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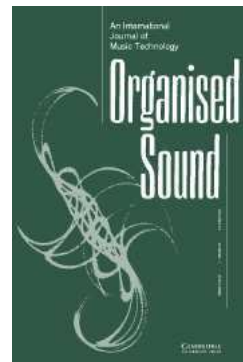
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## Just what is it that makes today's noise music so different, so appealing?

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# Just what is it that makes today's noise music so different, so appealing?<sup>1</sup>

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**This article explores how 'noise music' uses its influences, how it refers to them, and what occurs formally, when using influence self-consciously and formally. Specifically, it takes two artists, Nurse With Wound and The New Blockaders, that emerged at the same time as 'industrial music', and through different strategies, incorporated visual art influences into their work, to the point where influence as question is raised. Referring to Harold Bloom, the article notes that influence is not linear, nor is it fixed. The article begins with some general considerations about what noise is and how it works when in contact with music; it then looks in detail first at some works by Nurse With Wound, then at works by The New Blockaders. In so doing, it also pays attention to the material presentation of those works, which is a key part of the formal work of these artists. It concludes with some thoughts about how we can not only apply Bloom to experimental music, but that 'noise music' can provide itself as a theorisation of influence.**

Experimental music, like art history, has developed a canon of key artists, movements and works. But can noise have a canon? Can we fix what 'noise/music' is? I would argue that we cannot, even if we have to acknowledge a history of what has been identified as moments of noise. Noise raises the question of an avant-garde as such. Whilst art histories are content to map a sequence of changes, critics have stepped outside this, notably Peter Bürger and Rosalind Krauss, to note that the avant-garde is always paradoxical. It should be ahead, but it quickly dissipates as avant-garde, as it is accepted, recuperated, understood. Even to recognise something as avant-garde (or noise) is to reduce its noisiness, its disruption. This does not need to paralyse us, for it leads us precisely to the idea that noise is not something timeless, but is rooted in time, despite itself. Noise music is something that operates within the paradox of the avant-garde which has *no proper time to be*: it is always ahead, or behind (in being slotted into a canon).

Noise is a negativity: defined in opposition to something else, for example, meaning, music, structure, skill, beauty, etc. Historically, it has been thought of as literally negative: 'that's just noise'. But as we know,

what is noise at one historical or cultural moment or location is not so elsewhere. Noise has been thought of as a threat (notably by Attali), which can be a social as well as aesthetic danger, but it is also a challenge, and the raising the question of norms (of music or behaviours), and how they come about. However and whenever defined, something that brings noise (even if it ultimately *contains* it) returns us to a lost origin of meaning, music, communality.

The presence of noises not produced by proper musical means might indicate that the listener is encountering noise music, but this is not enough to necessarily make something noise. But noise music acts as if it could be noise, as if it can stay outside of time, and as if it can participate in the stately time of musical progression and change, in the same way that it acts as if were music (performances, works, recordings, bands) and as if it were noise (disobeying or exceeding 'acceptable' musical practice). Those who consider themselves to be practitioners of noise music, or something like 'genuinely challenging experimental music' are often highly aware of connections of influence, historical precedents and the state of the art today, and yet must use this in a way that refuses those connections even as it brings them out. So, in another 'as if' moment, noise music presents itself as if it were part of a canon, and as if it were a rejection not only of the specific canon, but of the idea of canon itself. This is basically the same for much of art production, once the idea that art must alter over time to be truly creative is in place (in the West this dates to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), so how or why would something like noise music be different? The noise is the important part: it is a rejection of the primacy of transmission of acceptable signal, it is something that seeks to not be recognised as valid. It does not try to renew, but to undermine, transgress rather than subvert. This is why John Cage, despite being one of the main reference points for noise in and around music, could be said to not really be engaged in noise, as Douglas Kahn (1999) notes (arguing that Cage is trying to expand musicality, reveal the music of all things).

The path of noise in music is deceptively clear: Luigi Russolo, John Cage, Edgard Varèse, synthesising

<sup>1</sup>Borrowed from Richard Hamilton's painting of a similar title from 1956.

machines, *musique concrète*, electronic music/Stockhausen, free jazz, industrial music, Japanese noise, various digital forms, with honourable mentions of other precursors, whether before that twentieth-century sequence, or alongside. This is not a false lineage, as the significance attached to it cannot be wished away (it is also useful to be able to point to precursors as validation, or, alternatively as points of reference), but it is one that is retrospectively imposed. For this to be a noise sequence, we have to acknowledge that rupture, disturbance and refusal are what link those moments, rather than there being a smooth developmental curve. Even within this simple and teleological tale lies a curiosity, which is that the many moments along it all comprise a rejection of standard forms of music, in favour of an at least implied musicality outside of what is or was at one point considered music. Because of this, many of the reference points are outside of music. The Fluxus movement, in its 1960s heyday, produced much that could be considered noise music (noise occurring in place of music), within wider art events (hence Michael Nyman's [1999, originally 1974] positing of Fluxus and also minimalism as genuine experimental music, as opposed to direct inheritors of 'classical music' in programme music, however adventurous).

The question of origins, precedents and influences is a vexed one for 'noise musicians', listeners and critics alike, but the key is that if what is going on is something like noise, then it must raise the question of influence even as it plays it out in the production of works. This is not as straightforward as being influenced by say John Coltrane, and therefore working that influence out through working through and developing or personalising a style or approach. In the groups I am looking at in this article, we can see that influence and canon play out both more literally and more obliquely, and I will claim that this type of playing out might be one way of identifying something as noise music. Again, this does not mean that we can definitively list any particular people as 'being noise', rather that they approach noise as something positive whilst being aware of its status as something produced negatively (in opposition to something else). Specifically, I will be looking at two artists active for over twenty-five years: Nurse With Wound and The New Blockaders. The question of influence, of influence made into question occurs differently in the two cases, but the connection is the time they started recording (1979 and 1982, respectively) – shortly after punk, and in the midst of industrial music (whilst not really being the latter), and the connections to both *musique concrète* and looser music and art from a similar period (but more concentrated in the 1960s). As well as what they do with influence, I will also think about influence as something that issues from their work.

Nurse With Wound was, for their first album, Steven Stapleton, Heman Pathak and John Fothergill. Over the years, the personnel have altered, with Stapleton the

constant, and Colin Potter a regular. As their early music is often harsh and peculiar, combined with erotic or violent imagery, they have been assimilated into the category of 'industrial music', and despite what Stapleton says, and despite the range of references that crop up in *Nurse With Wound*, I imagine that this is how the early audience saw their material. Over the course of time, the music has become subtler, but still on the margins of musicality. Stapleton has always been explicit about the sources and location of his project, which is, broadly, in the lineage of experimental art music, whether rock-based (like 'kosmische' music or 'krautrock') or more in the 'high art' tradition (like *musique concrète*). He also emphasises his connection to visual arts movements of the early twentieth century: Futurism, dada, and Surrealism. It is this last, above all, that permeates Stapleton's oeuvre:

'Nurse music is surrealist music', Stapleton asserts. 'Today surrealism has been swamped by advertising and has lost all of its purity. That's why it's down to me to carry the banner for what's genuinely odd, giving a completely different angle to the way instruments and compositions are looked at'. His notion of 'surrealism in sound' involves channelling the murky subconscious into music that provokes unpredictable reactions and tests particular mental states (Keenan 2003: 52).

This faith in a movement that is more popular than critically rated (due to its de-emphasis on formalism) is striking, and whilst I would not say *Nurse With Wound* achieve the communicative dream of surrealism – the transfer of mental states through art – they manage to be faithful to that movement and work as an avant-garde (which arguably surrealism never was, being more of call to order, compared to dada, than the freeing up it presented itself as). Other than at some points on the early albums, Stapleton avoids cheap quirkiness, and the model of Surrealism we should have in mind is the darker side – of Max Ernst and Georges Bataille, rather than the vacuous Dalí, in line with J.G. Ballard's work (despite this latter's strange championing of Dalí), and with the playfulness of Frank Zappa.

*Nurse With Wound's* first album is *Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and Umbrella* (1979), a clatter of toys, tools, instruments played 'unmusically' (except for some misplaced guitar 'work', which I suppose adds to the oddness by contrasting with the rest). There are howls, scrapes, drones, rattly and bumpy percussions, arrhythmic rhythms (complex but not necessarily worked out in advance as structuring devices), croaky vocals. The longest track 'Blank Capsules of Embroidered Cellophane', is the most satisfying part, mildly structured by the return of bursts of skittering percussion, often, I would think, one-handed, which is an important strategy for undermining the temptation to uniform rhythm. There is plenty of scraping and scratching and two bursts of electric saw,

once about halfway though, the next after 23.30 minutes.

