

Goodbye 20th Century: Noise, Modernism, Aesthetics

Invited paper given at Noisetheorynoise#1, March 6 2004, Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University

David Cunningham

There is a familiar complaint that, by contrast to our resources for articulating the visual world, our dominant verbal languages lack a similarly rich vocabulary of *sound*. Yet, despite (or because of) this apparent linguistic ‘lack’, noise as a specific figure of excess – with its accompanying metaphors of the ‘ear-splitting’, the ‘overpowering’, or even the ‘unlistenable’ - has often seemed particularly liable to provoke a concomitant *rhetorical* excess on the part of its would-be theorists.

Such rhetoric - which continually risks drifting into the utopianist fantasy of a ‘matter’ totally liberated from *all* formal ‘construction’ – no doubt takes shape, to some crucial degree, through its inevitable relation to the historically-conditioned *figure* of ‘excess’ itself. (‘Noise’, after all, is one of those disconcerting forms that Burke associates with the category of the Sublime, that canonical philosophical articulation of excess). In this regard, it is not perhaps coincidental that a certain contemporary ‘noise music’ has often been seen to make common cause with a particular discourse of bodily, material ‘transgression’, which has its neat equivalents in both literature and the visual arts. Yet, as the conceptual artists Art & Language argue, in a recent article, ‘it does not follow’ from the perhaps ‘over-intellectualized delibidinized’ character of much past modernist practice, that, for example, the supposed ‘transgressions of processed art-world abjection’ are in fact, in any way, ‘*ipso facto* transgressive’, in a broader social, political or cultural sense.¹

At the very least, such a point, then, indicates the need for a certain wariness, to the extent that there are evident points of proximity as regards a *particular* theoretical sense of noise’s - or a particular *kind* of noise’s – similarly ‘*ipso facto* transgressive’ character within the world of sound.² (A displaced Artaudianism has its

¹ Art and Language, ‘Deleuze’s Bacon’ in *Radical Philosophy* 123 (January/February 2004), p. 30.

² There is at least a *risk* here that should be acknowledged, in the correlation that someone like Merzbow establishes between ‘noise music’ and supposedly transgressive bodily practices such as sado-masochism. See also the appropriations of Japanese noise forms in the music (and sleeve art) of

role to play in contemporary studies of music and sound art, just as it does in theatre or art theory).

If, therefore – to cite Ray and Andy’s provocative ‘contentions’ for this conference – we are, today, concerned with a question of how, in the face of ‘the material intensities unleashed by noise’, we are to ‘reconfigure the parameters of theoretical possibility’, in such a way as to ‘usurp the dualism of Theory and Noise’ itself, there is equal need to remain vigilant with regard to some of the more problematically *naive* positions that such an ambition might engender.

Perhaps, then, one can only begin here with the *concept* of noise as such. Of course, an apparent *difficulty* lies in noise’s particularly varied potential significations across a range of discursive fields – acoustics, physical science, musicology, information theory, as well as its various ‘everyday’ meanings. Without being tempted by any late Wittgensteinian ‘cleaning-up’ operation at this point, it is perhaps politic to indicate that, whilst acknowledging these diverse (but overlapping) ‘language games’, this paper largely restricts itself to considering ‘noise’ as an issue and problem for *music*; noise heard as noise *within* the conditions (broadly understood) that music is listened to, and as theoretically ‘addressed’, in some sense, *to* music (as Russolo’s ‘Art of Noises’ is itself addressed, with ‘audacity’, to ‘Balila Pratella, Great Futurist *Composer*’).³

At stake in this, for *theory*, would be its capacity to concern itself with what Adorno – a constant (if somewhat ambivalent) reference point in what follows – calls ‘the unprogrammable concept inherent in the object’ itself; a ‘reflected immanence of works’. If the ‘miserable alternative’ between a ‘dumb and trivial universality’, and the acritical positivism of an empiricist ‘nominalism’, is to be overcome – without simply collapsing one into the other – then, to paraphrase Adorno’s definition of ‘aesthetic theory’ in general, the only possibility lies in ‘the philosophical insight’ that ‘noise’ and ‘theory’ are not polar opposites, but ‘mediated reciprocally in one another’ - form or meaning continually folding back upon the sensible; sensuousness fracturing form or meaning; each serving, in turn, to reconfigure and *renew* the other.⁴

In this light, the following sets out from three general *theses* on noise, which I want, briefly, to outline in its first part.

