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Noise - Three Musical Gestures

- Expressionist, Introvert and Minimal Noise

#### 4.1. Gesture and Noise

The question of the meaning of noise in music has no simple answer. One of the difficulties in developing an aesthetics of noise (Sangild, 2003) has been the fact that noise endows different musical contexts with different expressive qualities, even within one musical genre. Noise in music is usually an element in an overall musical gesture and takes its meaning in relation to this gesture. This does not mean, of course, that noise can express anything. Noise adds specific meanings to the gesture in which it partakes - disorder, chaos, blurriness and fuzziness - ultimately a decentering of subjectivity. It is important to acknowledge the differences between specific gestures as well as the shared features.

This essay contributes analyses of three distinct employments of noise - an expressionist, an introvert and a minimal - showing how they differ essentially in expressive qualities. First, let me explain briefly what is meant by the words "gesture" and "noise."

#### Gesture

A gesture is a movement that has a certain character and meaning. This meaning can be more or less culturally coded. The gesture as musical expression is the way the music "behaves" or moves, and is connected with the body perceiving it. The perceiving body does not have to move or act in order to sense the gestural character of the music. The movement or the quality of the gesture is felt as a disposition or an encounter. Music can be heavy or light, mechanical or organic, calm or restless, blurry or sharp regarding focus, etc. In terms of energy, a gesture can have increasing intensity, decreasing intensity or be constant. Gesture can be regarded on different levels: as a detail in a specific piece of music, as the overall movement of the piece or as a feature of a whole

style.<sup>1</sup> Gestures are, in a certain sense, objective. The attitude towards the gesture is the subjective part.<sup>2</sup>

## Noise

Noise has three independent but overlapping definitions, which I have developed elsewhere (Sangild, 2003, 10-16). Acoustically, noises are impure and irregular sounds; communicative noise is that which distorts or disturbs the signal to be communicated; subjectively, noise designates unpleasant sounds.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson Coker (Coker, 1972, 10-23) coins the concept of musical gesture based on a sociological communication theory. The musical gesture is distinguished from the sign in that it *does* something rather than tell or show something (This does not mean, of course, that there is no semiotic aspect of music as well. In fact, a large part of Coker's book is devoted to Peircian semiotics). We meet the gesture with an individual attitude defining our reaction to the gesture. The interaction of gesture and attitude forms the aesthetic experience.

Richard Middleton (Middleton, 1993) has sketched how the idea of musical gesture can be an important part in a musical analysis breaking free of the ties and concepts of traditional formal analysis. Gestures exist on all levels of the music, every drum beat, every sound is a gesture in itself (with a certain envelope) and is part of a larger gesture. Describing the music through analysis of gestures enables us to point to the way music behaves and is registered, bodily and emotionally. How would this music behave if it were a body? Which physical and dynamic qualities would this music be endowed with if it were a thing? Questions like these are tacitly implied in the method of describing and analyzing music as a gesture.

The gesture is not the only semantic aspect of music. There are semiotic, conceptual, and contextual aspects adding to the overall meaning of music. Also in my analyses below these aspects play a part, even as I here focus on the gestural meaning. Analyzing music as gesture is thus not a naturalistic approach. The meanings of gestures are culturally and historically coded as well as institutionally filtered.

The advantage of speaking about music and meaning in terms of gesture is that the phenomenological aspects of music can be analyzed while the musical object retains its primacy. Primacy is not accorded to the artist, not to the receiver as a psychological subjectivity (nor as a statistical average), but rather to the music as a sounding object with meaning perceived through bodily experience. This meaning may not be stable or simple, and no analysis using concepts and metaphors will be final. This is a basic hermeneutical condition.

<sup>2</sup> I have argued in my dissertation, "Objective Sensibility" (Sangild, 2004c), that aesthetic objectivity is not about finding universal, ahistorical, independent constants, and that objectivity is a question of the character of the object as mediated through subjectivity. The philosophical background for this argument can be found in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Mikel Dufrenne and especially in the subject-object dialectics of Theodor W. Adorno.

The gesture is objective in the sense that it is expressed by the music (the phenomenological and coded object). It is always an object-as-potentially-perceived. The gesture is registered by the sensorium of the perceiver. The subjective response, on the other hand, is a reaction to a gesture rather than a perception of it. The maelstrom of noise as described below is a gesture and the potential ecstatic reaction is the subjective response. The important thing is to acknowledge that music has gestural qualities that cannot merely be dismissed as subjective responses.