The title comes from Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* [The Songs of Maldoror], a book that was a great inspiration to Surrealism, as it combined eroticism, violence, arbitrariness, and a sense of absurdity as a potential for creativity, and ties in with the practice at work in the production of the album, which essentially consists of live improvisations, free of rehearsal, plan or pretty much any other sort of musical convention. Instead sounds would encounter each other randomly, without the skills usually associated with jazz or jazz-based improvised music. The blank materiality of the music (free of meaning, explicit purpose, etc.) is counterposed with the accompanying materials. The title's provenance also contrasts with the origin of the cover image, a detailed drawing of a leather-clad dominatrix, breasts exposed and whip in hand, from a porn magazine cover. Beyond this, we have a photographic collage (in the inside on the first CD issue) including bits of the members' faces. Then comes the key element: the famous list of influences, a simple and lengthy list (numbering in the hundreds) of influences, and stuff from Stapleton's record collection. Fanatics have long sought to chase down the more obscure parts of the list, and it is not entirely trustworthy for this purpose. The list itself is introduced with the title 'Categories strain, crack and sometimes break, under their burden – step out of the space provided' (*Chance Meeting* sleeve notes). Few albums can have come with such an extensive framing. The sounds within it are to be imagined as a crystallisation of those influences – a crystallisation through *listening*, rather than through musical training in the standard sense. We have to remember that in 1979 there was no established discourse of a history of experimental music, or noise, or noise music: the explicit and implicit workings of the reference points were far less obvious then, more bizarre. At a factual level, many of the artists listed have since been made available on CD or record, or achieved a higher profile as experimental or avant-garde rock music built up an audience. At another level, the list should not be seen as a manual but as a properly arcane document, which does not contain the music but matches it. The listener is encouraged to follow up the names in the list, but the initial effect is to show the immensity of potential strangeness that is 'out there'. Even the reference to Russolo on the back cover's collage might well be a given today, but not so then, and presumably not so now, to people new to peculiar music. The overall form of *Chance Meeting* is not to encourage knowledge as possession, but knowledge as process, involving mystery and loss of control. The notion of arcane knowledge is faithful to Surrealism, but not restricted to it: it can often mean replacing understanding with fascination. The initiates will gradually acquire understanding, but at every stage in

arcane knowledge, mystery is the key – there is always to be something left out, apart from meaning. As well as the use of noises to make a noisy deconstruction of music in the material of *Chance Meeting*, the noise of this album is in its dissemination of meaning of canon control to the point where these things become undermined. In short, to track down the sources, or congratulate yourself on how many you already know is to miss the point.

The sheer range of reference also mitigates against the idea of a simply linear story of the progress of 'noise music', where the cognoscenti can bask in having processed all preceding forms, and where the next move can be the only best move. The proliferation of reference here substitutes a contemporary evolutionary model of branching, bottlenecks and hidden continuities for a sub-Darwinian belief in progress toward greater, better, harsher experimentation. Across, within and above the list is a vaginal cut, with Nurse With Wound written in it: from these NWW was born, perhaps, but also a cut, a break, a point of separation, a giving over of agency. The masculine linearity of the list is disrupted but also permitted by the feminine intervention.

This process is exaggerated, taken to excess, on the 2001 reissue of *Chance Meeting*, subtitled 'special edition'. In addition to the original tracks is a replaying of the list in all its proliferating potential. Long-term collaborator (and leader of Current 93) David Tibet intones the names on the list, manipulated by Colin Potter. Further sounds are produced by Stapleton. The track 'Strain, Crack, Break' takes off from the heading of the list, and is made to repeat many times at the opening part of the track, emphasising, for those who had not eyes to see it, but maybe can hear, that the list is not about authority but immersion. Tibet's voice comes over in many layers, forming a choral round. The list is worked through, in order by one of those 'voices', but this 'voice' is constantly changing, after every few names. Other 'voices' start at different points or come to be only to halt, stammer and stutter one name (e.g. 'Guru Guru'). Gradually what are now trademark Stapleton sounds: drones, screeching metals, clatters, and so on come in, while the voice is further slowed down, sped up, twisted, echoed, and cut. The 'messiness' of the track fights any suggestion of the idea of canon as a rigid set of materials to master, but it comes at a point where Nurse With Wound have themselves become canonical, hence the importance of turning on their material, making it turn in on itself: through the list's dispersal, and with Tibet's voice itself continually altered. Arriving into the canon has further revealed the fragility of 'the' canon, and the randomness of influence.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Concerned for his own mortality, Tibet did not produce a box set or a best of, but played all of Current 93's output in layers on/as the album *The Great in the Small* (2001).