John Zorn.

³ See Russolo, ‘The Art of Noises’, p. 59.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 343. See also Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, p. 84.

Part I: Three Theses on Noise

My first thesis is that, as Jacques Attali argues, there is no noise ‘in itself’ extractable from ‘the system within which it is inscribed’.⁵ If human society is ‘always based on a technical system’ – that is, something like what Marx calls a ‘system of production’ – noise is never thinkable in isolation, but belongs to a system – which is not of course necessarily ‘musical’ – of relations or *renvois* [references or reverberations].⁶ Noise is not the abstract negation of music, the simple ‘outside’ to its ‘inside’, nor is it music’s other *in advance*.⁷ Rather, noise, we might provisionally say, articulates the violence – social and cultural – that is *internal* and *intrinsic* to music’s formation and violations.⁸ If noise *may* call up the ‘barbarism’ that reveals itself in the fissures of an ‘existing syntax’ – that which, to quote one writer on music, ‘sounds as if it had not been completely subdued by the ordering principle of civilisation’⁹ - it is *never* in itself a residue of some primitive or pre-lapsarian state.

In fact, a great strength of Attali’s text, as Frederic Jameson notes in his introduction, is to be found in its ‘futural’ and ‘anticipatory’ aspect, relating to the immanent and material ‘promise of a new, liberating mode of production’.¹⁰ Yet, the model of futurity proposed by Attali is a peculiarly crude one, posited on the basis of an apparently direct prophetic anticipation of a new ‘code’ to-come – beyond the ‘blasphemous’ noise of negation - and one which, in its analysis of the cultural present, lapses into a kind of Manichean utopianism founded on the concept of ‘composition’; the essentially *romantic* anti-capitalist vision of a ‘music produced by each individual for himself, for pleasure outside of meaning, usage and exchange’.¹¹ A rather more complex, variegated and *open* conception of the futurity manifest in the ‘utopian moment’ of noise is clearly required.

My second thesis is that, given the above, if noise is to be considered to have a *critical* force, it is still best conceived in terms of something like an experience of

⁵ Attali, p. 26.

⁶ See Bernard Stiegler in *Angelaki*, pp. 162-3.

⁷ See Michel Serres, *Genesis*.

⁸ Beech and Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy*, p. 287.

⁹ Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 41. Adorno is, it should be noted, writing here of dissonance’s relation to consonance in atonal works. See also Adorno, ‘Music and New Music’, p. 263.

¹⁰ Frederic Jameson, Introduction to Attali, p. xi.

¹¹ Attali, p. 137.

non-identity – to the already given technical systems of music operative within the cultural present - but one which, as I have argued elsewhere, dramatically exceeds the understanding of such experience to be found, for example, in Adorno's seminal account of musical modernism (based, as it is, around the more limited concept of dissonance).¹² It is in this way that noise may be understood to resist those modes of 'naturalization' which would erase the 'historical relationships' that constitute the musical system. Futurity here does not entail the *positive* projection of a future code that will ever come about as such. Rather it is registered in the vibrations of an 'upheaval of present place and meaning', and in the opening to a kind of infinity that historically-congealed structures of identity would deny.¹³

As such, my third thesis, following directly from this, is that the non-identity of noise, *qua noise*, must be understood as fundamentally *dynamic* or *motile* in character, having an *active* function which resists its reduction to any fixed or constant referent; (which does not mean that it can never subsist as noise, only that this is never absolute).¹⁴ It is this third point which, I would argue, also suggests the need to continue to think 'noise' through a properly *temporalised* conception of *modernism*, but in such a way as to reconfigure the cultural field to which this concept is conventionally thought to relate. Moreover, in this respect, modernism as the *dynamic* production of non-identity must be understood to 'oppose' *both* the familiar (retrospective or projective) aestheticisation of modernism *and* any necessarily problematic designation of a contemporary 'postmodernist' *style* which would work to fix a supposedly 'transgressive' practice outside of the temporal dynamic which in fact gives it *critical* meaning. For, if, as one contemporary commentator claims, 'noises' are 'never just sounds', but are also always '*ideas* of noise', the potential problem perhaps lies, not so much in the 'process of abstraction' itself, that this *unavoidably* entails, but in – to quote Samuel Beckett somewhat out of context – the *concretization* of such an abstraction; the giving of it 'another formal context'.¹⁵ Such, it seems to me, has been the fate of a number of concepts in recent 'theory', with the transformation of essentially dynamic categories into effectively *inherent* qualities of

¹² See Cunningham, 'A Time for Dissonance and Noise', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* (2003).

