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A chronic condition: noise and time

Paul Hegarty

how so?

Human time, clock time, work time, progressing time: all order our action and perception. With time, the amorphous duration of endless becoming is moulded, and locked away, even if never to be fully dissipated. The other time, the other times outside of 'our', human, time (for there are many), make up a perpetual residue, ready to swell over the bows of clock time. Noise has often been dealt with in terms of its effect on the body, or on parts of it. This means that noise is generally treated as a spatial problem or proposition. As noise is not autonomous but occurs through being perceived, defined, legislated for and against, as noise, this prominence of the physical encounter with noise has led to deep phenomenological insights about its working, but the embodied is not just 'there' in space, it is also 'there' in time.

noise as questioning of
time ...

Noise offers the hope of times improper, the prospect of unending, of non-linearity and the dream of non-death. Noise opens up the sense of what Henri Bergson identifies as 'duration', often in very literal form, and it is through very long, very short, and very static noise pieces that I will address the idea of noise as not just another kind of time, but noise as a questioning of time. Noise does not just disrupt clock time, it brings clock time out in its full reality. Neither does it immerse us in Bergson's optimistic dream of a true human sense of durational being. Instead it is a time that is subtly different from 'our' time. Once we let noise take us through Deleuze and Guattari, and then return to Nietzsche, noise will have told us something about time, and time about noise. In an untimely fashion.

It is with the sound of a hammer falling repeatedly that Bergson begins to round up his thought on time and duration, in *Time and Free Will*: ‘when we hear a series of blows of a hammer, the sounds form an indivisible melody insofar as they are pure sensation, and they also give rise to a **dynamic progress**’ (Bergson, 1960, 125). Two types of time are brought into being through the perception of the blows: **first, the purer, truer sensation of something happening which impacts upon our senses; second, the idea of time as a sequence of events**, a sequence of moments. In the first type of time, being responds through an acceptance that something is happening of which **I am aware**; in the second, understanding structures the something into a set of things where discrete events have their own moment and combine into a greater event. Bergson’s sloppy use of the word *melody* should not distract us; what he means is that the hammer blows are one entity. **This one entity is perceived within ‘duration’ (the essence of being) in multiple ways, which is how time passes unequally depending on our reaction to what is going on during that time.** The division of time into seconds and minutes is a homogenization of the truer time, an imagined objectivity attributed to time. While this is a betrayal of the multiplicity of duration, it is not meaningfully bad; it is more of an inevitability. It is what frames the truer duration, so that duration can truly be. This suggests that Bergson is proposing a **deconstructive idea of time**, and certainly that is the point of interest for writers like Deleuze who brought out this subtle, perhaps even unconscious self-reflexivity in Bergson.

one discerns - is aware of an activity

multiplicity of duration (division of time; i.e. chronological)

The idea of ‘dynamic progress’ is essential, and it is **why sound is the privileged encounter of sense and event**. Sound offers the prospect of sequence – and even an isolated sound suggests a narrative to which it belongs or disrupts. Bergson’s use of the hammer is meant to indicate ‘a sound people hear’ rather than a historicized activity. The same goes for the sound of tolling bells. Here, Bergson talks about how the person hearing a bell ringing attributes a meaningful sequence to the rings, through counting them, in order to know what time it is, and more profoundly, to understand not only the meaning of the chimes, but that a sequence of humanly produced sounds has a meaning due to its being a sequence (1960, 86–7). The clock tower with its bells measures out time (or represents that measuring), gives it form, tells people that time has form, has predictable form that is always the same. It lets people know that time is as measured by humans, and constantly reminds us of how to process time as something *external* as opposed to being about an internal encounter with external events. Elizabeth Grosz goes further, arguing, after Bergson, that time is embodied, negotiated in processes and interactional, and the other type of time is the one we have constructed as ‘empty time’, ‘time in itself’ (Grosz, 2004, 244).

sense and event (Sinn u. Ton)

clock gives time form

time in itself (constructed!) vs embodied (intra-actional?)

For all the interesting possibilities of evolutionary development of how we, as units of humanity, process time, Bergson ignores the social construction of time: hammers and bell towers are far from neutral as they tie into labour and religion. If sound is the privileged connection of being with the world, then how those beings interact, how their culture informs their hearing, will matter. Both of Bergson's examples belong to the world of order, discipline, productivity and moral goodness. These are good, proper sounds, in their place. At least as described by Bergson. But let us take the bell tower. This turns out to be a more complicated situation than one involving only listening and counting. Church time was connected to rural cycles of activity in times when there were very few large-scale urban environments (i.e. pre-eighteenth century). As well as shepherding Christians to their regular celebrations, the bells marked longer periods of time, in the form of religious and local festivals. Bells would be used for all manner of tasks, a pre-industrial-era mass medium. For that reason and with them under the control of the Church, the French revolutionary governments of the 1790s led a campaign to not only ban bell tolling but also to melt many of them down. They would instead be purely secular (and this would lead to the clock towers' function as marking progress of the day as rationally divided time). In the interim, the bells become noise, the site of resistance, as they go from regular and clearly understood signals to being occasional disruption (see Corbin, 1994). So bells are neither neutral nor fixed in meaning, even if we are talking about a particular bell in a specific village. So, from sound as the driver of experience and perception, we can move to recognizing that whether or not that sound is regarded as noise is important.

Jacques Attali starts from there, in terms of music and public performance. For him, the history of noise is a history of what is not allowed, what is deemed illegal and subject to exclusion. If noise is not a 'thing in itself', then it must alter or come into and out of being as historical time progresses, so noise is synonymous with avant-gardeness, and what is noise now will not necessarily remain so (Attali, 1985, 5–6, 11). If we take Attali's almost entirely cultural reading of how sound is noise or not and apply it to the types of perceptual encounter that interest Bergson, then the implication from Attali is clear: as the listener listens, things lose their noisiness, and acquire meaning or at least sense as to their purpose. This may occur in the course of listening! (perhaps less so hearing) hearing a particular piece of noise music, or in the course of hearing more and more and beginning to listen instead of hearing, or as certain types of noise is tied to meaning making; become standardized into genres. This endless and inevitable recuperation of it enfolds each other noise is why the sometimes misunderstood idea of noise as failure is quite common in noise writing.

To return to Bergson, we can maintain his idea of duration, but historically

situated. We then need to think of the two types of time: duration and quantifiable, simple yet false time. Noise music or anything that aspires to the condition of noise can have nothing to do with the latter; and yet something that is very long can stimulate the other type of duration. Furthermore, noise music occurs in quantifiable time: on recordings, in performances. Deleuze helps Bergson out here. True duration is multiple, and part of this multiplicity is its encounter with 'standard' time, which is socially connected to order:

[Duration is] an internal multiplicity, one of succession, of fusion, organization, heterogeneity, discrimination as to quality or of a *difference of nature*, a multiplicity that is *virtual* and *continuous*, incapable of being reduced to number.

(Deleuze, 1966, 31; my translation)

This sounds like the kind of thing noise aspires to, but it is primarily about music. Both Bergson and Deleuze see music as suspending quantitative time in favour of being as duration. For Bergson, music removes us from our constructed illusion of quantitative time. Rhythm and measure interrupt it and bring us into duration, a sensation of time, being and sound as an intensity (Bergson, 1960, 12). On the face of it, this is just stupid, since rhythm and measure seem to exist to reinforce quantitative time, and we will be told by him that our attributing sequentiality to sound is the way in which our true experience is deviated into a limited conception of time and therefore of reality. The point is that the explicit structuredness of music somehow initiates sensation out of time for the listener, as opposed to the more mechanical structuredness of clock time. This too is unsatisfactory, but if we explore intensity as an idea it becomes rather more interesting, as intensity is both inside and outside of duration. On the one hand, intensity is the sense that something is entering the mind to a degree that measure is lost. On the other, intensity implies lack of intensity elsewhere and is always already quantitative. Either way, intensity is not a property of sounds, or a piece of music, but how that input is experienced. The constant movement of music fuels the multiplicity of thought and sensation, and endless becoming of duration, rather than just wallowing in the specific duration of music. This is where Deleuze subtly parts from Bergson, as the latter talks explicitly of the 'cradling' effect of music (Bergson; 1960, 16; trans. modified from 'bercé' to 'lulled and soothed'). Deleuze and Guattari's take on intensity, as developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), is different: intensity is the quantitative transformed into a plateau or rhizome where connections are reconfigured so as to prevent the arrival of meaning and narrative. Bergson's multiplicity of intensity is one of transformation, Deleuze's is of simultaneity. Where

being as
duration?
Cox differs! Or
he puts it
clearer:
duration
as becoming

intensity!