This process of working through the canon by disrupting it is also in evidence in the move to a more manipulated sound, redolent of *musique concrète*, but also apart from it. Like Pierre Schaeffer, who sought to remove the ‘dramatic context’ of sounds in order to make new narratives (Schaeffer 1952: 32), the albums that follow *Chance Meeting* are atmospheric collages, with cuts and harsh intrusions never allowing an easy ambience to settle. Unlike Schaeffer, Nurse With Wound allowed a musicality that did not rely on this alienation of sound from origin. Instead, as on ‘I Am Blind’ on *Homotopy to Marie* (1981), music is approached to be withheld. On this track, moans combine with metallic, reverbed clicking and clattering, and gradually these give way to creaking and stranger vocalising. Like Schaeffer, music is allowed in, but its purpose is not to be one sound among many, rather it is something to punctuate the possible portentousness that builds up (like the ‘comedy brass finale’ of ‘The Schürz’ on the same album). The context of Nurse With Wound is significantly different to that of Schaeffer’s State-sponsored and laboratory-style approach, coming after a huge amount of experimental and often untutored ‘rock’ versions of what *musique concrète* was up to, and arriving at a point where punk and ‘industrial’ music had altered audience expectations and demands. Whilst Stapleton’s macabre visual aesthetic perhaps leads to a too-easy identification with early industrial music, there is always an unlaboured and authentically Surrealist humour going on (even if there are slightly too many ‘mysterious’ French vocals on the early albums) – at its height in the *Sylvie and Babs Hi-Fi Companion* (1985), which is an extended run at classic roll ‘n’ roll and easy listening tunes, with a ‘cast of thousands’. As well as being a very early musical mobilisation of kitsch, it also provides a way into the notion of a noise ‘cover’. It might be tenuous to say that certain musical approaches offer a different way of doing covers, but it seems to me that if an experimental artist does a cover, it raises curious questions: how does the artist who wishes to break with musical convention engage with respect? Is an homage by Nurse With Wound any different to a pop ‘diva’ doing the same? Possibly not, and this risk is part of what is *not* at stake for the pop performer. Is the artist attacking the ‘original’, making it kitsch, where once it at least tried not to be? Such ‘irony’ would be simply a statement about the superiority of the covering artist, self-reflection heightening the rationalist, controlling force that already structures music (and that noise tries to undermine or avoid). Nurse With Wound fall into neither trap, even on *Sylvie and Babs*, which announces itself as kitsch, its cover mimicking the conductor-led easy listening albums of the 1950s and 1960s, claiming it to be completed ‘with titillating orchestrations by Murray Fontana’. Among the pop titles is Nurse With Wound’s ‘Astral Dustbin Dirge’. Visually, this album is

in the genre of Bert Kaempfert, James Last *et al*, slightly troubled by the slightly dubious and seedy collage on the inside cover. Musically, ‘You Walrus Hurt the One You Love’ promises something wry, even quirky. Luckily, the collaging of easy listening, soundtrack material, mid-twentieth-century pop songs with bursts of sawing, shouting, random vocal interjections, sound effects and so on, raises the album, or more accurately lowers it from the podium of smug appreciation of the awful. Instead, the album has to be seen as a multi-layered ‘homage’, as it recalls the work of early studio experimenters like Les Baxter and Joe Meek. It is worth noting that the vast bulk of ‘easy listening’ orchestral collections were already covers – were being brought into the easy soundworld – just as here those songs and snippets are brought into that of Nurse With Wound. The album is also like a variety show, starting off with cocktail piano and gradually introducing a cast of dozens of Stapleton’s associates (as the Murray Fontana Orchestra). Particularly now, and since the advent of easy sampling through computers, Stapleton is far from the only person to have surmounted kitsch in re-appropriating music deemed worthless, dated or too pleasant, but what made this album interesting was the contrast between sample and something like ‘noise music’, which is where a noise relation is set up. ‘Great Balls of Fur’, the other half of the album, is much more performed, a combination of uncongealing cosmic rock and karaoke by the lost and bewildered.

Stapleton would return to this vein of music, but with a different approach, on *Who Can I Turn to Stereo?*, a Lynchean and near-melodious reworking of the music of Perez Prado, and it is in the even more direct cover of Jacques (sometimes Jac) Berrocal’s ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll Station’ that we can see the cover incorporating the original, not as part of a repertoire, or even of an accumulation of cultural capital through reference points, but in making the originality of the original tangential.

Nurse With Wound issued *Rock ‘n’ Roll Station* in 1994, revisiting it as *Second Pirate Session* in 1998. ‘Second pirate session’ is a line from within the song ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll Station’. In this, the vocalist (Vince Taylor for Berrocal, Stapleton in the cover version) recites a story that may be about an observatory, or a recording session (‘this is a session where we can do what we want to do’), or may be the telling of one of those stories within another. It continually refers to itself, and to the possibility of coming into existence, of music as potential (‘Jacques’ bicycle is music. Everything is possible. Possible’). Berrocal is indeed playing his bicycle, while an unchanging bass riff supplies rhythm. The track ‘itself’ fades away, and is replaced by clinking cups and laughter, as people listen to a recording of ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll Station’ in the background. Nurse With Wound’s version replaces the bass with a digitally created rhythm, paced exactly

the same as Berrocal's version. Jacques' bicycle as music grows another layer as it becomes an influence on Stapleton, and the potential continues to multiply – because of this play always already launched in the 'rock 'n' station', nothing needs to be added. The performing is the adding, not just through another reading of a text, but because this song is viral in the first place. Nurse With Wound conclude by replicating the 'coda' of the 'original'<sup>3</sup> through a very particular substitution. As the 'cover' ends, Stapleton intones a few lines about Russolo, over a different backing, and in the (aural) distance. The detail of the operation to heighten the proliferation of the 'original' can be heard further, if we return to Berrocal's album *Parallèles* (originally 1977, reissue 2001). The track 'Bric-à-Brac', which constituted side two of the LP, ends with a French-accented voice (uncredited, but feasibly Berrocal) intoning a few lines about Russolo, and returning to some of the lines of the track 'Rock 'n' Roll Station'. Through Nurse With Wound's bookending, Stapleton is able to incorporate the rest of 'Bric-à-Brac' as influence – with its banging, scraping, odd instruments and atmosphere, where improvisation creates what in hindsight was always already an acoustic version of Nurse With Wound.

Through a range of opposing strategies, Nurse With Wound have managed to summon influence without either letting it go, becoming slavish to it, or even adapting it. The original influences become incorporated into a world of an 'other musicality' apart from a musical reference system which would think of a lineage, of greats and timeless classics. With Stapleton, music or art become timely, even if that time is now complex, one of a sequence of returns and reversals in precedence. This is not absolutely different from all covers, nor is it separate from plunderphonic use of samples (like, for example, Ground Zero's 'cover' of Heiner and Goebbels' sampling cover of the Revolutionary Peking Opera [*Revolutionary Pekinese Opera ver 1.28*, 1996]) but what Nurse With Wound's approach to influence indicates is something of the complex existence (only ever fleeting, only ever gone or to come) of the avant-garde, and also of how influence, when not treated as a simple, ranked list, is uncontrollable.

Like Nurse With Wound, The New Blockaders (TNB) combine use of non-musical instruments, art inspiration, and a critique of musicality that is designed to renew. TNB, who are Richard Rupenus and Philip Rupenus, release their first album *Changez Les Blockeurs!* in 1982 (also on *Gesamtnichtswerk*, CD 1). The 'instrumentation' is made up of objects and bits of rooms being scraped, dragged, thumped, scratched, etc. The soundworld that emerges is something that

continues throughout their work, albeit sometimes featuring more processed elements, especially if in collaboration with others. What marks this first album out is its refusal to go beyond what is actually a very limited set of sound possibilities – whilst there is continual clatter, it does not aspire to variety. Unlike other of their releases, there is a dynamic, with changes in emphasis, mainly in the percussive elements – 'Part One', for example calms down toward the end, dissipating any momentum it might have acquired and in place of what could have been construed as rhythms are staccato metallic scrapes. Throughout, the percussiveness is jerky, but also insistent, as if trying to create an object that is both resistant, mass-ive, and also something that exists only to be pummelled away. 'Part Two' ends with quiet creaks (having taken in a dog yapping and something like elephantine trumpeting). Clatters give way to bumps and finally, a hiss like dust.

On the face of it, this is very similar to the recordings and performance of *Einstürzende Neubauten*, who use electrical tools, metals, bits of buildings, and so on at about the same time. But the German group are *using* destruction, where TNB are destructive of instrumentation. TNB refuse the *evocations* that characterise 'industrial music', and collapse signification into material. Initially, unlike Schaeffer or Nurse With Wound, the sound seems to maintain its 'dramatic context' – i.e. we know, and are encouraged to notice, what is being played, however unusual it is in the context of music (recording, performance, artwork). But TNB refuse a virtuosity of the newly musicalised object. If a chair or wall is to be used 'as percussion' it will not be salvaged as a musical instrument, but will retain its flatness, its essential unmusicality. Later recordings and performances even lose the residual possibility of 'properly playing' objects in an indistinction of sound.

Refusal is a key part of their strategy. Also in 1982 came the 'TNB Manifesto', which lays out a strong rejection of all art, the past and meaning. In being 'anti-music, anti-art, anti-magazines, anti-books, anti-films, anti-clubs, anti-communications' they aim for new thoughts, new actions etc. (sleeve notes, TNB, *Gesamtnichtswerk*). Their rejection is purposeful, but also contains the same seeds of contradiction propagated by the multiple dada manifestoes: 'we will make a point of being pointless'. Their philosophical nihilism (as opposed to the use of that word as an accusation of hypocrisy, cynicism or violence) is complete: everything is to be refused, even the meaning of the refusal. In this, The New Blockaders set themselves apart from Nurse With Wound: the former are genuinely rehearsing and re-presenting the purpose of dada – a continual questioning and destruction being in its own right creative, and not just a way of clearing a path, or effecting a cleansing (as some parts of Futurist manifestoes suggest). The manifesto does announce 'we must destroy in order to go forward!', but the

<sup>3</sup>If I seem to be overstating the tenuousness of Berrocal's version being the actual original, I should add that the role of the listener is important too, and like many other 'covers' of 'originals' the original only comes to light after, thanks to awareness increased by the cover.

important thing is how this is achieved – the going forward of TNB music is always a dwelling in the destruction of musicality. Nurse With Wound's reclamation of Surrealism is different, even if the sound strategies can seem similar: for Surrealism is about revealing more creation, finding more references and allusions.

Beyond the connections to specific movements, both groups recall the era of high modernism as a refusal of all that came before or at the same time. The TNB manifesto summons a moment where the artistic avant-garde imagined they could change society through art and exclamation marks. This manifesto becomes like the Nurse With Wound list: it doesn't quite work in the way it seems to at first: it is much more of a commentary on writing manifestoes: a meta-manifesto, which, because it takes 'the manifesto' idea seriously, ends up being less than a manifesto (and this in a good way). It both means what it says and realises the impossibility of this working, replaying Nietzsche's dictum 'Nothing is true! Everything is possible!' The sounds that we get are in place of music, and this writing is in place of a real programme for change. Above all, what characterises the attitude and the sound is refusal – hence the 'blockade', but how to keep this fresh without changing is a dilemma.

One of the ways out has been collaboration, and ultimately the outward contagion that bears fruit on *Viva Negativa!*, two four-album sets of 'versions' of TNB works. But before we get there, it is worth tracking TNB a bit further in their own right. The 'Live Offensives' of *Gesamtnichtswerk*, CD 2, continue the harsh, often jerky percussiveness, with pipe rolling and bashing to the fore on 'Morden Tower <10/83>'. All four performances establish a mass of sound that avoids light and shade in favour of a randomly phased strobing of sounds. There is no attempt to make high-quality recordings, so tape hiss and loss of sharpness also become part of the block of sound that is set up. Noise music is always an attempt to re-assert the material over the musical, and this means not hiding the process of production as digital sound attempts/claims to do. Loss of quality is not inherently something to do with noise music, as mp3 sound compression and selective heightening of vocals over other elements demonstrate, but the boundary between means of reproduction and material to be reproduced in The New Blockaders' material blurs, as does the line between what is acceptable and unacceptable on a recording, as does the distinction between music and non-music (where, in this case, music would just mean the sounds purposely created or replayed by 'musicians').

Everything about TNB entails refusal, and yet this refusal to even be anti-art is potentially problematic, because firstly, it is a common gesture, and secondly, it had in this case produced a large body of 'not-even-anti-art'. The title of their collection, *Gesamtnichtswerk*, is

important here. It reminds us of Wagner's dream of the 'total art work' – the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but the art is replaced by nothing, a nothing that is emphasised in the sleeve notes, as being outside of everything, an emptiness that becomes total rather than being a contained space of nothingness, or some sort of nothing reserve. In place of art, then, is nothing – no renewal, no radicality to inspire. As it is a collection, it is not about a total single moment of nothing, but the sprawl of nothing where there should be something, which means the 'total' part refers to the entirety of music and art (scraps of which litter the booklets). Clearly, though, creation has occurred in this nothingness, just as many currently suspect of black holes, but creation based on refusal is not the same as affirmative art, art that believes itself, and this because, not despite, of the 'manifesto'. The gesture is backed up by a material working-through of 'nothing' where art/music is supposed to be, and where a space has been cleared, there will be no building, only more clearing.

The third CD of *Gesamtnichtswerk* offers two 'symphonies': 'Simphonie in X Major' and 'Simphonie in O Minor': neither of which are recognised keys for composition ... 'Simphonie in X Major' begins with huge industrial blasts, and moves through phases of machinery destroying itself – there are rhythms, made up of booming and howling. After 7.10 in the 'First Movement', the noisier part stops and gives way to scraping and thumping, building back up to more overwhelming blasts. The 'Second Movement' is crashier. 'Simphonie in O Minor' is mostly quiet hiss, fizzing, and, gradually rising in volume from virtual inaudibility, a background throbs within it. The symphony is of course the privileged mode of 'classical' music at its height as an elitist art (culturally as well as in terms of class reception and production). Like the realist novel, its steady narrative and teleology reassures the higher classes of European society. Its structure makes it easy to construct a linear history of aesthetic beauty around it, suggesting a sense of order at all levels. Modernist experiments moved away from the symphony and/or sonata form, and in the case of noise music, attempted to leave form behind (somewhat optimistically and didactically). TNB take the symphony into the woods and pound it until it stops speaking its language of reconciliation and resolution. Narrative is specifically undone through the nonlinear trudge through 'non-music' in the first 'simphonie', and through absence in the second (without being the smug silence of John Cage's *4'33"*). This rejection of narrative is crucial in returning us to the question of influence – which can no longer be heard in terms of inheritance but must be seen as agonistic and retrospective. Not only this, but it is undone – not refused, the spurious belief in individual genius unconnected to history stripped back.

This rejection of the notion of the creative genius (as seen in dada) extends to TNB collaborations, which

range from Organum through the Haters to Merzbow, to the 'versions' or 'tributes' on *Viva Negativa!* The working methods are kept obscure, but it mostly seems as if material is being shared and altered, rather than the jazz model of the individual player finding a like-minded spirit and realising some sort of meeting of musical minds through presence. Similarly, TNB collaboration is not like remixing, where one self-present individual brings their style to another, in a mutual reinforcement of supposed greatness. Instead, individuality is swamped as the material gets more isolated from any controlling 'artistic' force, and aims for the self-generation and self-maintenance of living organisms. From the descriptions here, it might seem this is a very dry 'music' but it breathes, albeit slightly toxically. Its self-containedness, its removal from individual fingerprints being the key to its uncontrollability for listener and performer alike. This is not to say there is no recognisable style, or that a TNB/Organum recording (such as *Pulp*) doesn't suggest elements of individual styles combining. But once the 'music' is essentially made of noises, structured noisily and disruptively, without offering a welcoming form, any recombination takes it further from artistically recognisable modes of talent, skill, etc. even if a certain audience would 'appreciate' this music *as if* it had those attributes.

The manifesto too exists *as if* it were a manifesto, as if it returned us to dada, but without being merely a knowing reference or something in a 'retro' style. It is there again at the opening of the *Viva Negativa!*, both written and recorded on seven-inch single. Underneath it lies several hours of material, where TNB material has been ingested by others and 'tributes' made: the manifesto's seriousness (it is *not* ironic, in the sense of smugly deriding those early twentieth-century manifestoes, but it is a humorous take on the idea, I think) is essential for its own failure, and therefore its capacity to set up a tortuous, 'aporetic' path through the material. Its contradiction through eight albums of 'covers', four of them literally coming after the manifesto, in box 1, is part of the noise not being simply within TNB 'music', as it establishes an effect that stretches out of the record itself, between records, between TNB and others, between TNB and listeners, and so on. Like dada, the manifesto cannot but does succeed. It becomes impossible to fail, but to succeed as 'not-even-anti-art' is failure. This 'failure' is what defines noise in its encounter with music, for noise must fail to be noise if it is accepted, and of course it fails if not heard as well. This failure is where noise resides, the fate it selects for itself, or has selected for it. Noise must be only as if it were music, not as a new musicality, and all this is signalled in the relations set up the TNB manifesto and their actual musical practice, something akin to Bataille's 'formless', which travels between and undermines both form and formlessness.

No assessment of influence and the way it plays out in art could ignore Harold Bloom's influential *The Anxiety of Influence*, originally published in 1973. Bloom argues that a later poet is in a continual struggle with precursors, and realises their work as if free of influence, but all the while making that influence come to be, in the new poem. Many have misunderstood the 'anxiety' of the title, as Bloom is not shy of pointing out in his preface to the second edition. The anxiety is not separate or prior to new creation: 'what writers may experience as anxiety and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the *consequence* of poetic misprision, rather than the *cause* of it. The strong misreading comes first' (Bloom 1997: xxiii). The later poet develops as artist through six stages or 'ratios', beginning with a misreading that is never excised ('clinamen') and continuing through various reworkings until ultimately, the later poet becomes the precursor, thereby belatedly making the earlier poet into precursor ('apophrades'). Influence becomes unavoidable, and something that 'cannot be reduced to source-study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images' (*ibid.*: 7).

Anxiety and influence come late, not early, such that 'a poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety' (*ibid.*: 94).<sup>4</sup> Bearing in mind the seeming absence of worry in Nurse With Wound and The New Blockaders with regard to their artistic precursors, they offer good examples of Bloom's idea of 'anxiety': the presence of dada or Surrealism, for example, represent a creative misinterpretation rather than a happy wallowing in older, better forms. That those movements are thought to belong to the past (chased away by a succession of other avant-garde movements) heightens the possibility of 'misreading', without becoming cosy irony or nostalgia, but an awareness of the influence as an inevitable connector. Paradoxically, Nurse With Wound's cover of Berrocal's 'Rock 'n' Roll Station' is not a case of relaxed recognition, but a highlighting of the peculiarity of the presence of music within a 'non-musical' approach.<sup>5</sup> Nurse With Wound have also recorded with Berrocal, and as with TNB's collaborations, this represents a way of incorporating influence, of annulling it respectfully. The collaboration is a way of realising equality, but what is produced heightens Bloom's idea of anxiety in that influence cannot be surmounted and all attempts to do so only emphasise its lurking (creative) force.

Influence is no longer linear, in this view, and nor is it capable of being clearly delineated: 'misreading does not simply occur between two texts, but spans and in fact

<sup>4</sup>It is worth noting that for all his intentions to make anxiety a textual product of a creative writer, the standard version of anxiety as a worry about replicating someone else's work does appear often in Bloom's text, and even in his new preface.

<sup>5</sup>A writer is not allowed the luxury of the cover version, without rewriting a text to a very large extent. One exception to this is the fictional Pierre Menard, who writes Cervantes' *Don Quixote* out in full (Borges 1964).

constitutes the *history* of the poetic tradition' (Allen 1994: 19). Again, it is worth noting that 'misreading' is not the implication of an error by Bloom, but the process of reading itself, which is always removed from the source (and we could extend this, to the author). The field of poetry, of creative writing in general, even art in general, is composed of misreadings. So when the influence of influence is raised, as it is by Nurse With Wound and The New Blockaders, to become something problematic, rather than hidden, this is a playing out of Bloom's theory. In fact, they can tell us something about its reach, can display its functioning. This is in large part because the actual precursor, for Nurse With Wound or TNB (seen from a Bloomian perspective) is not a movement, or an artist, but music. It is music that must be re-read (misread), re-appropriated, denied, destroyed and so on, and finally music is brought back to an origin through its denial (i.e. the beginning of all music is its emergence from other sounds, which then become thought of as noise).

TNB's *Gesamtnichtswerk* even undoes the idea of a historical compilation, not just through conceptual framing, but also through closing on the twenty-minute silence of 'Null bei Ohr [Nil by Ear]'. This is not a reference to, or repetition of Cage (but in being silent, it makes itself the anxiety of such a repetition). At the end is nothing, in place of noise music. As it occupies time, the listener awaits, attentive – is it going to burst into sound? Is it made of frequencies beyond hearing? Is it about the machinery of recordings? All of this was never about listening, it almost says. But not long after this non-explosion, the *Viva Negativa!* Collection appears, offering a validation of The New Blockaders' influence – one way of stemming the original anxiety of coming late (in the history of art experimentation). As the many artists rework TNB material, and despite the subtitle of being a 'tribute', it comes across as very much a collaboration (or even more a TNB creation than their 'own' stuff ...). On the other hand, whilst it is often louder or harsher than the original materials, it is almost never noisier, so what we hear is an extinction of noise, just as there is an *extinction* of influence, a playing out of the fullness and permeability of influence. With Nurse With Wound we get an *exhaustion* of influence. Both artists are playing out the terminal condition of influence, glimpsed by Bloom as something inevitable, but perhaps not something that could be accelerated by noise. Noise music then is not just an example of a rethinking of influence, but where that rethinking is occurring, then there is something like noise.

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