¹³ See Cunningham, 'Architecture, Utopia and the Futures of the Avant-Garde', *Journal of Architecture* 6.1 (2001), p. 175.

¹⁴ See Alan Dunant, *The Conditions of Music*, p. 62.

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, interview with John Gruen, cited in Oppenheim, p. 126.

certain artworks; a transformation which, as one critic puts it, ‘works [them] in opposition to the politicized function’ that they were originally assigned.¹⁶ At any rate, it is a similar risk that must be engendered by any fixed *generic* idea of ‘noise music’.

If noise cannot – in this, its fullest critical sense – be contained by any idea of ‘style’ or ‘genre’, it also follows from this that it cannot be contained by *either* a musical scientism – as in Stockhausen’s definition of noise as determined by ‘a certain band-width’ or ‘less stable periodicity’¹⁷ – *or* a conventional psychology of music, which ‘assumes a constancy of musical subject’.¹⁸ The material of noise is never *merely* ‘sensible matter’. As Adorno puts it, the ‘physical and historical dimensions’ necessarily and mutually ‘interact’.¹⁹ Hence, the critical reasoning behind my claim that the concept of modernism remains, in its abstract temporal form, of undiminished importance. For modernism, as Adorno insists, is, in its fundamental core sense, *neither* a ‘generic-periodising category’, *nor* a ‘matter of style’, but relates to ‘an art in which the most progressive and differentiated technical procedures are saturated with the most progressive and differentiated experiences’. As he continues, ‘these experiences, being social, are critical’.²⁰ I will return to this in my final section. But before doing so, I want to open up something of what might be at stake in this through an attention to the immanent logics of certain musical forms and practices themselves.

Part II: I See Electricity uh Jump ‘n’ Spark

‘Everything comes to an end’, writes the composer Lou Harrison, ‘even the twentieth century’. The burden of the preceding has been, in part, to argue that such an inevitable chronological end, does *not*, as might be suggested, entail a end to *modernism*, while, nonetheless, acknowledging that it may indeed serve to reconfigure – culturally, socially, and indeed geographically - the cultural field to which this concept relates. For this is not, in fact, a situation that calls for that

¹⁶ Alex Coles, ‘Rendezvous: Walter Benjamin and Clement Greenberg – Programme of the Coming Art’, p. 61.

¹⁷ See Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Stockhausen on Music*, pp. 108, 93.

¹⁸ Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 32.

¹⁹ Adorno, ‘Vers Une Musique Informelle’ in *Quasi Una Fantasia*, p. 281.

²⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 33.

Farewell to an Idea announced, for example, with full melancholic effect, by T. J. Clark in his 1999 book of that title.

The Lou Harrison quote appears on the back cover of an album by the New York band, Sonic Youth, also released in 1999, under the title *Goodbye 20th Century*; an LP on which the group – along with percussionist William Winant, turntablist Christian Marclay, and others - record a number of post-war pieces largely drawn from composers associated with Cage and/or Fluxus, including Christian Wolff, James Tenney, Takehisa Kosugi, Cornelius Cardew, and Cage himself.

[*Play first minute or so of CDII, track 3: Christian Wolff, 'Burdocks' (1971) – inc. Wolff, Marclay & Takehisa Kosugi – whose score 'instructs the ensemble to interact with soft sounds in various communal ways' - and track 4: John Cage, 'Four to the power of six' (1992) – the score of which specifies the choosing of 'twelve different sounds with fixed characteristics (amplitude, overtone structure, etc)', and which sets out a 'series of time-brackets, each with a number indicating which of the twelve to use'*]

[*At same time: Put up scores on OHP*]

In the context of this paper, then, Sonic Youth's recordings gains their immediate interest from the confrontation they stage between 'noise' as engaged by the respective modernisms of so-called 'serious' and 'popular music'. For, if the 20th century might well be understood as marking a period in which *noise* becomes an explicit problematic and potentiality for music – the shorter 20th century that begins with Russolo, rather than the longer one that begins with Debussy, as it were – this may also be said to relate to the ways in which technological and 'internal musical developments' intersect and converge, in such a fashion as to 'diagonalize' – in Ray and Andy's felicitous phrase – the 'opposition between "elitist" classical modernism and mass-market pop culture' itself.²¹ Such a 'diagonalizing' has nothing in common with the facile 'synthesis' of 'high' and 'low' *styles* asserted by a certain postmodernism,²² or the relativisation of difference (and effacement of social and cultural antagonism) that tends to follow from it.