<sup>3</sup> A paraphrasing of Sangild 2002a 5-8 will serve to clarify these definitions:

Etymologically, the term "noise" in different Western languages (*støj, bruit, Geräusch, larm* etc.) refers to states of aggression, alarm and tension, and to powerful sound phenomena in nature such as storm, thunder and the roaring sea. The English word "noise" comes from latin "nausea", meaning seasickness and disgust (as the English "nausea"). The German *Geräusch* is derived from *rauschen* (the rushing of the wind), related to *Rausch* (ecstasy, intoxication), thus pointing towards some of the aesthetic, bodily effects of noise in music.

The following descriptions and analyses are genre relative. The overall genre of the analyses of noise below is rock music. As has often been pointed out (Green, 1988, 33-34; Moore, 1993, 167-170) meaning in music is related to genres and styles (and the related types of listening competence) that constitute a background against which the

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#### A. Acoustic noise

In the field of acoustics the concept of noise is in principle purely physically defined. Noises are sounds that are impure and irregular, neither tones nor rhythm - roaring, pealing, blurry sounds with a lot of simultaneous frequencies, as opposed to a rounded sound with a basic frequency and its related overtones. To name different kinds of noise, synaesthetic metaphors are derived from the spectrum of color so that 'white noise' is a signal ideally containing all of the audible frequencies at the same time, like an untuned radio. A signal in which certain frequencies are preferred to others is thus called "colored noise," ranging from "violet noise" (a bias on the high frequencies) to "purple noise" (a bias on the low frequencies).

#### B. Communicative noise

In communication theory, noise is that which distorts the signal on its way from transmitter to recipient. There will always be an element of distortion, either externally or internally, coming from the medium itself. In music noise is often originally a malfunction in the instruments or electronics (a disturbance of the clear signal), which is then reversed into a positive effect. The distortion effect of the electric guitar, for instance, which is now ubiquitous in rock music, was originally an overload of the amplifier, causing it to fray the sound. In the early sixties, guitarists began to deliberately construct this distortion by fiddling with the amplifiers, and soon the industry marketed pedals with names like "fuzztone," "overdrive", and "distortion" as an easy way to obtain the same effect. In the same way electronica artists work with different sorts of overloads of the devices, or they deliberately induce errors with unpredictable results. One of the methods is giving the midi too many signals for it to handle, resulting in an uncontrollable musical output. Another technique is the obvious one of creating distortion by overloading a digital amplifier.

When you reverse a disturbance into a part of the music itself, it is not smoothly integrated but infuses the music with a tension. There is still a play on the formerly negative relation between noise and signal when a noise is legitimated. This tension is an important part of the musical power of noise.

#### C. Subjective noise

"Unpleasant sounds" - this is the common and colloquial, but also the most intricate, meaning of noise. And it is obviously a subjective definition. There are few general rules as to which sounds are unpleasant (the higher the frequency and the louder the sound, the more unpleasant it feels); it is to a great extent a matter of personal idiosyncrasy and cultural-historical situation.

An important factor in coming to dislike certain sounds is the extent to which they are considered meaningful. The noise of the roaring sea, for example, is not far from white radio noise, but is nonetheless not considered unpleasant and irritating. We still seek meaning in nature and therefore the roaring of the sea is a blissful sound, whereas radio noise (even if we were to hear it as indistinguishable from the sea) is normally considered a disturbance. Artists, who deal with noise in their music, as well as their audience, have a different approach to white noise, no longer considering it a nuisance.

One might conclude from this that the subjective definition is not relevant to the aesthetic use of noise in music. As I have already suggested, however, that would be a hasty dismissal of the important tension you get from infusing the formerly negative. To reach a point where a harsh, white noise is not considered unpleasant demands a training of the senses to the point of being familiar with this expansion of musical sounds. Reaching that point, noise will still contain a certain power due to the tension of listening to what used to be dismissed as repulsive.

Another definition might be suggested. "Noise" might be considered an antonym of "music" - unmusical sounds. This definition is, however, no longer meaningful after a century during which music has employed noise as a common musical element.

semantics unfold. Minimal noise is, however, outside traditional generic boundaries, and is related equally to avant-garde composed music, rock music and electronic music.

## 4.2. Expressionist Noise

The most common gesture in which noise plays an important role is what I will call the *expressionist gesture*.<sup>4</sup> Here, noise enhances the gesture of rush, rage, excitement, aggression, pain, fear, anger, emotional chaos and ecstasy.

This can be found in all modern genres, however most commonly in rock music. The distorted guitar is a metonymy of "abrasiveness," of something torn, shattered, and decomposed. Noise expresses physical, emotional and mental instability, as we shall see. It began in the early 1960s with garage bands such as The Who, and was developed notably by Jimi Hendrix and The Velvet Underground in different directions. In the 1980s the use of distorted guitars peaked in the genre called "noise rock," with bands like Sonic Youth and The Jesus & Mary Chain.<sup>5</sup>

### 4.2.1 *Band of Susans: "Elisabeth Stride (1843 -1888 )"*

In "Elisabeth Stride (1843-1888)" (1995) Band of Susans employs noise in a clearly expressionist gesture. The relation between the lyrics and the music is highly (and atypically) intimate, and noise functions as a kind of leitmotif in the narrative. It may therefore serve as an illustrative example.<sup>6</sup> The song is atypical of Band of Susans, whose style is normally minimal and mantra-like with a constant, roaring layer of noise from their three guitars with a gesture not unlike a waterfall, combining a "wall of sound" with a "wash of sound" (Sangild 2003, 81-87).

Elisabeth Stride, the protagonist of the lyrics, was a victim of Jack the Ripper. It is not an account which is fascinated with Jack the Ripper as an early serial killer - on the contrary, the story is seen from the viewpoint of the victim; it is a poetic yet empathetic narrative about the assault of a woman who became a prostitute out of necessity.

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<sup>4</sup> The term "expressionist" is used here not in the specific historical sense (belonging to German expressionism), but in the broadest sense of the word.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the genre and detailed analysis of Sonic Youth, The Jesus & Mary Chain, and Band of Susans, see (Sangild, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> It is important to emphasize that this semantics of noise as suspension and release is not dependant on a lyrical narrative, and can be found in instrumental music or in songs where the relation between lyrics and noise is far less obvious. This should be clear from many of the examples in Sangild 2003.

The song begins with a bell-sounding bass chord, evolving into a melancholic ostinato forming the harmonic basis. Susan Stenger's alto voice enters, singing the simple melody in a low voice.

In the beginning we follow Elisabeth as a child in the country. All is safe, she plays in the field. When we are told that her "papa never lets her from his sight," the first faint, feedback stings disturbingly, hinting at a secret. Father is not only protective, but also incestuous ("visits late at night"). The intimacy is unbearable, and "she dreams of living in a world apart."

She grows up, reaches puberty ("old enough to bleed"), moves to London, and meets men. "Human needs must find a human heart" - on the word "heart" the drums enter with a pulsing beat while distorted guitars follow as we are told about the dangers and chaos of the city. Things are not going well for Elisabeth. She gets pregnant, but the child is stillborn "from the crime of birth." The guitar noise increases, the drums nervously subdivide the rhythm.

Elisabeth becomes a prostitute to make ends meet. On the word "sin" an extra cymbal beat enters and the uneasiness of the music increases while a man follows her path in the dark on her way home. Susan Stenger's voice become agitated, slightly short of breath as Elisabeth becomes more aware of the danger. "She can feel him stare". On the word "stare" an extra guitar enters with fast strumming. The gesture of increasing tension and energy is almost a measure of the adrenaline rising in her body while he stares at her. The noise intensifies, and the two lines "she can feel him stare/he's standing there" is repeated. A third guitar is added, playing a fifth above the others, leading the music into a 2½ minutes long maelstrom, slowly intensified with increasing noise.

The "maelstrom of noise" is my term for a gesture in which the tune and rhythm break off into a whirl of noise, gradually intensifying tempo and volume, with a potential response of absorbing the listener into its ecstatic black hole. This chaotic vortex is in opposition to the structural, formal elements of the song, exceeding the boundaries of the senses, although still controlled on a higher level. The maelstrom is simultaneously an *explosion* of energy and an *implosion* of meaning, turning away from the distinct and semantic into the sublime and ecstatic. On another level, however, this expression of a chaotic vortex is precisely the meaning. Whenever noise challenges meaning, the challenge will become a part of another semantics.

The long maelstrom enters synchronically with the assault on Elisabeth Stride, an assault so abominable and horrifying that it cannot be described in words. Instead, noise takes over.

When the maelstrom dies down, Elisabeth is left lying dead and bleeding. Instead of reveling in horrifying details the lyrics maintain the poetic tone, linking back to the “eyes open wide” of the innocent child in the beginning of the song. Synchronically, the bass links back to the repeated, tolling bass chord of the beginning. The literary cycle (the earth and the open eyes) is echoed in the bell-like bass.

In the extreme experience of a violent assault language leaves off and screaming takes over. The maelstrom of noise represents what cannot be rendered, what banishes form and beauty. Simon Reynolds is aware of this connection between noise and horror:

Noise is like an eruption within the material out of which language is shaped... This is why noise and horror go hand in hand - because madness and violence are senseless and arbitrary (violence is the refusal to argue) and the only response is wordless - to scream. (Reynolds, 1990, 60)

Violence is the disempowerment of language, and noise is the sonic equivalent of this disempowerment, threatening musical order. In the expressionist gesture noise is often the metonymy of a scream.

“Elisabeth Stride” is a striking example of the more general connection between noise and adrenaline. In the expressionist gesture, noise can be a gauge of the amount of tension and release. Noise is predominant at the expressive climax points. Noise enhances the energy and intensity of the gesture, be that aggression, horror or bliss.

#### 4.3. Intimate, introvert Noise - My Bloody Valentine

There are, however, other musical gestures in which noise plays an important role. Noise is not always extrovert, outwardly directed, and climax-oriented - even though this is by far the most common employment of noise, especially in rock music. Noise can be introvert, mellow, and intimate. A primary example of this is My Bloody Valentine’s album *Loveless* (1991).

When critics described the album, a certain type of metaphor was common: metaphors dealing with engulfment, spatial disorientation, erotic intimacy, softness, blurriness, and drowsiness. A typical example of this is Simon Reynolds’ review of the album in *Melody Maker*:

All of “Loveless” is suffused with an apocalyptic, pre-orgasmic glow, the sound of an annihilating intimacy. My Bloody Valentine music is a smelting, melding, crucible of love in which every borderline (inside/outside, you/me, lover/loved) is abolished. Instead of the normal perspective of rock production (bass here, guitar there, voice there, with the listener mastering the field of hearing), My Bloody Va-

lentine are here, there, everywhere. They permeate, irradiate, subsume and consume you. (Reynolds, 1991)

Those are big words indeed, but they are nevertheless quite pertinent as an attempt to describe the gesture (and potential response) involved in this music - a gesture in which guitar noise is essential. I shall attempt below to specify how this type of metaphor can be understood as descriptive of the gesture in My Bloody Valentine's music.

#### 4.3.1. *Description*

The ear meets a blurred, diffuse harmonic, slightly difficult to comprehend precisely. The chords slide unstably up and down in pitch, rarely focused clearly in the overall sound of distorted guitars. The sound of guitar strumming is absent. Instead, the guitar sounds loom without the clear markings of a normal (electric) guitar sound. It seems to be growing out of nowhere, with no distinct edges. The (often androgynous) vocals are mixed down in the background of the sound stage, making the words almost undecipherable. In several songs a flute-like sound plays a repeated melodic motif, which can be more dominating than the vocals. The songs do not develop towards a climax (as opposed to the expressionist gesture described above), but repeat patterns over and over. The drums are sometimes so low in the mix that they almost lose their role of creating a beat. They often have sixteenth note fills, but without the usual climatic function of the fill. Many interwoven sounds are present at the same time, not easy to separate spatially in the densely produced "sound-box".<sup>7</sup> There is hardly an indication of any space on the acoustic stage.

#### 4.3.2. *The-Not-Quite-Really-There-Sound*

The music is drowsy and dreamlike. The gesture is not unlike the sense of lying in your bed just before you fall asleep, deeply buried under the duvet.

*Loveless* is almost as far from expressionism as possible within a rock idiom. Nothing is spoken out loud, nothing calls for attention. By means of compressors the dynamic movements are leveled. There is a sweetness to the discreet, melancholic melodies. The vocal is lazy and mumbling as if it were coming from somebody reluctant to wake up, prone to just sleep on and indulge sensually in soft dreams.

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of a sound-box is developed by Alan F. Moore (Moore, 1993, 105-110) to designate the three-dimensional sound production along the axes up-down (pitch), left-right (stereo) and foreground-background (in the mix hierarchy). A huge spaced production is found in U2's *The Joshua Tree*. The sound-box of My Bloody Valentine will thus be at the other end of the spectrum, leaving no space for clear distinctions, producing an almost claustrofobic space.

The dreamlike atmosphere is primarily obtained by three means: Firstly, the sliding chords created by the so-called "tremolo-arm" (actually a vibrato-arm<sup>8</sup>) of the guitar, used differently than in normal rock music, where the guitarist occasionally grabs the arm in order to vibrate a sustained note or chord. My Bloody Valentine uses the arm to slowly let the chords slide and intertwine, creating a blurred, ambiguous harmonic, where the focus constantly glides and the chords are sometimes almost blotted out (as in "Loomer," "To Here Knows When," and "Blown A Wish"). The blurred harmonic endows the music with a sense of unreality, disorientation and fuzzy outlines, as in a dream.

The second effect is what they themselves have called "the-not-quite-really-there-sound," adding to the dreamy sense of immateriality. It designates the removal of the guitar strumming from the sound, created by keeping the volume pedal down at the moment of striking the chord and then letting the sound grow without the physicality of the strike. It may sound as if it were being played backwards, with the sound emerging gradually rather than suddenly. The same disorientation and immateriality can be found in dreams, where images appear and disappear without a clear sense of causality and without the inertia of physical reality. This aspect is one of the links between My Bloody Valentine and electronica, which often eliminates the indexical traces of the material origins of sounds (Sangild, 2002b).

The third means is, of course, guitar noise - an integrated part of My Bloody Valentine's sound. It enhances the disorientation; it is part of the dreamy atmosphere. Turbid guitar distortion helps to blur and veil distinctions. Where noise in early My Bloody Valentine is more conventional in its expressive energy, on *Loveless* (and the previous two EPs) it serves as a part of an introvert out-of-focus-gesture.

#### 4.3.3. *Same Noise, Different Gesture*

Thus, a different aspect of noise is at work than in the expressionist gesture. Rather than outwardly directed, abrasive, raging energy, *turbidity* is the prevalent aspect of noise in the introvert gesture. They have the same sonic root, chaotic fuzziness, and in these examples the instrument and overall genre is the same: distorted rock guitar. The outcome depends in part on the musical context.

This does not mean that noise arbitrarily means just anything at all, that it does not contribute specific meanings. *Loveless* without the noise would have essentially different expressive qualities - it would not be able to create its dreamy atmosphere,

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<sup>8</sup> Tremolo is made by inserting holes in the sound by clipping the volume up and down. Vibrato is made by rapid variations in pitch. Fender erroneously called their guitar vibrato arm "tremolo," a term that has lingered on. In My Bloody Valentine the vibrato effect is used for glissando, i.e. a slower variation in pitch.



and the intimate sense of being veiled or embraced by the music would simply be gone. Furthermore, as I have analyzed elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> the semantics of *Loveless* can be interpreted further in the direction of tenderness, intimacy and transgression of subjectivity, made possible through the employment of noise. Here, suffice it to say that in both the expressionist and the introvert-intimate gestures, noise is a vehicle towards subject boundary transgressions - whether explosive as in Dionysian ecstasy or implosive, suggestive of pre-oedipal narcissism - and that this transgression is a general feature of the aesthetics of noise.

#### 4.4. Extreme, minimal noise

If you take a moment from the roaring climax in expressionist noise music and expand it, if this moment lingers on and becomes the very music itself, the expressionist quality crystallizes into something quite different. Band Of Susans hinted at that in much of their music (different from the example analyzed above), creating long, solid power-chord drones with three unison guitars that moved the musical power from the expressive-ecstatic to the hypnotic. Minimal simplicity combined with sonic power equals mantra (Sangild, 2003, 81-87). Band Of Susans did not go all the way in terms of minimalism, still sticking to rudiments of song structures. It is precisely this ambiguous gesture, however, which shows in all its clarity the minimal gesture as a congealment of the organic-expressive.

##### 4.4.1. Historical Examples

Some brief historical remarks will be of service here. The idea of composing exclusively with noise can be traced back to Luigi Russolo's famous manifesto (Russolo, 1913) and the invention of the primitive *intonarumori* as an attempt to realize this idea. Later, avant-garde composers in the WDR Cologne Studio explored the different sonic qualities of electronically generated noise, as in Gottlieb Michael Koenig's *Klangfiguren II* (1955-56). Here, in a serialist idiom, repetition and drones were taboo.

A more minimal approach is found in Gordon Mumma's *The Dresden Interleaf 13 February 1945* (1965), where different roaring noise drones - only slightly changing, not developing in any direction - are interrupted by long "interleaves" of silence. Many of the noise parts in the work are slightly reminiscent of airplane engines, alluding to the bombing of Dresden without illustrating it in its abstract minimal gesture.

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<sup>9</sup> (Sangild, 2003, 76-77). See also (Sangild, 2002a, 18-19) for a summary in English.

#### 4.4.2. *Metal Machine Music*

In 1975 Lou Reed created his *Metal Machine Music*, a double album consisting of four record sides each lasting 16 minutes and one second, the last ending in a locked groove. The sound is pure guitar-based noise. There is no melody, no real development, only loops of feedback and distorted guitars. Listening through one side is a feat of endurance that few people are prepared for, let alone the whole album. The sound is closer to that of a jet motor than to the rock music normally associated with Lou Reed.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the relevant conceptual aspects normally focused on in the reception of *Metal Machine Music* (viewing it mainly as an attack on the record industry in general and the RCA label in particular) there is the possibility of listening to it in more depth, discovering the variations in the stream of rumbling noises and screeching feedback sounds. The harsh feedback sounds are, of course, tones; some of them have a drone-like character, others swarm chaotically. There is no structure, but there is a *texture* with the drones as temporary points of orientation between traditional opposites - the expressionistic scream and the meditative mantra.

#### 4.4.3. *Merzbow*

If *Metal Machine Music* had been a single exception to the convention that music cannot consist of pure noise there would be little reason to write about extreme, minimal noise as an important phenomenon here. However, a whole musical genre has developed from taking *Metal Machine Music* not as a terminal abyss, but rather as a starting point for the creation of extreme, minimal noise. Genre names like "Extreme Noise," "Drone Noise," "Japanoise"<sup>11</sup> or just "Noise" testifies to the establishment of an ongoing aesthetic pursuit in the sonic potentials of pure noise beyond traditional genre boundaries.

The most important name on this scene is Merzbow (Masami Akita), who has unremittingly produced extreme, minimal noise for more than 25 years, amounting to around 200 CDs and tapes, culminating in the 50 CD box set *Merzbox* (2000). They all differ in means and sound, exploring the seemingly endless possibilities for variations of noise. Some are pulsating, some are loop-based, some are based on static noise focusing on high frequencies, others focus on the lower frequencies, some are extremely harsh, others a bit more agreeable etc. They range from the relatively mild, industrial sounds on *Music for Bondage Performance* (1991) to the constant heavy distortion on *Venereology* (1994) and *Pulse Demon* (1996). He has been involved in many

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<sup>10</sup> The traces back to Velvet Underground are however clear as well as to La Monte Young's drone music in *The Dream Syndicate*, featuring John Cale. Cf. (Sangild, 2004a).

<sup>11</sup> A big part of the scene is based in Tokyo, hence the pun.

collaborations, such as the humoresque juxtaposition with German amateur pop band Ladybird on *Balance* (1997), with Merzbow's white noise in one channel and naïve pop in the other, so that the listener can choose her own mix of the two.

Even though there is no development in any traditional sense, there is variation in every piece, the timbres are constantly changed in detail. A brief look at the typical Merzbow track "Klo Ken Phantasie" from *Venereology* will serve as an example. The track may simply sound obnoxiously harsh and monotonous during a superficial encounter, but the audible fact is that there is not one second similar to any other. Underlying most of the piece as a functional drone is a deep, dark rumbling sound reminiscent of wind noise in a bad microphone or a tube guitar amplifier in an ecstatic moment that just lingers on. Already five seconds into the piece higher frequencies of noise are added, the color of noise constantly changing. Throughout the piece occasional feedback squeals briefly. Some decisive points of change are at 2'10 when new sounds are added, many of them frictional in quality; at 3'27 when the sound picture gets very sharp (few and high frequencies); at 4'04 when the rumbling drone disappears and the feedback squeals dominate; and at 7'35 when the texture is attenuated with a focus on midrange frequencies and there is a play with tape speed and thus pitch.

#### 4.4.4. *The Screaming Mantra*

The ambiguity between a violently aggressive sound and its drone-like flow is essential to the gesture of extreme, minimal noise. It is no longer expressionist, since the climax loses its climatic character when the climax is all there is.

This dialectic is reminiscent of the employment of dissonance. It can be found already in Arnold Schönberg's *Erwartung* (1909), where the ubiquitous expressionist dissonance loses its character as a tension and the composer has to rely on dynamics in order to create emotional difference. Still, the gesture is one of constant tension and hysteria with no lyrical passages to provide contrast to it. "The emancipation of the dissonance"<sup>12</sup> is also the waning of its expressive power.<sup>13</sup> To a certain extent noise has replaced dissonance as the aesthetic means of creating roughness and tension in music. The parallel with atonal music is thus clear: when noise is predominant it is no longer expressive in a traditional sense.

The noise drone is not a drone in the sense of a harmonic centre, but rather a timbral or textural constant. The gesture of no development is as present here as in the

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<sup>12</sup> This is, of course, Schönberg's own famous designation, cf. (Schönberg, 1975, 84, 216-217)

<sup>13</sup> Historically, the foundations for the waning of the power of dissonance are laid by the chromatic tonality of romantic music. It was already in a crisis when Schönberg made his expressionist move.

religious mantra or in the minimalism of La Monte Young. The difference from the usual meditative drone gesture is the *sound*, which does not express peace of mind but rather stress of mind or even chaos.

Still, minimal noise can be experienced somewhat meditatively by its core audience. Noise can even be used for relaxing purposes, as the CD label Pure White Noise testifies [Link: <http://www.purewhitenoise.com>]. They sell CDs such as *Smooth Radio Static*, *Baby's First White Noise*, *Baby's Vacuum Cleaner*, *Calming Electric Fan*, *Distant Thunderstorm* and *Soothing Air Conditioner* - not as conceptual sound art or as playful internet jokes but as serious, scientifically based tools for relaxing yourself or your baby when in pain or stress, even for concentration, meditation and focus.

There is, of course, a difference between the Pure White Noise CDs and the minimal noise music of Lou Reed, Merzbow and others. *Metal Machine Music* and much of the work by Merzbow are harsher than the relaxation CDs. They also invite to listening at higher volume levels.<sup>14</sup> Still, the meditative flow is hypnotic and trance-like, and this is an important part of the minimal noise gesture.

#### 4.4.5. *Less Is More*

The minimal gesture is a gesture of detachment. In its simplicity minimal music dispends with the somewhat mythical gesture of an organic subject expressing her feelings through music. It is thus part of the more general objectifying tendency in the arts since the 1950s (Sangild, 2004c, 13-24). There is a focus on the artwork as object or gesture - as organized sound, when we speak of music. The reading of the music as spiritual expressions of an authentic self becomes impossible.<sup>15</sup>

Minimal noise is a challenge for the ear. We are accustomed to perceive pure noise as just noise, relegating it to a common perceptual category of garbage. Minimal noise conveys a focus on differentiation between thousands of different noises, many of them close to white noise. This is in line with what minimalism in general does; it heightens the perceptual awareness of minute variations in the seemingly monotonous. In minimal noise, the complexity is not at the horizontal level of development, but rather on the vertical level of sound textures. Hence minimal noise can be perceived as a pure "timbre melody", and, in terms of response, as a possibility for enriching our sensibility towards auditory experience in general.

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<sup>14</sup> Merzbow's concerts are an example of this, typical for the extreme noise scene in general. The volume is very high, a physical assault on the ears and the nervous system.

<sup>15</sup> In the expressionist and the introvert gestures this reading is possible, but rather problematic. Sonic Youth and The Jesus & