74</sup> Death, in the activity of suicide, is for Blanchot something under control as it becomes an extreme actuality illuminating our being up to and including its most extreme point. Perhaps this is why Masami Akita involves himself with *Onna harakiri sakuhinshû* film series, scoring a number of them and even going so far as to direct his own contribution to the series called *'Shitsurakuen': jôbafuku onna harakiri*.<sup>75</sup> However, what is arguably more interesting than Akita's directorial contribution is his scoring of the film *Jogakusei: Harakiri*. What is significant about this film, the third in the series, is not only the fact that the girl committing seppuku is wearing a school uniform – as Akita has stated, 'most of Japan's sexual trauma is high school girls. High school girls are a very powerful sexual icon in our society'<sup>76</sup> – but that the film also depicts a certain fantasisation of death before the act itself as well as a significant sonic framing of death heard in the film's score. In the almost hour-long depiction of a teenage school girl's act of seppuku, we see a highly eroticised and equally



fantasised visualisation of suicide. The footage, almost voyeuristic with its analogue formatting and grain, begins with the girl sitting alone on a tatami (.) in a dimly lit room. In front of her is a black book which she slowly begins to open. On its pages are images of seppuku. As the girl examines each photo, sometimes leaning forward to meet the images up close, she becomes increasingly excited, often stroking the pictures and then drawing her fingers to her mouth and lightly licking their tips. It is as though the girl is trying to taste the death on the pages, as if hoping to bring it into the room where she sits. It is not long before the girl's longing withdraws from the pages and becomes transfixed on her own body and the fantasy of her own death, as she begins to rub her stomach and caress her breasts. At this point Merzbow's music, which has been building slowly in the background, settles into an echoed industrial

clatter which at times gives way to some high-pitched, electronics as well as a low drone that sounds circular with its peaks and troughs. The image then fades to white, only to return in silence where the book that lay in front of the girl has now been replaced with a tanto (..) – a small blade traditionally used to pierce the abdomen in the act of seppuku. As she picks up the blade the music slowly sounds back into the frame, with some horn-like noises again accompanying a number of higher frequencies. These sounds get louder as she meticulously fondles the blade and slowly undoes her shirt to expose her breasts. As she nears the act itself, drones and heavier sounds help continue to frame the higher pitched frequencies. But at thirty three minutes and eleven seconds into the movie, when she finally begins the act by thrusting the blade into her abdomen, the music stops. Without the noise of Merzbow we can clearly hear her gasps and the sound of flesh being torn as she forces the blade from the left side of her stomach to the right. Only when she dies does Merzbow's noise return, escorting the camera as it circles the girl's blood covered corpse.

There are a number of ways in which Yuuri Sunohara's depiction of seppuku, and Akita's scoring of this suicide, might be interpreted. The most obvious reading is that these films, and particularly *Jogakusei: Harakiri* because of its use of a school uniform, look to shatter and symbolically disembowel the *kawaii* or 'cute' phenomenon of Japanese culture as discussed in the introduction, with the gruesome reality of suicide.<sup>77</sup> For this reason, although coming nine years after these *harakiri* films, comparisons might be drawn to Aida Makoto's 1999 image titled *Harakiri School Girls*. This image depicts a group of uniform-clad schoolgirls, in the style of anime, disembowelling and decapitating themselves. According to Makoto, this piece was an allegory for the 'distorted mentality of Japanese youth at the time and the atmosphere of Japanese society' which, after the collapse of the Bubble Economy, led to an 'air of pessimism [...] spreading through Japan like a virus.'<sup>78</sup> For Makoto, while the *kawaii* veneer of Japan should, according to the nature of *kawaii*, indicate something happy and innocent, something underneath 'seethed dejection and darkness.'<sup>79</sup> It is not inconceivable that Sunohara and Akita, before Makoto, looked to

<sup>77</sup> Suicide rates in Japan, and particularly during the nineties, were and still are exceptionally high in comparison to the rest of the economically developed world. The possible reasons for this are numerous, but it is enough to note here that whatever the cause, it is contrary to the 'cute' and innocent veneer of Japanese popular culture.

<sup>78</sup> Brian Ashcraft and Shoka Ueda from 'Japanese Schoolgirl Confidential', BoingBoing.net, 2010, <http://boingboing.net/2010/09/03/makoto-aidas-schoolg.html> [Accessed 3 February 2012].

<sup>79</sup> Ibid

expose this underbelly of a more sinister Japan while simultaneously raging against the more obvious uniform conformity of mainstream Japanese society as it is symbolised by the school girls' uniform. This would affirm an interpretation of the video in line with the discursive tendencies of active noise, with its emphasis on the more obvious radicalism of the suicidal gesture. It would be to affirm an idea of death in the world that makes possible, as a radical gesture or social commentary, the impossibility of death's unknowability. But irrespective of Sunohara and Akita's intent there is, if we pursue a passive understanding of his film, an undisputable meticulousness and strength, depicted in the actions of the girl that contradict the very possibility of thinking and acting through the impossibility of death. This contradiction belongs to the anteriority of passivity, as we have been thinking it in the language of passive noise, which refuses the negative affirmation of activity. Far from naming the extreme possibility of being, as it does with Heidegger, Mishima, Sunohara and Akita, death for Blanchot works as a synonym for the neuter, where impossibility is neither affirmed nor negated. In the way we have suggested that the only 'true' alterity of noise cannot be found in subversive action or for that matter any kind of action at all, the impossibility (unknowability) of death cannot be understood in the realm of action, which includes even the act of suicide. Despite the apparent strength and will at work in Mishima's final act and the seppuku film, there is another death in play that refuses to be assimilated into the possibility of suicide and by extension, the possibility of Japanese noise music.

As a genre of music that is regularly said, in the language of active noise, to look beyond the limits of musicality (assuming that musicality implies meaning) Japanese noise music is, within the conceptual terrain of active noise, a music of suicide. The artistic act in general, according to Blanchot, is one commensurable with the madness of suicide. This is not to say that the artist necessarily makes death the explicit content of his/her art. More precisely, what Blanchot is in fact saying is that the artist is 'linked to the work in the same strange way in which the man who takes death for a goal is linked to death.'<sup>80</sup> Both the 'artist and the suicide plan something that eludes all plans [...] both are linked to what they want to achieve by a demand that knows nothing of their will.'<sup>81</sup> The 'horizontal character' that marks the closure of

<sup>80</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 105.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

something in the world 'cannot be drawn'<sup>82</sup> for the work of art. Particularly with certain types of literary fiction, Blanchot argues that the work is never finished in that its meaning, unlike modes of essentialism, admits only to an infinite withdrawal of meaning. As Iyer explains by quoting Maurice Natanson, 'for something to be or transpire is for it to have regional or zonal character,' whereas for Blanchot, the things that 'come forward to us in fiction have a fragmentary character.' Put crudely, the work of art can mean both 'this' and 'that' while equally meaning neither as it is given over to the 'infinite density' of subjectivism which, in its circling of the 'failure of signification' as the absence of meaning, 'draws the reader across its event horizon.'<sup>83</sup> In his/her pursuit of this absence of meaning, where meaning is displaced by an endless movement of comprehension, the artist pursues an impossibility that is equivocal to the unknowability of death. And like the proponent of suicide, he/she does so through power. 'Even in the region of the ungraspable, where the domain of goals end,' Blanchot writes, both the artist and the suicide are two movements 'testing the singular form of possibility.'<sup>84</sup> But what makes Japanese noise music and Mishima

distinct from the general association Blanchot sees between artistic creation and suicide is the way in which both Akita and Mishima make death also an explicit part of their literary and visual aesthetic. In the instances cited above, both Akita and Mishima look to bring something that is beyond the world and fundamentally ungraspable, into the world as both an artistic gesture and a final act of being. This is arguably why the music of Merzbow stops in Sunohara's film once the knife penetrates the abdomen. Rather than cloud or obscure the final moment, she lets the sounds of suicide resonate on their own. It is as if she wants us to hear, clearly, what being in its final moments might sound like. It is as though Sunohara is trying, with the use of Merzbow, to show us what might resonate beyond musicality and the world once noise pushes us there; a noise that ultimately, in its extremity, pushes us toward the silence of death and the impossibility of listening, an impossibility that involves 'what cannot pass [passer] or come to pass [se passer]'<sup>85</sup> as illustrated by Hegarty's idea of failure.

<sup>82</sup> Iyer, Blanchot's Vigilance, 33.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Blanchot, Space of Literature, 106.

<sup>85</sup> Derrida, Aporias, 23.

Before Mishima was able to carry out his death in the world he had to conceive it in all its possibilities, in order to bring the mystery of death as closely to the realm of comprehension as possible. Like the girl in *Jogakusei: Harakiri*, Mishima fantasised about death not only through his literary characters but in a photo shoot with Tamotsu Yato,<sup>86</sup> where he replicated the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian: tying himself to a tree, with his arms raised and three arrows appearing to pierce both sides of his body. This imagining of his death is arguably more significant to understanding Mishima's own affiliation with Heidegger's difficult paradox (the possibility of impossibility) rather than Mishima's actual act of suicide itself. If, as Derrida explains, 'being-possible is the being proper to Dasein,' orientated as it is through a temporality of projects conditioned by the futurity of one's mortality, then the 'existential analysis of the death of Dasein will have to make of this possibility its theme.'<sup>87</sup> This is not, as explained above, to understand possibility solely in terms of a decision or, as Derrida explains, in terms of 'completion of accomplishment.'<sup>88</sup> Heidegger is not an advocate of suicide and the discussion of Mishima's actual suicide is not illustrative of an instance where possibility absorbs the impossibility of death entirely through a final act. 'The definition of death as the most proper possibility,' Derrida writes, is used in order to describe 'both the anxiety that must be related to this most proper possibility' as well as the 'fear that keeps the everyday "one" from having the courage or the heart (Mut) to approach or confront (aufkommen) anxiety before death.'<sup>89</sup> While inauthentic Dasein is said by Heidegger to take refuge in *Gerede* (gossip) instead of confronting the anxiety involved when facing death, authentic Dasein is claimed by 'properly awaiting it [death] in anxiety and in freedom.'<sup>90</sup> While the complexity of Heidegger's notion of anxiety is beyond the scope of this chapter and our argument, the idea of waiting as one connected to freedom is enough to understand how Blanchot subtly reverses Heidegger's paradoxical proposition as well our own reclamation of death as one distinct from aesthetic subversion and typical modes of transgression.

<sup>86</sup> Tamotsu Yato was a close friend of Mishima. He is known for having pioneered Japanese

homeroetic photography, creating iconic black-and-white images of the Japanese male which became popular in Japan's gay communities.

87 Derrida, *Aporias*, 63.

88 *Ibid.*, 69.

89 *Ibid.*, 67.

90 *Ibid.*, 68.