thinking-feeling;
thought/sensation

Bergson imagines music as the way of mobilizing sound so that listening beings move into duration, Deleuze looks to avant-garde music based on disruptions and atonality, as well as to literature of cut-ups or streams of consciousness. Deleuze seems to suggest a way for noise to affect time in a way that Bergson hints at but does not reach, but, even with Deleuze and Guattari, we may still be talking of an 'intensity' that plateaus into a safe cradling despite its formal intent and strategies, as the plateau represents a location that allows dwelling, a certain sort of settling that veers away from the more deconstructive implication of 'the impossible' found in Nietzsche, Bataille or Derrida.

The idea of intensity is implied in all noise: noise is the too much, the unwanted, the excess – in terms of volume, performance practice, simple duration, difficulty. But perhaps too much of this intensity has already been identified as problematic by Bergson: it suggests that something is more intense than something else, (i.e. it is quantitative and therefore removes the intensity as something felt, perceived, sensed or suffered). If intensity is an aim in noise, can it be maintained? Let us look at this literally: intensity in noise consists of volume, duration, unpredictability, loss of reference points. Noise often claims to be intensity, an excess that is always more, and therefore capable of inducing an ecstatic reception of the sounds encountered that goes beyond listening. To get even more literal, noise music aspires to be a seemingly permanent condition, and needs time to be noise and music, rather than just a pile of noises; thus this results in long performances or recordings, unrelenting sequences of moves that go against music (arguably in the name of a higher, but I would say lower, musicality). Neither sound nor auditor is to be allowed to settle. This is the reason for Japanese noise artist Merzbow's prolific output – the endless proliferation of *merz* sound takes away the possibility of mastery. On individual albums there may be track divisions, but there is very little in the way of let-up or release. Where there is calm, it is only to act as an undertow of anticipation of noise to come – like being bound and awaiting blows that bring pleasurable pain but not release. Some of his albums sprawl over several CDs, and there have been playbacks of the entire 50-CD *Merzbox* (1999). The endless proliferation of his releases (usually double figures every year) creates both a sense of pre-emptive fatigue and the possibility of continual surprise, as well as the impossibility of keeping up with everything and controlling the Merzbow *oeuvre*. But – is more always more? I would argue that actually noise music's attempts to always be more are precisely an attempt to always be less – less than meaning, less than an object of contemplation. In so doing, the excess, the 'more', becomes low rather than something spiritual and consciousness-raising like Pauline Oliveros' idea of deep listening ('the result of the practice

[of deep listening] cultivates appreciation of sounds on a heightened level, expanding the potential for connection and interaction' [Oliveros, mission statement, deeplistening.org]]. But we do settle, at least after some initial shocks, and the sheer range of sounds on offer at any one time leads to the sort of duration an untempered Bergson suggests for us – one where organized sounds stand in place of the distractions of everyday life and open up a sense of our own being as duration. The task for noise is to not let this happen (even if noise music occurs in the awareness, it is always going to have to fight for this).

Two examples: Hijokaidan's *Romance* (1990) and Vomir's *Proanomie* (2009), both single-track full-length CDs (77 and 76 minutes respectively), and very different in terms of how they structure and destructure time around them. *Romance* is a constantly changing mess of howling feedback, residue overpowering the possibility of a musical centre to fix upon. Moments cannot fall into a narrative (except of fragmentation), and permanent suspense replaces the ebb and flow of noise and not-noise or different types of noise. In this work, we catch a glimpse of the broken time of noise, which occurs at both individual (this piece) and historical scales (the history of noise) – making them interact. Following Bergson, we can see history as something external that imposes the quantification of events, but we still do not get the sense of the permanent revolution through what is judged to be noise by Attali. Where we do find this is in Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. Here, he writes that 'where we perceive a chain of events, he [angelus novus] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' (Benjamin, 1992, 249). The angel is an idealized observer, not a moralizer, whose act of observing structures time differently from humans, and may be seen in earthly historical terms as history being made up of disruptions, with historical continuity only the residue. In a way that recalls Bergson, Benjamin goes on to argue that 'the concept of historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time' (1992, 252). For noise, we can see this working at the level of a history of noise, or of the movement of a piece, or the reaction and reception to either one piece or to a genre.

Romance holds us in an unsettled version of duration, where we are exposed to what Benjamin calls 'jetztzeit' – now-time – a time removed from linear chronological progression, and is precisely not homogeneous. In addition, though removed from the most ordered time, its removal is still in relation to standard time – it is specifically 'duration that is removed from time', not autonomously other. If we go to the other extreme, though, we again encounter a removal from time – as with the case of Vomir's *Proanomie*. This album, like the vast majority of Vomir's pieces, is entirely white noise.

removal - yet
in relation to
(not in!)
standard time

Or something not-quite-white. It comes across as a mass of shifting layers, seeping into one another and in and out of perception. It is as full as possible, but also dramatically empty. Its radical stasis, while being ostensibly noise, is a purposeful rejection of the time that music and organized sound (or sounds recognized as organized – hammers, clocks, bells) structure for us. Non-moving music is often a goal of ‘spiritual’ music, to create trance-like states, or to reveal an essence of the emptiness of time, as in American minimalisms ranging from Morton Feldman to La Monte Young. Noise music can certainly create this state, but once it happens, are we really in the presence of noise any more? A relentless wall of noise with no prospect of its ever ending (both in terms of overall duration and at any one point not being able to hear where it is going) could create a sense of continually altering absence of satisfaction, like the different pains when shifting around in stress positions. But if we settle on this, I think what we have here is too pure a Bergsonism, too much an attempt to restore an authentic if difficult duration. Once again, Deleuze, this time in the company of Félix Guattari, has a more interesting take on how time can both move and stop (without changing position or halting).

involution

again:
extensive
continuum
of Goodman!

This proliferation of material has nothing to do with an evolution [...]. It is on the contrary an *involution*, in which form is constantly being dissolved, freeing times and speeds. It is a fixed plane, a fixed sound plane, or visual plane, or writing plane, etc. here, fixed does not mean immobile: it is the absolute state of movement as well as of rest, from which all relative speeds or slownesses spring, and nothing but them. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 267)

movement
and non-
movement
(SP6?)

This fluctuation between movement and non-movement maps on to and across the lump of once-layered sounds in Vomir’s work. That fluctuation then refers back to the empty time of clocks, hinting at pure duration. It is anything but pure duration, however. It is internally compromised, its fullness making it empty of the qualities of music that permitted Bergson to imagine humans rejoining the world of duration. Here, duration is also made empty, made nothing, replaced by a failing authenticity of nothingness.

Vomir frames his recordings (through nihilistic titles and occasional accompanying texts, along with bleak, simple artwork) as a removal from the world, a nihilistic withdrawal assumed as a ‘positive’ value. But the empty time of the quotidian is not replaced by something better, just the realization of a clearer nihilistic reality – or as his 2010 cassette album puts it, *No Eternal life, Just Endless Annoyance* [*Pas de vie éternelle, juste un emmerdement permanent (sic.)*]. *Proanomie* is not doing noise through its long duration, but

in how duration is never allowed to supersede empty time, and this through the collapse of the vertical (the recorded layers) so that the horizontal is always thwarted, returned to the banality of the CD player's clock.

Where we may have to look for noise in terms of time is at the other extreme of the scale, in repetition, or fleetingness. If noise can only ever be fleetingly perceived as noise, however long a specific piece is, and less so the more it is accepted (e.g. in the form of noise genres), then perhaps we should be looking at pieces of noise that are just that – fragments, short works. The ultra-short track offers no literal time in which to settle – it is only attack, its entirety transformed into disruption. This isolation of a tiny group of sounds removes the prospect of narrative from inside the track; the only possible sense is one of its coming into existence, only to vanish before being processed. However, stick a whole sequence of these together and you have a pattern (especially on compilations of short tracks). There is still interruption, and huge variety (such as on Naked City's hardcore jazz splurge of micro-cosmic noise pieces *Torture Garden* [1989]) – and often the most impressive short tracks are ones that seem to do away with all the 'unnecessary bits' – think 'perfect pop', hardcore, early Hüsker Dü or Wire. But that would hardly make something noise; instead it would be an attempt to capture some sort of essence of music, or rock, or pop. This might be unavoidable: if noise and music are intimately connected from the outset, then any attempt to get at the core of the functioning of one will tell us something about the other – as if one was the other.

The short track is even more effectively noise when isolated. Organum, like several 'noise music' bands – the Haters, Merzbow – have issued many records in seven-inch format. This format allows a concentration to the point where one track acts as its own world. Many tricks are played with the material of the releases, but what is striking about Organum is the shortness of the records. The material form is a central part of how this works – because we are not talking about a whole series of short tracks, but one short track per side. The Organum collaboration with The New Blockaders, 'Der Graben' (2002), is 1.37 on each side, and the track is basically the same. What we have is an excess of the material side, a luxuriating in the limits of the form, only to fall so far within those limits as to be comical and/or offensive. The second side of the 'Crusade' single (1997) is fewer than 50 seconds long, and this is almost impossible to see due to the transparency of the vinyl. The second side of the 'Horii' 12-inch (1986), 'Keloid', is even more 'extreme' – one side of this 33rpm record is 1.10 long. These tracks have specific noise functions in how they relate to the first sides, using the same material, collapsing it, sucking out developments hinted at on side one, and which we would expect to continue as the piece progresses or has a second part or a different version. With 'Keloid' we also get a huge

run-off that takes nearly half as long as the track, and this is a visible ‘fuck you’ to the listener and to the sounds accumulated on side one. The noise in all these short tracks is not in the content, but in the material form, which adds to the temporal play proposed by Napalm Death or Extreme Noise Terror. The shortness is materially visible, and comments on the material, at the same time as the material element offers insight into the sound part.

But actually we do not need to insist on shortness to the detriment of the extremely long – it is the arbitrariness of time taken that reconnects these tracks to the 70-minute punishment CDs, which leaves us in a duration that is about becoming. After all, a CD can contain one track only and be any length at all: is the 51 minutes of Vomir’s *Renonce* (2010) any less hermetic than the 76 minutes of *Proanomie*? Once we accept that duration is not about how much clock time is used, then no. Once we accept that Bergsonian duration is exposed as an insufficient recasting of time, then the ‘involution’ which Deleuze and Guattari spoke of can occur in however short or long a moment as it structures. The structuring of that time is not just in the sound, but also the material form. If each piece is a blast of thick, swarming yet seemingly static matter, then there is no reason for a piece to end (or begin) other than arbitrarily. The arbitrariness works, first, as an immersive technique (even more in the live context), a disorientation from clock time. Second, it is a fragment of ‘now-time’ that seems to be exposed temporarily. Third, it is a return to ‘empty time’: this one is 6.30, this other one 61.42, yet another 23.05, often seeming to be timed simply according to the standards of the recording format. That Vomir is resolutely not about a communing duration is easily seen in the absence of a piece that would last forever, or at least some ridiculous length of time, gauged in days or weeks (although *Claustration* [2007] occupies five CDs).

Vomir’s complexification of time needs Nietzsche in addition to Bergson and Deleuze. Nietzsche’s eternal return suggests a parallel with Vomir in that to return is to be both caught in a moment, like an insect in amber, and also to be between moments, always only about to be glued into place. Becoming is not about arriving, or even travelling as if to arrive, but something to do with being as irregular pulsation. Grosz signals this when she teams up Darwin and Nietzsche with Bergson, to create a complex idea of time as generative movement that is only ever its own embodied generation: time as GENERATIVE movement (ontogenesis??)

The eternal return cannot be understood, as [Arthur] Danto reads it, as a doctrine of the repetition of all things, acts and identities. It is not being, matter, things that return: rather, it is returning that is the being (i.e., the becoming) of things and of matter in its particular configurations, including those constituting life.

(Grosz, 2004, 143)

involution

inbetween
moment!!
(inbetween
ness)

Q!
(materialism)

Noise, like time, is no more separate from bodies, from judgements, from listeners, than time is from those that perceive time. But empty noise is not the same as empty time: empty noise undoes time, by expanding it vertically (now) and flattening it horizontally (in linear time). But noise as noise music does not wish to be empty like this, to imagine it can step outside time, music, and even noise, to simply occur as some sort of 'bare noise'. Noise music flits continually around and entwines with what it is not, creating either a jarring sense of time that does not settle, or, in Vomir's case, the very presence of this impenetrable mass empties empty time.

"Timelessness" to be rejected', writes Nietzsche in *The Will to Power* (Nietzsche, 1968, §1064), amidst his thinking on the eternal return. Eternal recurrence is a removal from time as standard, linear, forward-progressing units of time, in favour of a temporality that is both stuck and permanently moving. Each moment repeats forever, and all time occurs at every moment. So, in Vomir, we see this in the form of the compression of layers of noises into a rolling lump whose movement is illusory. With Hijokaidan, we have the permanent prevention of one moment defining the next moment as the next step in a sequence. With Organum's tracks on seven-inch the moment is all there is. Its prevention of the buildup of repetition is precisely how it leaves minimalism behind in favour of a crushing of time.

It is not that noise is the eternal return, and music the limited sense of time. It is this at first, but noise and music interact in the multiplicity of duration as suggested by Deleuze's Bergson, and for Nietzsche, the eternal return is not permanent war but the struggle between war and peace: 'you resist any ultimate peace; you will the eternal recurrence of war and peace, man of renunciation, all this you wish to renounce? Who will give you the strength for that?' (Nietzsche, 1974, §285). It is a struggle about whether contradiction, opposition, difference can occur. Even then, the idea of the eternal return is not an answer to how noise makes time or vice versa, but a way of situating it as a question, or more accurately as something that will not be solved. Even as the prospect of noise time recedes, Nietzsche holds out the thought that even if we cannot get to the essence of how time structures being, something similar to noise will bring us closer, bring an actively nihilistic non-understanding:

To endure the idea of recurrence one needs: freedom from morality; new means against the fact of *pain* (pain conceived as a tool, as the father of pleasure; there is no cumulative consciousness of displeasure); the enjoyment of all kinds of uncertainty, experimentalism.

(Nietzsche, 1968, §1060)

Perhaps Nietzsche wasn't talking about noise. But, if he wasn't in *The Will to Power*, he was in *The Gay Science*, where he writes that 'the whole musical box repeats eternally its tune which may never be called a melody' (Nietzsche, 1974, §168). And this means every tune which does not attain melody, every fractured moment, condensed in on itself, over and over, without ever coming to the pleasure world of order.

The hammers of the bell and the worker do not necessarily cede to the philosopher, but they will perform a new philosophy nonetheless, because Nietzsche also has a hammer for us. He describes his book *Twilight of the Idols* as a 'great declaration of war' (Nietzsche, 1998, 3), but the hammer is not one for smashing. Instead it is a diagnostic hammer, one for tapping the idols to demonstrate their inner emptiness, 'to hear in response that famous hollow sound which speaks of swollen innards' (ibid.). This auscultation is also present when noise stretches or compresses itself, making it a questioning of time, as opposed to music which is the structuring of time into clock time. Vomir's mass of noise endlessly recycles and never attains a moment in which it can dwell. The listener is brought to the idol of music which was supposed to help reveal time through chronological development, periodicity, narrativized sound sequences, and invited to touch 'with a hammer as with a tuning fork' (ibid.). This empty time is brought out as always already having been the condition of music through the empty and emptying saturations of noise. Not that this will change anything, or provide a cure. Noise has not brought us to time, to a time or out of time. This is in fact time as a rejection of 'being in time', noise becoming time that smothers the listener while fending him or her away.