²¹ See Adorno, 'Music and New Music' in *Quasi Una Fantasia*, p. 266.

²² See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, Introduction.

Particular attention ought rather to be paid here to ‘noise’ as a ‘product’ of the appropriation and detournement of instrumental technology, which crosses over, and disturbs, both of these conventionally partitioned cultural fields. Without doubt it is such a phenomenon which has provoked some of the more interesting recent theoretical and critical writing on ‘noise’, whether in relation to the high-octane dismemberments of sonic material to be found in the likes of Merzbow, or to the apparently more subtle play with technological dysfunction to be found in the so-called ‘glitch’ music of Oval or the various artists gathered together on the ‘Clicks & Cuts’ compilations. Nonetheless, such foregrounding or subversion of technological fault-lines should not be restricted solely to recent digital electronic developments.

As Bernard Stiegler puts it, *all* ‘instrumental knowledge’ involves an ‘appropriation’ of the ‘kind of expropriation that constitutes the musical instrument as such’; and such appropriation can take varied forms. While, in the specific context of a modernist productive logic of musical non-identity, such a process might be tracked through, say, Cage’s prepared piano, this can also be pursued in relation to the history of the electric guitar; that technology with which Sonic Youth are, of course, most closely associated.

Now, as Steve Waxman notes, in his excellent cultural history of the instrument, the electric guitar’s opening up of ‘a world of new sonic possibilities’ was not ‘inevitable when viewed within the broader contours of the instrument’s history’.²³ Certainly, early developments of the solid-body electric guitar, pursued by Les Paul and Leo Fender, were in fact explicitly governed by a regulating Idea of sonic and tonal ‘purity’ or ‘consistency’ that would allow the electric guitar to fit comfortably with established instrumental palettes. Attali provides the lineaments of a certain context here, in what he describes as an ‘aesthetics of performance’ which works to exclude ‘error, hesitation, noise...[seeking] abstract perfection’. And, as such, it is in the interruption of such a regulating Idea that the development of the ‘noise-making’ potential of the electric guitar – from Bo Diddley through to the Velvet Underground and the Stooges, and beyond – must be understood. The forms of such ‘interruption’ are well-known – feedback, overdrive, distortion - in each case, the product of an over-running of the in-built limits of technological systems, disrupting the consistency of the relationship between input and output signals. As

²³ Waxman, *Instruments of Desire*, p. 289.

Roger Mayer – the electronics expert who famously worked with Jimi Hendrix – puts it, such interruptions are ‘an exercise in knowing exactly what to do *wrong*’.²⁴

Sonic Youth’s *own* sonic practices – characterized by various techniques of instrumental modification (screwdrivers placed between the strings, etc.) - came out of what has been called the ‘urgency and lasting modernity’ of ‘No Wave’ music, which emerged in the late 1970s in New York, and which included the performances and recordings of bands such Mars, DNA and The Contortions, as well as the larger-scale compositional work of Glenn Branca and Rhys Chatham.²⁵ No Wave represented perhaps the most consistent attempt, up to that point, to reduce a rock instrumentation to its ‘noise-making’ potential, at the very limits of musical intelligibility. DNA’s main guitarist – a young Arto Lindsay – seemed, for example, to play governed by his own regulating Idea of the erasure of any melodic or harmonic function that the guitar might possess; developing, through this, a unique technical repertoire of scratching, scraping, and smacking that has little historical precedent.

Now, to move rather quickly here, *Goodbye 20th Century* gains its critical interest, for me, in its bringing of Sonic Youth’s own subsequent development of such ‘instrumental knowledge’, and its history, into the open space of the avant-garde scores performed – scores, as William Winant observes, ‘with open instrumentation and varying degrees of indeterminacy written into them’ – and thus into the space of the other ‘history’ that they represent. Doing so, evokes a number of unexpected, and critically effective, relations: George Macunias’ 1962 ‘Piano Piece for Nam June Paik’ – which scores the slow dismemberment of a piano with hammer – intersects with the auto-destructive art of Pete Townsend and The Who, a few years later. Steve Reich’s 1968 ‘Pendulum Music’ – which calls for the ‘unmanipulated rhythm’ of the feedback produced by the swinging of a microphone in front of a loudspeaker – intersects with the contemporaneous music of Hendrix or the Velvet Underground; and does so in such a way as to cast a harsh light on Reich’s own subsequent retreat to the safe shores of tonality and narrative. At the same time, if this brings into question a contemporary ‘serious’ music dominated by the fatuous religiosity of ‘post-minimalism’, it *also* lays bare and interrupts ‘popular’ music’s own contemporary *aestheticisation* of noise as ‘style’ – an aestheticisation which Sonic Youth

²⁴ Cited in Waxman, p. 184.

²⁵ ‘Martian Chronicles’. *The Wire* 241 (March 2004), p. 27.

themselves seemed, at one point, to assist in their previous role as patron saints for ‘grunge’ - demanding the continuation of a *dynamic* of non-identity, which would resist any sense that ‘noise’ might finally find its *own* ‘form’ in a purity and consistency of ‘noise’ itself. (The regulating Idea of a purity and consistency of *noise* which is increasingly built into the ill-named ‘distortion’ effects pedals manufactured for guitarists).

Goodbye 20th Century thus reconfigures, not abandons, the cultural field of modernism; pursuing an opening to the future, from the standpoint of the new, through which the past – noise’s past – might be reconstructed, so as to resonate the possibilities within it.

Part III: Music, Noise, Sound (Art)

1999 – the year of Sonic Youth and T. J. Clark’s respective millennial interventions - also saw the publication of another ‘goodbye to the 20th century’ which, given its growing influence, I want, in the final part of this paper, to address. In fact, Douglas Kahn’s ‘goodbye’, in the book *Noise Water Meat*, to ‘artistic modernism and the avant-garde’, shares several reference points with that of Sonic Youth – most obviously, Cage and Fluxus. Yet, Kahn’s own particular justification for this focus lies, less in a rethinking of modernism, than in his specific assertion that ‘the emergence of sound art in the 1980s’ provides ‘a way to account for artistic activities already underway’ some time before.²⁶ One privileged moment in regard to such a narrative is, for example, the late 1950s work of Alan Kaprow whose ‘desire for noisicianship’, Kahn comments, ‘stands as one of the earliest and important moments in the burgeoning sound arts in the post-war period that were to lay the groundwork for a great deal of present-day practice’.²⁷

As those who have read Kahn’s book will know, it is precisely *against* music – up to and including what Kahn describes as Cage’s ‘musicalization’ of ‘all sound’ - that these ‘burgeoning sound arts’ define themselves; repositioning *noise*, as they do so, as something other than that *specific* ‘other’ ‘contained’ by music.²⁸ For Kahn,

²⁶ Kahn, p. 18.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 275-6.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 47. This is not to say that Kahn himself is ‘opposed’ to music, as he makes clear, but rather that the category of ‘sound art’ is (necessarily) articulated here via its non-identity to music as a form and history.

sound art – as an emergent ‘autonomous art’ in its own right – marks, more particularly, the return of what he calls the *worldly*, as opposed to that apparently ‘areferential’ ‘silencing of the social and ecological within an ever-expanding domain of music’.²⁹ Given my own restriction of the question of ‘noise’ to its status as an issue for music, at the beginning of this paper, it is perhaps then necessary to say something of this apparent claim for noise’s final triumphant liberation from its restricted musical determination.

Now, in doing so, it is certainly not my intention to proffer some reactionary defence of the ‘sanctity of music’.³⁰ Nonetheless, to drastically simplify what could be a very complex argument at this point, what I do want to suggest is that one must be wary here, once again, of the aestheticising dangers of such an emancipatory rhetoric. For *contra* Kahn’s rather heady visions of a ‘return’ to the ‘worldly’ and the ‘social’, it would indeed be truly naïve to imagine that sound art simply offers sound – or noise – its freedom, as opposed to what is a *different* system of organization, with its own ‘violences’ and ‘violations’. This is not the place to develop this argument further. But suffice it to say that, in general terms, sound art is necessarily marked, for better or worse, by its own inheritance of the institutional frames and contexts of installation and site-specific art more generally, emerging, as it does, as a new kind of specificity *within* the post-conceptualist codification of a *general* or ‘generic’ art associated with the transformation in the ontological conception of the artwork performed by a number of largely visual art-derived practices and movements (including Kaprow’s environments and various Fluxus activities).

At any rate, in light of this, it is perhaps not so surprising that Kahn’s largely undeveloped category of the ‘worldly’ thus replicates what Hal Foster observes of the clearly related conception of ‘life’ to be found already within certain earlier discourses surrounding the avant-garde – life ‘not only as remote but also as immediate, as if it were simply *there* to rush in like so much air once the hermetic seal of convention is broken’.³¹ Ironically, given Kahn’s own pivotal critique of his *musical* pursuit of ‘a din undifferentiated by power’, this comes, in its very desire for an immediate affirmation of the ‘social’, to repeat the abstract negation of historical, social and formal relations that characterizes Cage’s quasi-Buddhist rhetoric, at a

²⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 353.

³¹ Hal Foster, *Return of the Real*, pp. 15-16.

different level, and which itself ends in what Adorno calls a ‘misplaced positivism’.

As Alan Dunant writes:

To isolate ‘[sound] itself’ as intrinsic, spontaneous or autonomous...[is to make a futile] bid to be liberated from...determinations in general. Such a vision merely wills to vanish the social and historical conditions of sound as music and noises around which any initiative of composition, performance or agitation can be made.³²

By contrast, as Adorno insists, what needs to be registered here are the ways in which the ‘immanent historicity’ of the artwork ‘which seems to be the mere self-locomotion of the material is [*itself*] of the same origin as is the social process, by whose traces it is continually permeated’. As such, the ‘unresolved antagonisms of reality return to artworks as immanent problems of form. This, *not* the insertion of objective elements [Kahn’s ‘worldly sounds’] defines the relation of art to society’.³³

It is in this regard that we need, then, a far more sophisticated account of the relation between sonic and social forms than Khan is able to provide, and with this a more complex sense of its relation to the technical systems and organizations of modern, urban life - already established in Russolo’s 1913 manifesto - and its capacity to ‘remind us brutally’ of that life. Any straightforward opposition of ‘referential’ and ‘areferential’ is necessarily inadequate here.

At the beginning of this paper I re-iterated – as the first of my theses – Jacques Attali’s assertion that there is no noise ‘in itself’ outside of the technical systems within which it is ‘inscribed’. And, although its technical significance certainly cannot be reduced to this, it is perhaps music’s particularly ‘intimate relations’ with new means of technological production – as manifested in new instrumental and recording technology – that may accord it a privileged position within contemporary cultural production, and with respect to the *seam* which opens it up to the socio-economic; there, as Chris Cutler puts it, ‘where the contradictions are deepest’.³⁴ For such means of production themselves ‘exist at an intersection of material, social and cultural worlds’.³⁵ The capacity of contemporary aural practices to embody a certain

³² Alan Dunant, *The Conditions of Music*, p. 56. See also Adorno, ‘Vers Une Musique Informelle’, p. 287.

³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 5; *Philosophy of Modern Music*, pp. 33-4; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 6.

³⁴ Cutler, p. 17.

³⁵ Kevin Dawe, ‘Cultural Study of Musical Instruments’.

productive logic of *non-identity*, from ‘inside the social relations of technological mediation’,³⁶ is thus tied to their ability to immanently *register*, in critical fashion, the *tensions* and *fissures* always already implicit within the diverse technical systems to which they relate, as well as, more particularly, their internalized relations to the imperatives of commodity production. It is the capacity to *foreground* such ‘tensions’ – in, as it were, a mimetic relation to that which dominant systems of identity would seek to suppress - that gives ‘noise’ both ‘artistic’ *and* ‘social’ substance; laying bare those very systems within which it must emerge, even as it immanently distresses the violations and violences of their formation.

If the face of Sonic Youth’s ‘Angelus Novus’ is turned towards the past – if it sees the debris of the 20th century’s aestheticisation and retreat – the noise it makes, ripping the divisions that traverse it, nonetheless reverberates the present with vibrations of the future.

cunninda@wmin.ac.uk

³⁶ John Roberts, ‘On Autonomy and the Avant-Garde’, p. 25.