Heidegger makes possibility the theme of death by arguing that 'with death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-being.'<sup>91</sup> With this Heidegger looks to mobilize the inevitable and unavoidable approach of death as belonging to subjectivity's own approach rendering death a temporally present phenomenon. As he goes on to explain death is 'the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there.' This possibility, by consequence, marks the insatiable impossibility of experiencing death thus binding death to Dasein's 'ownmost potentiality-for-Being.'<sup>92</sup> In other words, the inevitability of death is what makes us conscious of our living reality as a reality to be claimed, individually, by our actions. As Derrida explains, the detail stopping Heidegger's possibility of impossibility from collapsing in on itself and into an irrecoverable impossibility, is a minute nuance indeed. But what Derrida carefully shows is how Heidegger is arguing in his idea of death that the 'possibility of a being-able-not-to or of a no-longer-being-able-to' is by no means 'the impossibility of being-able-to.'<sup>93</sup> Death belongs distinctly to possibility as that which allows us to claim our existence for itself and what will inevitably put an end to our existence and our possibility of existing. Positioning possibility first before impossibility is Heidegger's way of bringing death into the world not as completion, because this would mark the end of Dasein, but as something to be anticipated because the anticipation of death is what makes us aware of our living here and now. Heidegger reduces the abyssal reality of impossibility to ontology, that is, to Dasein's own power and decision. While Mishima's actual suicide pulls him away from Heidegger and arguably nearer the sacrificial urgency often thought to belong to Bataille, his fantasy of death, epitomised by his photo shoot with Yato, is what keeps him close to the ideas of Heidegger. It is with this fantasy that Mishima most significantly expressed his hope for a 'union of art and life,'<sup>94</sup> but it is also with this fantasy where we can start to consider Blanchot's critique of Heidegger and a different understanding of death and, in relation, a different relationship between death and noise than the one typically assumed in expressions belonging to active noise.

91 Liberton, *Proximity*, 74.

92 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 294.

93 Derrida, *Aporias*, 68.

94 Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 47.

Mishima wants to die but before he has the courage to act out his want, he dreams it and he makes art of his dream. Similarly Japanese noise music fantasises about death: Akita directs and scores seppuku videos and the likes of Mayuko Hino

perform on the borders of death through explicit images of masochism. If understood in the language of active noise, Japanese noise music is often read as a music of death where both musicality and the listening subject risk losing themselves entirely but are saved only by a dialectical recuperation which makes death a Heideggerian possibility. That is to say, both Mishima and Japanese noise music use death as a means to explore the impossible in their art, making death a distinct possibility of art and life. While the mystery of death is preserved, by Heidegger, through the idea of the impossible, where death marks an end of Dasein as a 'nonaccess to a nonborder,' this impossibility frames our uttermost possibility, becoming for Mishima, Sunohara and Akita the very impetus of artistic creation and action. In other words, the nonaccess to and mystery of death give way to the illuminating day of possibility and meaning. But because impossibility is so interconnected with possibility one can turn, as Derrida explains, 'what is thus at the very heart of the possibility of the existential analysis against the whole apparatus of Being and Time' which is precisely what Blanchot does, saying at once 'the same thing and something completely different from Heidegger.'<sup>95</sup> What Blanchot presents with his slight reversal of Heideggerian terminology is an account of death which foregrounds the notion of impossibility to such a degree that possibility ultimately collapses as it proceeds. Death is retained not as our final possibility of action, of being at its most extreme, but as the reserve held in possibility itself. It is with this idea that we are able to retain Japanese noise music's relationship with death without falling into the traps and limitations of a voluntaristic terminology. And it is with this relationship with death that our discussion of passivity and transgression, as it has thus far been presented, might be drawn to a close.

<sup>95</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, 77.

## The Noise of Fascination

Greg Hainge's analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* arrives at similar conclusions to Blanchot's writings on Rilke. Where the mysterious centre of Rilke's

text, a centre made impossible to approach because of the bottomless nature of Brigg's fear of death, 'ramifies into diversions where the unexpressed signals to us from further and further away'<sup>96</sup> Antoine Roquentin, the diarist-narrator of Sartre's text, abnegates according to Hainge the 'energy of exteriority'<sup>97</sup> that is at times announced by Sartre's discussion of nausea. Coming three years after Levinas's 1935 text *On Escape*, the events that mark Roquentin's existential crises are of a similar ilk to Levinas's idea of the *il y a* and its relation to his own discussion of the etymology of nausea, which were discussed in chapter one. For both Levinas and Sartre, nausea is what signifies a certain 'unmooring of existence from fixed forms and identities' which for Roquentin comes when the 'apparently immutable contours of the objects around him become porous and seem to float and meld before his eyes.'<sup>98</sup> It is the moment in which the solipsism and certainty claimed by the Cartesian subject gives way to, according to Hainge reading Sartre, the contingency of existence. Hainge interestingly connects this nausea to noise when he suggests that Roquentin's world takes on a noisy aspect in those moments of nauseous uncertainty, unmooring yet at once revealing an aspect of existence that was hitherto hidden from him; it is a revelation that for Hainge allows him to 'glimpse the in-between of existence, to

attend to the expressivity of being which comes to be always outside of itself.<sup>99</sup> But like Rilke who Blanchot argues writes only to allow Malte to forget the terrifying uncertainty of death, Sartre, as Hainge reads him, cannot let Roquentin attend fully to the ramifications of this existential nausea but instead constantly 'mishears' the noise around him and 'chooses instead to write' in light of its impending uncertainty 'as a means to justify his existence.'<sup>100</sup>

96 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 130.

97 Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 80.

98 *Ibid.*, 71.

99 *Ibid.*, 73.

100 *Ibid.*, 79.

Hainge is able to think Sartre's discussion of nausea in conjunction with noise through what he describes as an 'expressive ontology.' Throughout his text *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*, Hainge works to describe this ontology as relational which enables him to avoid the typical tropes of active noise that tend to fix or essentialise noise through a language of negativity. Noise, as discussed through this expressive ontology, is comprehensively pervasive in its resistance: it is that which 'unmoors the world from the illusory fixity' signalling, in an expression that is

close to Serres and our own discussion of passive noise, the 'necessary movement that subsists in all being, whether this be at a subatomic, existential, philosophical, quantum or individual level.'<sup>101</sup> Equally, then, noise is what conditions ontology in its refusal of ontology typically thought; noise conditions meaning and being through resistance, fluidity and uncertainty. So for Hainge, in his moments of existential crisis (nausea), when the rigid outlines of his world blur from any clear definition, Roquentin faces the conditioning plane of existence as it is characterised by noise and the *il y a* of being.

101 *Ibid.*, 68.

102 *Ibid.*, 92.

103 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 131.

104 *Ibid.*, 136.

105 Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 80.

In the way that this noise is said by Hainge to be contemporaneous with existence it could be said, in a typically Blanchotian turn of phrase, that with noise we are contemporaries of death. As Hainge himself argues, noise can, in its unmooring, 'act as a gateway or portal to death' with its 'imposing and ineluctable presence only ever offering an absence of meaning'<sup>102</sup> equivocal to the undermining impossibility of death's insistence. In this way Roquentin's dismissal of nausea and his mishearing of noise shares in Briggie's hope of bypassing the 'frightful final line'<sup>103</sup> of existence. Both Roquentin and Malte cannot stay with impossibility or death because impossibility, as it is held in death, proves too much for them to bear. But where

Blanchot says of Rilke that he 'never departs from the decided affirmation of the Open, but his estimate of our power to approach it varies greatly'<sup>104</sup> the same might be said of Hainge and the revelatory character he occasionally attaches to noise, or at least implies, through his discussion of nausea. Although Hainge's expressive ontology yields no rigidity in its referral to an anterior realm of mutability that displaces the foundations of meaning and identity, it is sometimes unclear what kind of power, if any, we have in relation to noise. At times Hainge seems to suggest that something might be claimed and therefore within our power within the experience of nausea yet at other times noise seems to persist in a radically passive sense refusing absolutely any revelatory potential whatsoever. Expressions of the former are only ever subtly implied but particularly with his discussion of Roquentin, the transition is noticeable. Noise moves to that which might take us to the 'edge of the abyss that would engulf all forms'<sup>105</sup> of existence from its capacity to 'reveal a different facet of

existence.'<sup>106</sup> In this latter instance, noise is a communication which displaces the surface of the immediate to reveal the 'true' meaning beneath. In the former instance, where noise is said to engulf all forms, noise must be that which cannot be mobilized and cannot communicate for its very nature is resistive to the very idea of communication and revelation. This is perhaps why Roquentin choosing to write is a complex act for Hainge. If noise is properly impossible and equal to the abyssal nature of death then noise would no longer invest power but would be the 'Other of power: the excess of communication over negation.'<sup>107</sup> Despite Hainge's explicit insistence that noise 'ultimately resists any containment or pareidoli' of any kind, the radical passivity of passive noise must engulf even the 'disruptive potential'<sup>108</sup> he retains in his expressive ontology.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>107</sup> Libertson, Proximity, 72.

<sup>108</sup> Hainge, Noise Matters, 95.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>110</sup> Blanchot, Infinite Conversation, 183.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

If broken down into the simplest polarisation then it might be said that Hainge favours, like Heidegger, the theme of possibility as opposed to impossibility. While his emphasis on unmooring and the undecidability of noise leans towards a passivity close to what we have been discussing with passive noise, the fact he retains the hope of an ontology at all, even without a 'definable essence,' suggests that the nature of impossibility and the likes of death are themes put to work in his text as operations of the possible:

we can nonetheless talk about what it [noise] does, about its operations, and attempt to find the multifarious sites, subjects, objects, texts, expressions and channels in which it arises some commonality or shared principles that allow us to talk about it in terms of an ontology.<sup>109</sup>

But what interests Blanchot and the likes of Liberton is a belief in 'a region – an experience – where the essence of man is the impossible.'<sup>110</sup> The term 'experience' is misleading here because it is not meant to refer to any kind of conduit of actuality. Instead, experience names the proximity in which possibility is already, before we can speak as Hainge does of its operations, contaminated by the region of impossibility and deferral, 'the space from which what is called man has as if in advance always already disappeared.'<sup>111</sup> Again, it must be noted that Hainge is more often than not aware and attentive to the passivity of noise's condition. As he makes

clear in his introduction, noise is 'the very precondition for expressivity that is born only as an unintended yet inexorable consequence of the expression itself.'<sup>112</sup> But the emphasis he places on the language of ontology, as well as his proposal for an operational taxonomy of noise, no matter how close it may seem to our own discussion, distracts from the radicality of his own position. Hainge, in the end, wants to ask 'how things come to exist' and how his taxonomy might help us 'address how things come to exist (-sistere)',<sup>113</sup> rather than staying with the inoperative space of precondition and inexistence. Although Hainge effectively highlights the numerous theoretical problems that frequent what we have been calling active noise, his own discussion of a passivity of sorts, which he accounts for via his expressive ontology, cannot occur without a slight reduction of passivity precisely because his is a language of ontology, albeit a fluid one. For us, however, the importance is to stay with the inevitable approach of death's impossibility as it marks an involvement as an interiority within ontology to such a degree that manifestation is already a contamination of what it is not and what it can never be; a contamination that is radically against any proposition, operation or taxonomy. In this way, death names a contamination of impossibility prior to and constitutive of any configuration of the possible. Hainge touches upon this with his brief mention of passivity in his discussion of death in cinema's horror genre but he does not go far enough in rendering the interiority of impossibility clear. Hainge rightly suggests that the 'horror genre often relies upon an absolute passivity from its protagonists' and that this passivity is 'already a kind of death for the Cartesian subjects.' However, he does not fully expand on the implications of this passivity because his discussion of noise and death in the film *Poltergeist*, as an expression of what he argues to be the 'incommensurability of interior and exterior',<sup>114</sup> veers away from the anteriority of the chaos that constitutes his expressive ontology. In other words, far from placing the alterity of death, noise and transgression inside the subject already, as was highlighted in our discussion of *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, Hainge seems to want, even if only implicitly in his writing, death and noise to work as a 'perceived loss of self or soul' as if assuming there is at first a self there to be lost and that 'noise can provide

<sup>112</sup> Hainge, *Noise Matters*, 23.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

access'<sup>115</sup> to this loss. Although he advances toward the complexity of passivity, if he were to be true to its form then he could not speak of a protagonist surrendering to the evil forces within the film but would have to speak of a subject already surrendered and already lost before the events of the film take place, much like the jumbled temporality of *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* and the interior actuality of the salaryman's transformation.



115 Ibid., 94.

116 Ibid., 92.

117 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 102.

118 Iyer, *Blanchot's Vigilance*, 96.

119 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 32.

120 Ibid., 33.

It is true that Hainge's discussion of death might be informed by the events of the film he is analysing; *Poltergeist* may not share as much potential for thinking about the nature of passivity as *Tetsuo*. This is perhaps why Hainge acknowledges within his analysis the 'literal, sudden and gruesome death' that appear in the horror genre and not the 'metaphorical deaths of Blanchot.'<sup>116</sup> But these literal, sudden and gruesome deaths are only ever, according to Blanchot, masks of a 'fascinated dispossession'<sup>117</sup> that look to conceal, as is the case with the film *Jogakusei: Harakiri* and the suicide of Mishima, the extreme passivity that belongs to the refractory nature of death which cannot be said to materialise in acts like *seppuku* or in the acts Hainge analyses. The idea of fascination occurs in Blanchot's work when subjectivity is said to be drawn from itself by an alterity which remains 'free of determination.'<sup>118</sup> In fascination, seeing is no longer determined by what it sees but our gaze is swallowed by it, consumed to such a degree that the subject that is said to see is no longer a certainty. Or better yet, fascination serves as a reminder that the very constitution of subjectivity is determined by an excess over interiority which, as Blanchot writes, 'robs us of our power to give sense.'<sup>119</sup> Fascination is not, therefore, to be thought typically where we might consider an object, person or idea to be the centre of our obsession. But rather like Blanchot's use of the impersonal neuter and the *il y a*, the space of fascination belongs to an anteriority where absence, death and passive noise are said to touch the subject in an immediate proximity where, like the passivity of transgression, it 'seizes and ceaselessly draws him [the subject] close, even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance.'<sup>120</sup> The gaze of fascination relates to death and noise because it is with fascination that the real alterity of noise is captured. The idea

of literal death as a mask of a fascinated dispossession is thus to suggest that before the subject has the capacity to die, he is said to be already conditioned by an impossibility that distances him absolutely from the possibility of owning his death. Regarding Japanese noise music, this concerns the way in which the excessive gesture of a radical music is already conditioned by an alterity that makes any gesture manifestly other to itself. This suggests that we are drawn to thinking about death as an aesthetic category of noise not because it represents the ultimate excessive gesture of a radical music, or some kind of opening to a submerged reality like Hainge often implies, but rather the unfathomable refusal of death illustrates the impossibility of noise's categorisation into the typical regions of active noise as it is conditioned by the passivity of fascination, or as we have called it, passive noise.

To think about death in this way is to think about death of a very different kind to the one committed by Mishima, the one emphasised by Hainge and the death visualised by Sunohara and scored by Merzbow, just as to think about passive noise demands a very different language from the one favoured in the discourse of active

noise. This death was introduced by Levinas and quickly reappropriated by Blanchot both of whom were cautious of Heidegger's formulation of death and the danger of its solipsism. While they follow Heidegger's assertion that the impossibility of death is found in its approach they do not affirm the nature of impossibility as the conditioning moment of authenticity. That is to say, the impossible nature of death cannot be reappropriated into the realm of possibility and action. Death, for Levinas, no longer holds as something that can be apprehended, recalled or anticipated. 'My death,' Levinas writes, 'comes from an instant upon which I can no longer exercise my power.'<sup>121</sup> Death withholds itself from being, absolutely, as a mystery that cannot be assumed. It is not enough, as Levinas sees it, to say that death is unknown as if it were somehow still within the realm of knowledge, waiting to be known. Or as Heidegger suggests, something within the realm of possibility as impossibility. What is proper to death is not knowledge but mystery, which is to say, death is not 'unknown but unknowable,'<sup>122</sup> that which is beyond the human realm completely. The impossibility of thinking death in this manner does not constitute the possibility of authentic Dasein. Instead, the impossibility of death, which marks the absolute

<sup>121</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 234.

<sup>122</sup> Richard A. Cohen, 'Levinas: Thinking Least about Death: Contra Heidegger', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 60 (No.1/3), (December 2006), 21-39 (29).

nothingness beyond being, leans on being as a 'menace' that threatens the certainty of any activity. The fear of death, for Levinas, is not disclosive in that it is not caused by the thought of 'my being' ending. The menace of death marks, in life, the 'impossibility of every possibility'<sup>123</sup> as an excess that insists over and above any totalising account of knowledge. Death is, then, for both Levinas and Blanchot, a 'primary figure of the Other in proximity.'<sup>124</sup> This Other refers to the fact that, as Joseph Suglia writes, for both Levinas and Blanchot death is 'anything but an individual engagement' as it 'cannot be known except by way of the Other,'<sup>125</sup> that is, another person. Death is never one's own because its withdrawal cannot constitute any kind of individuation. It is only the death of the Other that brings us into contact with the absolute alterity of death because its alterity, like that of the other person, belongs fundamentally outside of the self as the very thing that brings the self into question. While more could be said about the ethical implications of death, the significance in thinking death in proximity to the Other as a way of understanding passive noise involves primarily Blanchot's suggestion that with the idea of death 'possibility – understood as a field opened by force and comprehension – is sacrificed for the sake of the fascination of the impossible and the experience of the outside.'<sup>126</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 235.

<sup>124</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 74.

<sup>125</sup> Suglia, *Hölderlin and Blanchot*, 107.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>127</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 105.

It is at this juncture that we can start to properly think about death according to the idea of passivity and passive noise in accordance with death and by implication transgression. The significance in thinking about Mishima's suicide and Sunohara's

simulation of seppuku comes from Blanchot's own belief in the commensurability of suicide and art, where what is undertaken is the 'effort to act where immeasurable passivity reigns.' We can think about the aestheticisation of seppuku alongside Mishima's actual political act not because of the same ritualistic suicide being shared but because Japanese noise music, as conceptualised in the language of active noise, attempts to 'impose measure' on a 'movement that escapes all aims and all resolution'<sup>127</sup> just like the one who commits suicide. As a music that is regularly argued to look beyond the limits of the world, Japanese noise music is a music of suicide. The subject and the world from which this music is both created and consumed is sacrificed for a world without limits or at the least the hope of such

world. While Blanchot focuses on literature as the paragon of art's relationship with suicide and death, it seems that Japanese noise music is equally illustrative of art's relationship with the beyond. Death for Mishima begins from the moment he sets about 'acquiring an existence other than that of words'<sup>128</sup> while for Japanese noise music it is positioned in the hope that music might become 'an unknowable, mysterious, indescribable world of pure sonic experience [...] by reiterating its potential to escape meaningful classification.'<sup>129</sup> But the radically passive interiority of transgression, alterity and the neuter all of which, we have argued, are synonyms for the conditioning moment of failure that must be said to belong to any manifest moment of being and meaning, are equally what condition the impossibility of a stable noise-language as well as the impossibility of understanding death even in the act of suicide.

<sup>128</sup> Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, 67.

<sup>129</sup> David Novak, *Japanese: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 119-120.

<sup>130</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 95.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

'What makes me disappear from the world cannot find its guarantee there; and thus,' as Blanchot argues, 'in a way, having no guarantee, it is not certain.'<sup>130</sup> This for Blanchot is the contradictory nature of suicide. The confidence that one can 'triumph in the end by disposing sovereignly of nothingness' affirms the very thing suicide looks to deny. There is, as Blanchot sees it, an 'illogical optimism which shines through voluntary death.'<sup>131</sup> This optimism necessitates a confidence that with suicide 'one will always be able to triumph in the end by disposing sovereignly of nothingness.' The final act of suicide, like that of Mishima's, is taken in the belief that in sovereignty we will withdraw from the world as a place of action. But the meticulousness of an act like seppuku, and of the young girl in *Jogakusei: Harakiri* who carefully and patiently turns the pages of death before slowly removing the Tanto from its casing, is demonstrative of a 'strength suitable only for a citizen of the world.'<sup>132</sup> That is, despite a willingness to leave the world – or in the case of Japanese noise music, a willingness to leave the world of meaning and music – the strength of suicide (noise) is suitable only for a 'great affirmer of the present'<sup>133</sup> and equally a great affirmer of music. Suicide, in Blanchot's presentation, serves only to

domesticate the alterity of death by reducing its impossibility to, in a distinctly

Heideggerian move, the possibility of action and thematisation. It is with the belief that the loss of self through death, as Hainge intimates with his discussion of death in the horror genre, might in some way be accessed through some kind of thematisation and disclosure, where Blanchot objects. But his objection against the Heideggerian notion of authenticity is not done in favour of its opposition, where suicide would be argued to represent an inauthentic approach to death. As Libertson explains, Blanchot does not disapprove of the contradiction he identifies within suicide or the futility of its aim. It is in fact with this discussion of suicide's futility where he positions its relation to art as it involves the 'irreducibility of both these comportments to the context of authenticity grounded in totalisation and accomplishment.'<sup>134</sup> In other words, suicide is not inauthentic as a result of action. Its inauthenticity and futility is found in the constitutive impossibility that is our very foundation of meaning and being. Blanchot's refusal of authenticity, then, involves the description of a reality, or an irreality, that is incomprehensible to any phenomenological procedures and anterior to any configuration of ontology. In this reality, the subject 'persists as an indecision, a fascination, and a passivity which are produced by differentiation itself, and which are uneliminable.'<sup>135</sup> It is with this reality and this hold of fascination that Blanchot believes the true alterity of death to reside, as a radical disruption of the certainty of our worldly death. And it is with this reality and this second death that we can understand Japanese noise music's true relationship with death.

<sup>134</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 76.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Similar to the duplicity of art, which sees the language of thematisation and interpretation as contemporaneous with a language of impossibilities, and similar to the two slopes of both active and passive noise that have been at the centre of our argument, the passivity of alterity and the interiority of excess is not only what conditions the 'virility of creation' but also the strength of suicide. In Blanchot's writing the word "passivity" means death'<sup>136</sup> as a differentiation that equally conditions and frustrates the economy of meaning. So just as passive noise withdraws the language of active noise from the certainty of its claims to negativity and radicalism via a heterogeneity that constitutes the exigency of noise, the persistence of this passive death exceeds the voluntaristic mobilization of suicide and, with it, conceptuality and meaning. The death that circulates in the world and the language of

possibility – this being Heideggerian death and the intimation of 'access' by the likes of Hainge – is doubled by a death which 'I cannot grasp, what is not linked to me by any relation of any sort' and which 'never comes and toward which I do not direct myself.'<sup>137</sup> This death is what conditions the absence of language and the groundlessness of subjectivity that both Blanchot and Levinas figure as anterior to Heideggerian ontology. Death is thus, as Libertson writes, 'the irony of that which annihilates without annihilating.'<sup>138</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 104.

<sup>138</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 69.

Death is indeed an impossibility and with the idea of passivity impossibility does not suddenly consume every mode of possibility. As with all of Blanchot's concepts it is necessary to think death through a radical paradox and contradiction where death works equally as the conditioning moment of meaning as well as its frustration and interruption. As the conditioning moment of meaning and subjectivity death is equivocal to transgression, the Other, the neuter and passive noise in its anteriority. And similarly to these things working as a frustration of meaning death carries forward, from its anteriority, into the constitution of subjectivity and meaning as a contaminated interior. Death is what cannot be reduced or captured in the constitution of meaning yet it is this irreducibility that enables such divergent thinking with concepts like noise. The possibility of thinking about Japanese noise music does not necessarily involve thinking about the way in which its radical sonic gestures and aesthetic venture toward a world without limits or rule. And therefore, the impossibility of this is not simply dialectical. Instead, the impossibility of fixing the language of noise into place comes prior to any mode of radicalism, negativity and thus possibility. Transgression, the neuter and death condition noise passively which makes any ontology of noise always already other to itself. This is precisely how we should understand Levinas's reversal, 'the impossibility of every possibility,' in relation to death and noise.

The thematisation of transgression and noise through passivity, where the manifestation of noise is said to be orientated outside of itself both internally and beyond any kind of control, takes place in death's space. While the artist does not have to make death his work of art in any explicit manner, he is nevertheless linked to death in the same sense that suicide is involved with death in that both are determined by an exigency that exceeds them. 'Both involve a power,' Blanchot writes, 'that

wants to be power even in the region of the ungraspable, where the domain of goals end.'<sup>139</sup> Suicide reaches beyond the world of the living while Japanese noise music, in the language of active noise, apparently calls for a world without limit or boundary, where every signpost is lost to an infinite wall of white noise. This would arguably be a way of listening to and understanding The Guilty Connector piece 'Sanno-cho Stardust – MOMISAM & RISONNE' from the compilation CD *Japanoise of Death II*.<sup>140</sup> The two minute, thirty one second composition begins with a field recording taken from a Japanese commuter train. The initial sounds are thus familiar as one can distinctly hear the rumble of the moving train carriages and the announcements emanating from the carriage PA system. Kohei 'Fast' Nakagawa of The Guilty Connector, however, quickly merges this rumbling sound with his own sonic manipulation and feedback so that the familiarity of this commuter train is completely lost one minute and twenty five seconds into the piece. What is left is an indiscernible cacophony of sounds stripped of their opening phenomenological worldliness. In this sense, Nakagawa's piece might be heard alongside Hainge's reading of Sartre's nausea, as a moment in which the familiarity of the world is unmoored into blurred lines lacking in definition.

<sup>139</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 106.

<sup>140</sup> Guilty Connector, 'Sanno-cho Stardust', track 1 of compilation CD, *Japanoise of Death II* (Steinklang-International, 2008).

<sup>141</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 104.

The difference between the suicide and art, according to Blanchot, is that the former mistakes one death for another. Mishima believes he can pass from a worldly death, a death necessitated by possibility and action, into the groundless fascination of death rooted in impossibility. 'I go to meet the death which is in the world, at my disposal,' Blanchot explains, 'and I think that thereby I can reach the other death, over which I have no power.'<sup>141</sup> Voluntary death refuses to acknowledge the death of fascination and passivity – the death that cannot be reached – because it makes of death action and hope. Art in Blanchot's understanding, however, seeks this second death as origin rather than an end. In other words, art looks to dwell in the negligence of mistaking one death for another. That is how art allies itself with impossibility – the abyssal withdrawal of death – by attempting to make content of impossibility. This is arguably why Nakagawa does not let his piece finish with this absolute cacophony but instead, at two minutes and four seconds toward the end of the

composition, gives way to a subway jingle that is played through the carriage PA system, a particular sonic trait of many of the subway lines in Tokyo. It is as if Nakagawa is acknowledging the impossibility of escaping the world, and the impossibility of dying, by making this impossibility the very impetus of his recording. But the fact Nakagawa allows the world to temporarily give way to this nausea but only to then bring the listener back into the world is to make an ally with death by positioning its impossibility into the refrain of control. Again, much like Hainge, it could be said that he follows the assumption that nausea and death might be ontologically disclosive.

Already in the title of *Japanoise of Death II*, a strong alliance between death and noise is announced. The compilation CD seems complicit with the penchant of thinking Japanese noise music through aggression and subversion while the track 'Suicide Weapon'<sup>142</sup> by Screloma implies the transgressive voluntarism that is proper to the discourse of active noise. Even the very idea of compiling a compilation of Japanese noise music, a genre assimilated under the antagonism of genre and music, seems to want to thematise noise's alliance with death as one understandable and approachable. But the death that belongs to Japanese noise music cannot, if we follow the language of passive noise, be held in any sort of compilation because its subversions are not phenomenological or material. This material kind of subversion, which is favoured in the language of active noise, only works according to the movement of dialectics. But as we have argued, the failure of Japanese noise music is not necessarily dialectical just as transgression has more to do with passivity than action. The impossibility of death works as a call that reaches Japanese noise music beyond volition where 'in spite of itself' it is said to be 'drawn, by something that puts it absolutely to the test.'<sup>143</sup> The death that is proper to Japanese noise music cannot be put to work if, as Large explains, 'by "work" we mean something which is useful or meaningful.'<sup>144</sup> In both the act of suicide and the artistic gesture an 'invisible but decisive leap intervenes'<sup>145</sup> that prevents Mishima from reaching what he hopes to reach with suicide and Nakagawa from attaining any kind of disclosure from nausea.

<sup>142</sup> Screloma, 'Suicide Weapon', track 11 of compilation CD, *Japanoise of Death II*.

<sup>143</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 107.

<sup>144</sup> William Large, *Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot: Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2004), 106.

<sup>145</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 106

This intervention comes in the form of passivity where what constitutes the world of meaning comes to be the very thing that makes meaning impossible:

the death that was the extreme form of power not only becomes what loosens my hold upon myself [...] but also becomes that which is without any relation to me, without power over me – that which is stripped of all possibility – the unreality of the indefinite.<sup>146</sup>

146 Ibid.

147 Large, *Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing*, 105.

148 Hill, *Fragmentary Writing*, 182.

149 Thomas Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 65.

Death is a way of naming that which within art escapes our grasp and a way of understanding how active noise's insistence on radicalism and negativity is impossible. Death names the non-essential space from which the language of art, and by implication the language of Japanese noise music, begins. And it is precisely this constitutive non-essentiality that carries over into the language of noise as its dislocation and separation. Death does not belong to a person as it did to Mishima, nor can it be symbolised through any kind of sonic excess or macabre aesthetic. Death belongs properly to that which withdraws entirely from the world of conceptuality. But because this absence and alterity comes before, for the likes of Levinas, Blanchot and Liberton, the world of meaning, it is therefore equally what conditions meaning as well as what frustrates it. Death is 'possible only in its impossibility and absence'<sup>147</sup> just as the heterogeneity of noise stems from that which is not announced in its discourse of radicalism and negativity. While the aporia of possibility and impossibility that was first announced by Heidegger remains in Blanchot's thought, the emphasis is given to the latter through the idea of passivity. Death not only constitutes, for Blanchot, its own simultaneity of possibility and impossibility, but language and thinking too suffer the 'ultimate possibility and impossibility alike.'<sup>148</sup> In other words, there is not first and foremost language and then after, once language approaches its limit, a silent void into which it spills. If this were the case, then our thinking of noise and death would show little difference to Kant's thinking of the sublime. Instead, language is caught already in the necessary emptiness which occurs once language replaces that to which it aims to refer with the sign. Passively, which is to say, before the will of the subject, language, as Wall explains, 'tears itself apart from the moment it begins to speak.'<sup>149</sup> With this in mind, Japanese noise music does not fail because it reaches for the impossible, as it would

for musical death, rather it fails because its very constitution is one of impossibility and death. What is said through the language of active noise, what is thought within the realm of possibility, has already lost itself to the realm of the impossible, which is, the realm of passive noise that is equal to the 'empty depth of the beyond'<sup>150</sup> of death.

150 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 106.

151 Large, *Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing*, 98.

## Waiting for Death

The reason the language of active noise upholds an explicit relationship between death and noise is because practitioners of Japanese noise music use death as an aesthetic property. This means that the connection noise is said to have with death, as discussed in relation to Japanese noise music, is not only conceptual but also material and physical. Arguably, then, death plays as big a role in this music as it does in any other type of art, including Blanchot's understanding of literature. Put differently, Japanese noise music is as equally invested in the neutrality of literature as Blanchot sees it. Here we can recall the discussion of 'The Song of the Sirens' in the introduction, as a novelistic treatment of sound that accounts for the reason Blanchot's interest in literature might open up a new space for discussing Japanese noise music. In the narrative relation, the relation between the work and its reader, 'the meaning of life and the meaning of a sentence are still "given", but only through a kind of "withdrawal" or a "distance", which suspends the attachment of meaning to the intentions of a subject.'<sup>151</sup> For Blanchot, literature is unique in the manner by which it withdraws from any kind of essentiality and intentionality. In the literary space, as Blanchot sees it, both the reader and author are lost to the neutral and indeterminable space of literature, where the negation of the sign is doubled by the irreality of fiction. Although its relationship to the neutral must be thought differently to the literary relation, Japanese noise music nevertheless gestures to a similar kind of withdrawal where intentionality, meaning and familiarity are actively refuted in favour of a sonic space seemingly without end and definition. While this might, in itself, be said to be intentional as belonging to the likes of Merzbow, C.C.C.C., *The Guilty Connector*, all of this is apparently lost during the listening encounter when listening, for theorists like Voegelin, becomes too much causing the self to shatter and disperse.

But the mistake in the language of active noise is one already touched upon in our discussion of Voegelin. The assumption that through its aesthetic relationship with death, noise might actualise and give reality to an essential and pure noise as well as the neutrality of death's space, is equivalent to mistaking one death for another, as with the futility of suicide. Theorists within the language of active noise assume that the only death that is proper to noise is literal in form and excessive by gesture and that through this noise, the depth of death's interior might be exposed. In this sense, death becomes attributable to an amplified sonic gesture. But in fact, the death that is proper to noise as the death that allows us to think noise in sequence with Blanchot's literature is the death that withdraws from any kind of volition and escapes any kind of conceptuality that looks to close in upon it. It is the death that shares its space with the Other, transgression and the neuter as a passive space of alterity that slips from the clutches of conceptuality and oppositional thinking. As with Bataille's writing, the violent content of Japanese noise music only serves to turn us towards that which cannot be contained within this very content. To this extent the aesthetic and violent imagery of death is a useful tool for enabling the discussion of ontology as well as bringing into question the reality of meaning but the results are not exhaustive. The literal mode of death, then, is not entirely futile as it helps frame an



essential relationship noise has with death but only to the extent that this death remains impossible. But this impossibility never gives way to possibility completely, but instead conditions it as the interval that forces possibility to encounter impossibility at every turn. Literal death is therefore ironic due to the irreality that is contained within it and which escapes any supposed presence of a worldly death and pure noise.

As Libertson explains the creation of an oeuvre is like suicide as both share 'an involvement with passivity and a desire or exigency to master this involvement.' But it is precisely this exigency that, as he carefully explains, 'exceeds its own voluntaristic mobilization, by virtue of its latent passivity.'<sup>152</sup> As discussed in chapter two, the modality of interiority is equal to that of desire. The closure of interiority is a condition of desire that is animated by excess and alterity. As such, any action that looks to move beyond the world of meaning or at least looks to transgress the restraints with which it feels bound, whether it be suicide or an extreme sonic gesture,

<sup>152</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 77.

is said to be 'always already suspended itself in its non-occurrence.'<sup>153</sup> Le pas au-delà, Blanchot's 1973 text *The Step Not Beyond*,<sup>154</sup> is his way of describing this double movement, or this movement without completion, as that which is incubated in the discussion of active death only to then manifest as death's uncontrollable impossibility. Pas, as Leslie Hill explains, has a notorious double meaning, as it is etymologically rooted in the Latin 'passus, meaning: step' but which also in Latin means 'barely a step at all.' Le pas au-delà is, then, the step not beyond where no step, as Hill writes, is ever simple but always part of a double movement that is both 'here and there, forwards and back, right and left, the one with the other, the other with the one.'<sup>155</sup> As an act that affirms only the possibility of action and of acting finally, the step beyond by which the world and the subject are finally transgressed is barely a step at all or is never a complete nor firm step. What refuses to occur in the step of ritual suicide and what by extension refuses to occur in the sacrificial tendency of Japanese noise music, is that which is proper to death and noise respectively. That is, the condition of desire makes the step toward the beyond already a futile and impossible one as it contains within itself the very thing it looks to step beyond. This is in part the inconsistency of the suicidal gesture as it demands a meticulousness and strength suitable only for the world of the living. But it has more involvement with the exigency of desire which expresses the way in which all modes of possibility, including conceptuality, are fundamentally conditioned by an alterity and otherness which exceeds them. Death belongs to this sphere of incomprehension as a latent and conditioning passivity.

<sup>153</sup> Hill, *Fragmentary Writing*, 187.

<sup>154</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond* [1973], trans. Lycette Nelson (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>155</sup> Hill, *Fragmentary Writing*, 185.

<sup>156</sup> Libertson, *Proximity*, 77.

Because this death is irreducible to a dialectical temporal order, just as the failure of Japanese noise music is anterior to the progress of dialectics, this death's 'only reality is its approach.'<sup>156</sup> As the approach is something that never reaches its

end and never arrives, the approach of death is all we have while our relationship to it can only ever be one of waiting. The idea of 'waiting' is, like Blanchot's discussion of the night, an example of what he refers to as a 'limit-experience,' an experience that, as Hill explains, 'exceeded the authority, interiority and identity of any personal

self.'<sup>157</sup> Waiting is not, as Hill clarifies, something that is active but nor is it passive in the traditional sense of the term. Alternatively, waiting belongs to the space of radical passivity wherein all modalities of agency are suspended. That for which waiting waits is 'neither properly present nor properly absent [...] because it is possible to wait for something only if it cannot be obtained in the present' for its presence would mark the end of waiting. Precisely because, then, the object of waiting is forever suspended in order for waiting to be what it is, the temporality of waiting is exact to that of death caught as it is 'between a presence it cannot deliver and an absence it cannot overcome' making it both 'interminable and inescapable.'<sup>158</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Hill, *Fragmentary Writing*, 131.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

The impossibility of death's presence, as a way of understanding the impossibility of noise's conceptualisation through negativity and radicalism and which illustrates Blanchot's key reversal of Heidegger, necessitates a temporality of waiting. The language of passive noise accounts for the anterior ontological dimension that resists any final affirmation that looks to thematise noise into 'this' or 'that' understanding. The conceptual terrain of noise is forever out of reach not because of the varying cultural boundaries that define its supposed negativity but because of its investment within an alterity that refuses the light of the day, as Blanchot understands the day. To this extent, the step towards understanding Japanese noise music, and towards the ultimate noise gesture, is always deferred. The alterity of noise cannot be found in some kind of end-point of pure noise because its arrival is always deferred by the latency of its passive condition. So Japanese noise music is caught in the suspension of waiting, like death, because waiting describes the experience of possibility that finds itself traversed by impossibility at every turn. This impossibility is not, as Hill explains, 'secondary but constitutive, and can be neither eliminated nor accommodated.' The result is the implication that 'nothing in waiting retains its proper identity, but is always already interrupted, compromised, and contaminated by its belated spectral twin.'<sup>159</sup> This spectral twin of Japanese noise music describes the role of passive noise as what contaminates the language of the active, thereby submitting the temporality of understanding noise to the space of waiting.

It is tempting to frame the condition of waiting conceptually alongside the actions of what Hegarty refers to as the 'ascetic, stationary performers'<sup>160</sup> of Japanese noise music. In chapter two emphasis was placed on the overtly erotic displays of early C.C.C.C. performances as an example of what Hegarty sees as 'a literalist type of masochistic auto-erotic will to break free of the self'<sup>161</sup> and ultimately the confines of music. Noise performers, particularly Japanese noise performers, 'vacillate [dramatically] between stasis and more visceral performances.'<sup>162</sup> Mayuko Hino, founding member of C.C.C.C., is but one of many Japanese noise artists who seem to take, as Hegarty explains, Bataille's erotic injunctions quite literally, 'becoming all

body, all noise.'<sup>163</sup> The extremity of such performances have in some cases, as with Boredoms and Hanatarashi vocalist Yamataka Eye, become folkloric. One story recalls Eye 'bringing a dead cat on stage and tearing it in half with a chainsaw.'<sup>164</sup> The fact Eye has verified this story is almost redundant; it is the folkloric nature of such performances that illustrates a discourse of violence and the expectation of extremity. The story of Eye's performance captures the image of the extreme performer who looks to submit himself/herself to the limitlessness and lawlessness of noise. This is partly the reason why so many discussions of Japanese noise music accentuate the literalist interpretation via literal understandings of transgression and death; active noise understands this music always through a language of violent, wilful subversion whereas passive noise announces the impossibility of this affirmation.

160 Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace', 141.

161 Ibid., 140.

162 Ibid., 138.

163 Ibid., 139.

164 Kevin Hainey, 'Boredoms: The Art of Noise', Exclaim, 2005,

[http://exclaim.ca/Features/Timeline/boredoms-art\\_of\\_noise](http://exclaim.ca/Features/Timeline/boredoms-art_of_noise) [Accessed 8 October 2012].

165 While these technological differences might go some way to explain the differences in performance – Merzbow's early analogue performances were far more physical than his contemporary digital ones which generally see him seated in front of his laptop – it is the nature of what is evoked by these static performances, as they contrast with the literalist mode of performance, that is of interest here.

166 Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace', 141.

However, in the prioritisation of this active mode of expression, analysis of extreme physical performance has taken an unjust precedence over stationary performances which are in fact, especially since the advent of digital technologies supplanting analogue,<sup>165</sup> as regular modes of performance as visceral performance. As Hegarty writes, 'Often the loudest, noisiest noise music is produced by people standing still and fiddling with knobs, stuff, effects or even a laptop.'<sup>166</sup> Whereas the extreme, bodily noise performer evokes a physical possession, as if the extremity,

eroticism and death of noise's aesthetic has overtaken them, the static performer seems to want to deny this relation. Masonna, for instance, hurls himself across the stage and clatters into the drum cymbals and electronic pedals he has positioned. If read literally, the connection between Bataille's eroticism and noise is, as Hegarty explains, not simply 'metaphorical' but comes from 'lack of control or the letting go of control.' Masonna performs this 'letting go of control' by acting as a 'channel, possessed by noise, becoming an unconscious savant.'<sup>167</sup> His sporadic and out-of-control fits and spasms physically mimic the unpredictability of his noise while the aggression of his gestures evoke its violent eroticism. Of course, Masonna is never completely out-of-control, as Hegarty explains. His choice of technology, the positioning of this technology on stage, as well as his actions, all conspire to undermine this lack of control. This is again an instance for Hegarty in which noise music fails to reach, completely, what it looks towards. Any performative gesture that looks to abandon control is always recuperated into the discourse of control, albeit in

a peculiar fashion, for the very reason that performance belongs to an act of volition. Masonna cannot escape the terrain of conscious action entirely because his mode of escape is strategic just as his extreme sonic gestures are actively positioned against, and therefore partially responsible for, the definition of music and meaning. Nevertheless Masonna, like all noise musicians understood by Hegarty, performs in spite of the inevitability of his failure. That is to say, he favours an 'authenticist role for performer, who is there to bring as much noise as necessary, dictated from somewhere unattainable.'<sup>168</sup> In the literalist mode of performance, the likes of Masonna work toward the impossible as if possible. This, by implication, renders impossibility an attribute of a greater and consuming possibility.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 141.

The static mode of performance, however, visible in later Merzbow performances and MSBR concerts, enacts a relationship with impossibility that appears closer to Blanchot's idea of waiting than any kind of literalist thinking of transgression. In the static and stationary performance, the noise artist does not approach impossibility through any kind of visible gesture. He/she does not actively pursue noise like Masonna or like the suicide goes after death. Instead, the static performer waits for noise as if disavowing one's own sensuality and action by

submitting to 'forces greater than it can take.'<sup>169</sup> This kind of performance, one which sees the noise practitioner sit almost motionless behind their computer and other digital outputs, defies the literal and visceral performance of active noise. The stasis, as Hegarty writes, 'becomes a kind of helplessness'<sup>170</sup> that appears to succumb to the uncontrollable and unapproachable nature of impossibility. It is as if, in the static performance, he/she waits for death, 'in a state of waiting [that is] indifferent to death,'<sup>171</sup> where indifference refers to the manner in which the static noise performer seemingly disavows the possibility of approaching noise and death. The stasis lingers in impossibility as a powerlessness that can in no way enact the true radicality of noise.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Blanchot, *Awaiting Oblivion*, 28.

<sup>172</sup> Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace', 141.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 142.

But equivalent to the volition of the literalist mode of transgressive performance, the static noise performance still chooses to wait. That is to say, despite defying any obvious gesticulation, the helplessness this kind of performance evokes is nevertheless a 'willed helplessness, a knowing febrility, a conscious submission.'<sup>172</sup> Although the act of immobility is arguably more attentive to the nature of impossibility, as it appears to characterise both death and noise as that which cannot be approached or controlled its attestation to the giving-up of control is paradoxically an act of the utmost control. To this extent its lack of motion shares little difference, beyond its surface, to the sporadic body of Masonna. Where Masonna surrenders his

control as if possessed, MSBR voluntarily surrenders his control as if perceiving it to be futile. In both instances, 'both attest to giving over control, to inviting noise as if it were truly beyond, as if it could be channelled through denial.' But this denial is still, importantly, a choice and still an acceptance to act even if only through refusal. This is why the noise performance is so essential for Hegarty because the impossibility of surrendering control completely constitutes his understanding of failure as the orientating moment of possibility within noise music. These performances, he writes, 'ground the ungroundable, knowing this cannot happen, yet over and over, relentlessly, make it not happen.'<sup>173</sup> Hegarty's affirmation, then, is distinctly Heideggerian as it makes of impossibility a curious type of possibility, wherein the

impossible manifestation of death and pure noise constitute the manifestation of an actual, radical, noise music.

By framing Japanese noise music through the idea of failure, Hegarty avoids the naivety of a pure noise music while still positioning the complexity of impossibility and noise within the realm of understanding and control. In this way Hegarty touches upon the significance of waiting in his analysis when he writes that both literalist and static gestures give 'us a useful way in to the core of "noise as performance", as it insists on waiting, on suspension.'<sup>174</sup> This suspension is intimately involved with his idea of failure; Japanese noise music waits for the limitlessness for which it reaches because the actualisation of this limitlessness is always suspended/deferred/failed by its dialectical recuperation into the limit. Similarly to the nuance Derrida explains exists between Heidegger and Blanchot's understanding of death, the nuance that is occurring within Hegarty's own essay, that distinguishes his understanding of waiting from what we have explained as Blanchot's idea of waiting, is equally complex. But despite making explicit references to 'a billowing noise, a primary static that only comes into being in hindsight, as if it were always already there, filling the cosmos, underpinning it all,'<sup>175</sup> this latent passivity that is occasionally alluded to by Hegarty generally gives way to the language of activity. As opposed to the idea of waiting that persists beyond the dynamic understanding of activity as a radical passivity, Hegarty's notion of waiting is 'only possible through technique, the body, musicality, and institutions of listening (the concert, the recording).'<sup>176</sup> Waiting for Hegarty is a choice that waits in hope of a pure noise music. In spite of his emphasis on failure (impossibility) with regard to the fruition of this purity, the actions of both the hurled body and the motionless performer are nevertheless, according to Hegarty, 'archaeological' tools used for considering 'border conditions and the mixing of categories of objects, flows, processes, expectations.'<sup>177</sup> While we are not communing with this primordial noise, these performances in particular and Japanese noise music generally, Hegarty believes, enable us to 'recall something like that as something lost, something traceable in bone.'<sup>178</sup>

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

In Blanchot's discussion of waiting, by contrast, the impossibility of the condition of waiting is hardened to such a degree that the idea of recollection would be disingenuous to the infinite immobility of waiting. For Blanchot, it is the absent condition of language that is the condition of our subjectivity. That is, our identity is orientated towards an alterity that pulls our interiority away from its stable persistence, in such a way that it destabilises our ontology. In waiting, then, we wait equally for 'ourselves without ourselves, forcing us to wait outside our own waiting, leaving us nothing more to wait.'<sup>179</sup> What this means for the static noise performer is that he/she does not properly wait in the Blanchotian sense of the term because waiting can never align with any kind of action. Waiting is like death and passive noise as that which persists behind the realm of action as both its conditioning moment and that moment's impossibility. Waiting is, as Blanchot explains, a 'neutral act'<sup>180</sup> that is never the possibility of any kind of action because it is already withheld from even the action that chooses to wait and especially from the action that aggressively rushes toward the beyond like that of suicide.

<sup>179</sup> Blanchot, *Awaiting Oblivion*, 14.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>181</sup> Kobo Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes* [1964], trans. E. Dale Saundress (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

It is, as previously mentioned, tempting to frame the static noise performance alongside Blanchot's idea of waiting but if we are true to the passivity that persists in Blanchot's definition then the likes of Koji Tano, of MSBR, cannot be said to wait for anything. Tano instead holds a relationship to waiting that is akin to the one espoused by Kobo Abe in his novel *The Woman in the Dunes*.<sup>181</sup> In this book, Niki Jumpei, an insect aficionado, finds himself at the bottom of a sand quarry, having been lured with the promise of shelter during the night by villagers. Too deep to escape, Jumpei finds himself stuck in the quarry, eventually submitting to living there with a young widow who works at the bottom of the quarry without rest. Despite his resistance, his utter confusion and his desperate attempts to escape, Jumpei can only wait at the bottom of the quarry. In one sense his waiting belongs to him and is the very thing that torments him as neither death nor rescue arrive. In this way, his waiting is thought literally as equivocal to thinking the motionless performance of MSBR as what is proper to the definition of waiting. Both Jumpei and Tano are tied to impossibility – the impossibility of escaping the quarry and the impossibility of

reaching the limitlessness of noise – and this impossibility forces their active immobility. But the moment of waiting, if we follow Blanchot, does not belong to Jumpei, and by extension Tano as well as the subject thought generally, in any way. Waiting belongs to the night, to the *il y a* of being, as the 'indifference without shore from which every gaze is averted.'<sup>182</sup> In Abe's story, then, waiting could be said to belong to the quarry itself rather than Jumpei's situation. The quarry represents the hollow space of waiting within which nothing specifically can be awaited and where nothing actually arrives, not even his death. It is a neutral space that is indifferent to the subjects that wait within it and who suffer, without end, the impossibility of escape. In this way, the quarry symbolises the nature of passive noise, as it refuses the material certainty of any kind of action that the likes of Tano might affirm. It is, in this sense, the hollow space of death and waiting that is fundamentally without end and comprehension which is why Jumpei, at the end of the novel, does not escape even when a ladder is lowered, and which is why Tano, despite his immobility, is not

held in the real moment of waiting. What this ultimately means is that waiting, like transgression, is not accounted for by any kind of action. Instead it names, in the language of active noise, the infinite deferral of meaning that makes any claims to its negativity, radicalism, subversion and materiality, fundamentally non-essential.

182 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 160.

183 Derrida, *Aporias*, 77.

Derrida suggests that, with his own idea of death, Blanchot is saying at 'once the same thing and something completely different from Heidegger.' Equally for us, while the more literal affirmations of active noise that lean on an understanding of transgression and death are easily distinguishable from the account of passive noise, Hegarty's account does occasionally share our own emphasis on the passivity of impossibility. But as Derrida explains, the difference between Blanchot and Heidegger – a difference we are trying to understand as one between passivity and failure – 'is just a question of knowing in which sense [...] one reads the expression the possibility of impossibility.'<sup>183</sup> Hegarty's idea of failure, while necessary to the interior make-up of Japanese noise music and therefore not something wholly exterior, does not fully interiorise the nature of failure. In keeping with the theoretical pattern of active noise, alterity, in Hegarty's analysis, is ultimately conceived as some unfathomable beyond held out of reach like Heideggerian death. The language of active noise, broadly speaking, tends to hold onto this unfathomable beyond through

the idea of inspiration; it is as though the thought of a pure noise music generates the transgressive potential of Japanese noise music while failure marks this attempt without end. In this way, impossibility is strangely conceivable and, to a degree, possible. But if, as Derrida writes, 'the most proper possibility of Dasein, is the possibility of its impossibility' then it follows that the 'proper of Dasein becomes from then on contaminated, parasited, and divided by the most improper.'<sup>184</sup> And precisely because of the originary nature of this proper possibility of Dasein, that is animated by impossibility, that Dasein is said to be already and always contaminated by that which exceeds it. What this means for Japanese noise music is exactly what it means for suicide: the act which looks to step beyond the limits of the world, as an act that would make impossibility possible, even in an immobile performative gesture, is always already conditioned by an impossibility that defers it. This impossibility, in Japanese noise music, is what cannot be conceptualised through the language of subversion and literal transgression because its transgression is necessarily anterior to this language.

184 *Ibid.*

185 Wall, *Radical Passivity*, 8.

Death is what breathes a peculiar kind of life into Japanese noise music and this life is to be thought of as an 'instability that can never be commanded.'<sup>185</sup> It is what makes noise noisy and infinitely more complex than its opposition to music or literal modes of transgression might attest to. While Hegarty and, for the most part, the normative discourse of Japanese noise music, recognise the commensurability of possibility with impossibility, the result is still predominantly Heideggerian. Yet if we are to conceive of meaning as Levinas does, in contrast to Heidegger, noise cannot be said to start from a moment of presence, which in this case would be its apparent radicality. Its beginning would instead be always delayed, positioned as it is within

death and absence and within an infinite regress of possibility and meaning. Death names in noise the incomplete and inherently unstable manner of its reduction to meaning which is also the very possibility of the reduction. This contamination within the interior is what conditions the aesthetic opposition of noise and music but also what makes this opposition radically impossible. Death is what is passive within noise as what resists stable modes of understanding by contaminating our language of both music and noise simultaneously. Or as Libertson has it, it is only in the 'time of alteration,' the neither/nor space that refuses both noise and music's commensurability

as diametrically opposed terms, that 'the Same can be what it is, and never be entirely what it is: separation as exigency, in the approach of the Other,'<sup>186</sup> an approach that is akin to our understanding of death. Prior to its association with radicality and music's opposite, noise is already involved and constituted by an alterity which remains inaccessible, caught as it is in the infinite suspension of waiting. And while Japanese noise music might be said to pursue this alterity in vain, it does so only because it is always other to itself; a music always already dead before it has the strength to die.

186 Libertson, *Proximity*, 343.

## Conclusion. Community of Passivity

### A Matter of Gesture

Passive noise has many different guises and expressions all of which are correlative to alterity as it exists within manifestation. The night, nausea, affliction, transgression, proximity, death, fascination and waiting are all ways of articulating the passive nature of difference, a difference that is irreducible to any dialectical reason or temporality, as it is anterior to the familiar and dominant understandings of noise that are typically emphasised through vocabularies of negativity and subversion. 'To the tracing of every limit,' Hill writes, 'responds or corresponds that which, unspoken or unsaid, extends beyond the limit,' a limit which within its very constitution is 'interrupted' and 'effaced' with the 'otherness [...] upon which every limit depends.'<sup>1</sup> Passive noise names this effacement of the limit within any 'understanding' of noise, what we have referred to as active noise, as an irreducible multiplicity and irreconcilable heterogeneity. In other words because language, acting as a gateway to meaning, identity and subjectivity, is predicated on absence and death, the constitution of meaning is conditioned by that which dislocates it from itself. Japanese noise music might indeed be a radical sonic gesture but this is not the site of its alterity. The proximity of difference within the manifestation of meaning is precisely where noise's relationship with the beyond of familiarity is anticipated. But because the true nature of alterity is such that it cannot be reduced to any categorisation, this relationship can only ever be anticipated as one suspended to the temporality of waiting. But it is precisely this anticipation, as it is exacted through the language of passivity, that intervenes in the language of active noise not as a 'broken or deferred totality' but as a 'perpetual opening to alterity.'<sup>2</sup> This opening is what conditions the radicalism of Japanese noise music, not as an active subversion but,



beyond the control of the noise maker, a multivalent predicate.

1 Leslie Hill, *Maurice Blanchot and Fragmentary Writing: A Change of Epoch* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 433.

2 *Ibid.*, 433-434.

What is at stake in Japanese noise music, then, is not the possibility or indeed the impossibility of it being a subversive musical, artistic or even cultural gesture. Whether or not Japanese noise music is realised as a subversive style of music and for how long it might remain so is a matter for dialectical reasoning. The outcome of this

kind of approach frequently results in a rather restrictive conceptual terrain which essentialises the categories of negativity and radicalism to the conceptual make-up of noise. However, the complexity that belongs to the ever elusive concept of noise is partially reduced when the understanding of transgression and impossibility are limited to the tension of a conceptual opposition that aligns music with meaning and noise with meaninglessness. Even instances of active noise that complicate this simplified tension, realised most effectively in the work of Hegarty and Hainge, nevertheless propagate a language of ontology, and therefore possibility, even if only implicitly. Hegarty almost frames noise passively when he writes of a 'mutual loss of self through proximity to the other,'<sup>3</sup> but this idea is ultimately given over to the language of activity when this loss is positioned within a dialectical understanding of failure. Hainge similarly complicates the language of noise beyond its oppositional tension through his relational ontology but the impossibility of this ontology – impossibility understood as his refusal to fix the ontology of noise to one place by emphasising instead its relational nature – is compromised when he talks of an 'operational taxonomy of noise'<sup>4</sup> that is not only operational but also descriptive. The necessity of thinking noise through a relational ontology is Hainge's way of avoiding the alternative; the heterogeneous complexity of noise that is impossible to seize should not, as he explains, give 'us an excuse, as critics, scholars or philosophers, to throw up our hands in surrender and not attempt to talk about noise in a consistent manner because the task seems so hard or even impossible.'<sup>5</sup> But as Blanchot explains, 'in the final analysis,' when words reach the absence and uncertainty of their condition, it is necessary that 'one speak[s] in order to remain silent.'<sup>6</sup> In other words, a surrendered silence is not the only alternative to an operational ontology. It is, rather, a matter of choosing the right words and a certain approach to language in order to make the empty space of words speak in the language of Japanese noise music. One has to speak about noise if only so as to hear that which refuses to be said in this speaking. For Japanese noise music this involves emphasising not only its

3 Paul Hegarty, 'Brace and Embrace: Masochism in noise performance', in Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (eds.), *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorising Sonic Experience* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 140.

4 Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 23.

5 *Ibid.*, 273.

6 Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* [1983], trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), 56.

operations but what refuses to be assimilated by these operations into the conceptual frameworks we use to describe them.

The difference between passive noise and active noise is thus largely a matter of a theoretical gesture and strategy. A large part of this strategy involves reconsidering transgression away from the embodiment of sacrifice so that we might accurately reflect on the true nature of alterity as it figures in the supposed community centred around Japanese noise music. Indeed, this very idea of community, when thought radically, is essential to understanding how a genre of music, locatable to a specific geography, might still be affirmed alongside a language of withdrawal. It certainly seems curious that an argument in favour of an absolutely irredeemable impossibility chooses, as its case study, a specific and loosely definable type of music. But this is only curious if we think community as it is typically thought, that is, as a collective body unified through a shared political, social or cultural agenda. This idea of community, however, is precisely what Blanchot, following Nancy, looks to complicate. In their respective ideas of community, there is equal attention paid to the notion of sacrifice as it relates to their radical notions of community. However, it is in their respective gestures and strategies where both Blanchot and Nancy differ and it is through this difference that we can reframe the sacrificial community of Japanese noise music away from the literal notion of sacrifice and equally the typical notion of community. This discussion will be our final comment on Japanese noise music as a way of summary, to the extent any summary can be proposed for a concept ingrained in the temporality of waiting.

## A Community without Noise

Ian James explains in his essay 'Naming the Nothing: Nancy and Blanchot on Community'<sup>7</sup> that it is on the notion of sacrifice, as considered in relation to Bataille's affirmation of the sacrificial community and his secret society *Acéphale*, that the otherwise similar theories of Nancy and Blanchot differ in their discussion of community. As with the difference between active and passive noise, this difference is similarly a matter of theoretical gesture. Both Nancy and Blanchot agree that in the absence of metaphysical grounds, community can only be conceived as absent and

<sup>7</sup> Ian James, 'Naming the Nothing: Nancy and Blanchot on Community', in Clare Monagle and Dimitris Vardoulakis (eds.), *The Politics of Nothing: On Sovereignty* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2013).

devoid of any unifying consciousness, thereby making absence the very grounds of a community. Precisely because of this metaphysical loss emerges, as Hill explains, an 'urgent need to pose the more radical question of the very essence of the political.' This involves, ultimately, thinking the very idea of relation 'outside of any concept of the subject and of subjective identification.'<sup>8</sup> This is exactly what we have been arguing to be the case through the language of passive noise, where an anterior relation to absence persists in the manifestation of active noise as an interruption. In the case of community, the absence in which being is conditioned becomes the grounds for speaking of a community. But precisely because of this absence, community cannot be understood by any traditional means; it becomes instead an absent community, a community without community, and as the title of Blanchot's

book names, an Unavowable Community.

8 Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 199.

9 Blanchot, *Unavowable Community*, 5.

For this reason, a community cannot be thought through its projects or its ability to fulfil these projects. The reason for this is that at the root of each being there exists what Blanchot calls a 'principle of incompleteness'<sup>9</sup> which naturally runs counter to the very notion of fulfilment. Because this principle is what animates the possibility of a being and because this principle does not concern completion, it follows that the notion of community, as a collective of beings, cannot be defined by the notion of completion or any projects that would require fulfilment. In other words, a community is not defined by what collectivises it. For Blanchot, Bataille's discussion of community and the community of *Acéphale* are perfect embodiments of this idea because the community of *Acéphale* is one distinctly conditioned by this principle of incompleteness. And it was through the notion of sacrifice that Bataille tried to make this principle the central principle of his community. That is to say, for Blanchot, Bataille's community of *Acéphale* was never concerned with the accomplishment of its various sacrificial intrigues, but was an ironic effort designed to expose us to the impossibility of our deepest human recesses.

According to Nancy, however, Bataille does not make fully apparent the real nature of impossibility in his discussion of community, contrary to what Blanchot argues. In Nancy's account of the community without community – what he refers to as the inoperative community – impossibility takes place in 'the vicinity of the

"sacred" but only when the sacred refers to a 'contagion' and a passive exigency. This is opposed to what he recognises in Bataille's discussion of community as the 'self-sufficiency' of a free subjectivity geared towards the 'unleashing of passions.'<sup>10</sup> What Nancy suggests is that Bataille fails to recognise the extent to which a very classical notion of freedom and sovereignty inform and shape his discussion of community and sacrifice. Death and sacrifice are not strategies aimed at exposing the principle of incompleteness but literal evocations that believe, whole heartedly, in the liberating and subversive potential of both death and sacrifice. In other words, Nancy is arguing that Bataille's idea of community pertains to a shared politics of abandon that retains impossibility within the region of possibility. That is to say against Blanchot's reading, Bataille was in fact concerned with accomplishment as it refers to the very possibility of sacrifice. *Acéphale*, for Nancy, was thus a failed attempt to rekindle a relationship between subjectivity and wilful transgression, just like Mishima and his final act of seppuku and much like Japanese noise music as Hegarty sees it.

10 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 32.

11 Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 32.

According to Nancy's analysis, Bataille privileges 'the sovereign destruction of all things' while failing to recognise the extent to which this privilege is itself 'submitted to an ultimate reserve (or sublation) of the Subject: the sovereignly subjective annihilation of subjectivity.'<sup>11</sup> What Nancy is saying here mirrors what we have been saying about active noise; that, in the emphasis given in Bataille's language (and active noise alike) to the activities of subversion, the condition of

passivity has been overlooked. Regarding Bataille, this is, as we have shown, partly his own doing. The frequency with which he is read as a philosopher of wilful subversion and destruction is due to his choice of language in a number of his texts. This is why he is so easily appropriated in the language of active noise as a way of describing the complex antagonisms of a supposedly radical music. In this sense, Nancy's critique of Bataille is parallel to our own critique of the language of active noise; both aim at demonstrating the way in which understandings of transgression that emphasise voluntarism are in fact already conditioned by the interiority of passivity that makes them fundamentally impossible.

But the nature of transgression that truly interests Bataille, according to Blanchot and Libertson, is always, in spite of the surface appearance of his writing, maintained in reserve to its voluntary antagonisms. That is to say, contrary to Nancy, *Acéphale* was not concerned with the completion of the sacrifice or its possibility as a direct fulfilment. To situate Bataille's writing within the 'closure of sacrificial subjectivity' is, as Hill explains, to 'underestimate the suspensive, neutre [neuter] force of the impossible alterity on which Bataille's search for community is in fact premised.'<sup>12</sup> Nancy is able to turn an inherent passivity in Bataille's writing against Bataille not for the reason that he (Bataille) is committed to a historical and religious view of sacrifice that overlooks its passive possession but because, as Blanchot tells us, he glides from this view to 'the infinite exigency it exposes itself to in what opens it to the others and separates it violently from itself.'<sup>13</sup> The condition of passivity is latent in his work not accidentally but deliberately, and his exercises in eroticism are, according to Libertson, gestures designed to bring it to the fore. Bataille uses an extreme aesthetic and a language of death not literally but ironically, allowing it to name the anterior condition of subjectivity that coalesces as an irreconcilable impossibility. As such, what Nancy believes to work against Bataille is in fact the secret triumph of Bataille's philosophy. His transgressive excursions were never meant materially but were literary evocations of the impossible, designed to expose the absolute impossibility of our inner most wants.

<sup>12</sup> Hill, *Extreme Contemporary*, 204.

<sup>13</sup> Blanchot, *Unavowable Community*, 15.

Where Blanchot and Nancy differ is precisely on this point: Bataille's notion of community is in fact an instance of the community without community in a way Nancy does not acknowledge. What is particularly interesting about this for us in our analysis is that this difference mirrors the different languages of Japanese noise music. Nancy, like agents of active noise, chooses to take the sacrificial gesture literally in his reading of Bataille. This allows him to critique Bataille's notion of community as one indebted to a rather classical notion of subversion. In this way, we can draw parallels with Reynolds' understanding of the radical, which he equates with a shock effect, as well as Hegarty's notion of failure. Reynolds retains a rather antiquated view of transgression which leads to his suggestion that it is a rather prosaic mode of expression. Hegarty, on the other hand, upholds the power of

transgression but complicates its possibility through his notion of failure. Now, what is distinct in Nancy from these two theorists, particularly Reynolds, is the idea of passivity; Nancy's own notion of community makes more room for the consequences of impossibility in a way which the language of active noise typically does not. But Nancy's mistake is like that of the language of active noise in that both assume the

subversive gesture is to be taken literally. Put differently, both Nancy and theorists of active noise do not believe that the subversive gesture might in fact possess more complex and nuanced connotations. What Blanchot argues, against Nancy, is precisely this: that Bataille's erotic expressions were never meant to be taken literally. And what we are arguing by proposing a language of passive noise, is that the material expressions of subversion in Japanese noise music might in fact only distract us from a much deeper and more complex version of alterity that was never meant to be about completion.

Thus, rather than interpret the community centred around Japanese noise music as a failed community in the way Hegarty would, and in the way Nancy sees the community of Acéphale as a failed community, it seems conceptually more accurate (if we follow Libertson's definition of transgression and recall our discussion of death and waiting) to suggest that Japanese noise music, with its emphasis on transgression and death, is a community that is distinctly unavowable. But how might we think this unavowable nature of Japanese noise music? The crucial component when defining noise in the language of active noise, as has been discussed throughout this thesis, is volition; the language that has dominated the musicological terrain of Japanese noise music foregrounds its ability, or at least its intention, to challenge the dominant order of music, art and meaning. Even impossibility, as it appears in this language, is considered to be a by-product of failure as part of this muscular avowal. For this reason Japanese noise music might be thought collectively, as a community of musicians who look to transgress – transgression being understood here as an active and wilful subversion – the dominant order of music making as well as performance. This is perhaps suggestive of what is unavowable within it, as if what is unavowable is equal to what Japanese noise music actively refuses.

As Hegarty and Novak explain, what collectivises this type of music is also what makes it disparate. Novak explains this in his account when he suggests that, having begun his field work in 1998 with the intention of defining this seemingly

elusive style of music, 'the sounds and performances that fell under the umbrella of Noise were too inconsistent to be categorized with quick-and-dirty summaries of sound, aesthetics, audiences, or regional histories.'<sup>14</sup> It is true that while the idea of making noise connects the artists to the scene, expressions of these ideas may vary greatly, just as Sachiko M offers a very different, and contrasting, approach to noise to Merzbow. In his discussion Novak seems to follow Hegarty in the suggestion that Japanese noise music is both a category of music and equally the impossibility of categorization; its disparate configurations and seemingly limitless sounds are what define it and equally what thwart any semantic unity. 'As a genre, Noise can,' Novak argues, 'be recognized as part of music and a meaningful signal in itself.' But noise also, at the same time, 'makes musical categorization seem impossible.'<sup>15</sup> For both Novak and Hegarty it is the way in which Japanese noise music actively refuses any easy genre mapping and any comfortable collectivisation that gives noise its semblance of identity.

<sup>14</sup> David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 117.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.

If we follow this understanding then it would be tempting to understand the unavowable community of Japanese noise music via its active refusal of a scene and

its deliberate inconsistencies. Because we are focusing on Japan and because, undeniably, there is a type of music known as noise music, in which both theorists and fans alike share an investment, we are able to gesture toward an idea of a community, made up of artists and consumers. But because the sound and performative expressions of this music vary greatly, and because this music actively tries to work against semblances of meaning and continuity, we might argue that it is a community that works actively against ideas of community, scenes and collective meaning. This, however, would be to read the language of transgression literally, like theorists operating with the language of active noise do, and to assume, in a similar way as Nancy assumes when reading Bataille, that no other version of alterity is present in the community of Japanese noise music other than the one seemingly evoked by its violent gestures. This idea would also reduce the nature of what is unavowable to the region of thematisation which, as we have argued to be the case with the nature of alterity, would in fact dilute what is proper to the idea of the unavowable – because what the 'unavowable' names in the community of Japanese

noise music is its anterior exposure to impossibility. What this means is that Japanese noise music is not a community founded on the possibility of noise or a collective act of subversion. This, by extension, equally means that the unavowable community of noise cannot be retained as a consequence of a participant's deliberate refusal of community. Instead, the unavowable community of noise forms beyond the control of its participants as it is founded on the limitlessness of death and waiting as opposed to the immanence of death. The unavowable community, as Blanchot explains it, 'includes the exteriority of being that excludes it – and exteriority that thought does not master.'<sup>16</sup> What is unavowable about the notion of community and thus unavowable about the community of Japanese noise music, is not within the remit of this community. The manifestation of the community of Japanese noise music is animated by an exteriority that is its passive condition. As we discussed in chapter two, transgression does not name a sacrificial effort but the contamination within meaning of an alterity that exists prior to and constitutive of the very condition of meaning. Before the community of Japanese noise music is able to question the very idea of its community through its heterogeneous sonic output, this community is already other to itself and therefore, already without community as one properly unavowable.

<sup>16</sup> Blanchot, *Unavowable Community*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

The community that is said to belong to Japanese noise music can thus be thought next to the community of Acéphale, not because of a sacrificial identity but because it belongs already, like Acéphale, to the impossibility of being and the passivity of alterity, which Libertson understands as transgression. 'If,' as Blanchot writes, 'we had the unfinishedness or incompleteness of existence' as the principle of community, 'we have the accomplishment of community in that which, precisely, limits it.'<sup>17</sup> This limit marks the centre of the community of Japanese noise music and Bataillean communities alike, and the erotic/sacrificial aesthetic of these two communities serve only as a reminder of what is impossible within them. This is why Bataille maintains the question of death in the region of the other; a region where alterity cannot be reduced to conceptuality or accomplishment, but is held infinitely as a perpetual withdrawal. Bataille inscribes his idea of community 'in works only to affirm the unknowing that haunts them,' all the while knowing that he 'cannot reach

it"18 through this work or through his communities. With this Bataille is affirming the passivity of impossibility as opposed to the eventuality of impossibility as it is understood in the language of active noise.

18 Ibid.

It is, however, important to note that despite arguing that the community around Japanese noise music is necessarily unavowable like Bataillean communities, this does not automatically mean that the participants of this community deliberately try to evoke the nature of what is unavowable within them. While for Blanchot and Liberton, Bataille was always a philosopher of passivity, conscious and deliberate in the various expressions of anteriority that sustain in his work, it is indeterminable to what extent the participants of Japanese noise music are conscious of the reality of passivity and the true radicalism of noise music's condition. Certainly it seems that a number of practitioners within this scene are content with a classical and very subjective concept of freedom regarding transgression. These artists, as we have seen, use eroticism, extreme volume and death starkly in an attempt to overcome the normativity of performance and musicality. That being said, this exercise in transgression might be at odds with passivity or it may very well be a deliberate irony aimed at exposing the impossibility of this gesture, much like Bataille. Equally, the more restrained gestures of Japanese noise music may be more vigilant over passivity than their literal counterparts, or it may be that these efforts, other than their surface differences, are in fact no different from any other deliberate exercise in subversion. But what we have been arguing with the expression of passive noise is that beyond, as coming before, the intentions of the author is an alterity that exceeds the final expression of this music. By arguing against the order of active noise, the intention is not to reconceptualise authorial intent by suggesting that Japanese noise practitioners are in fact deliberate practitioners of passivity. The aim instead is to suggest that the excessive gestures of Japanese noise music, regardless of intent, work as a gateway to understanding alterity and noise differently from the way in which they are typically thought. Put simply, the language of active noise is not attentive enough to the density and complexity of Japanese noise music. With its emphasis on voluntarism and negativity this language reduces, to the limitations of categorisation, the actual nature of alterity as it exists in art and as it exists especially in Japanese noise music with its heterogeneous sonic output and conceptual uncertainty. Passive noise, on the

other hand, allows us to retain the alterity of noise conceptually as a phenomenological impossibility which ultimately makes the language of noise limitless.

It is with this notion of limitlessness that we can understand the purpose, if indeed passivity can be considered as having a purpose, of passive noise. As a concept that resists the notion of intention as well as the idea of community, it certainly begs the question what the purpose of thinking about passivity might be. If passivity is what frustrates the language of thematisation, as we have shown to be the case with the language of active noise, then where does the language of passivity ultimately get us? Is this discussion not eventually self-defeating? In fact, the notion of passivity, far from being self-defeating and limiting, is ultimately the point at which the limitlessness of conceptuality, which includes the concept of noise, can be glimpsed.

In his recent book, *Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot's Exilic Writing*, Christopher

Fynsk argues that Blanchot cannot be understood as 'dwelling with the negative in his writings,'<sup>19</sup> no matter how far he emphasised notions of death, dying, affliction and impossibility. Fynsk later goes on to cite a passage from *The Infinite Conversation* in which Blanchot clearly states that the impossible is not 'there in order to make thought capitulate, but in order to allow it to announce itself according to a measure other than that of power.'<sup>20</sup> What Fynsk is trying to foreground is something which is often lost in readings of Blanchot. That is, the notion of passivity as it accords with impossibility is not a mode of scepticism. What Blanchot is trying to demonstrate through his philosophical commentaries, which eventually rupture at the point of certainty, and through his novels, which are replete with impossible encounters, is that in language (particularly the language of art) a relation with the immeasurable is given. And because what is given is immeasurable it must, by definition, be 'indissociable from a yes'<sup>21</sup> as much as it is from a no.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Fynsk, *Last Steps: Maurice Blanchot's Exilic Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* [1969], trans. Susan Hanson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Fynsk, *Last Steps*, 7.

What this means for the language of passive noise, particularly as it relates to the community centred around Japanese noise music, is that far from being self-

defeating, the language of passive noise, in fact, opens the restrictive economy of the discourse of Japanese noise music to a much broader and nuanced mode of expression. Where this music is typically said, in the language of the active, to be a music obsessed with subversion and antagonism, the language of passive noise exposes this emphasis to its inherent impossibility in a gesture that is inseparable from hope; the hope that Japanese noise music might be understood one day by concepts broader than the ones allowed by negativity and radicalism. Because Japanese noise music's excess is always to come, suspended as it is in the temporality of waiting, its potential to mean is never affirmed nor negated. As such, with the language of passive noise, we are reminded that the complexity of Japanese noise music can never be reduced. Like the noise and silence that have, for Blanchot, burned all access to the origin of the Sirens song, passive noise refuses any kind of access to the origin of noise. And this impossibility is the limitlessness that animates the complex language about noise and Japanese noise music.



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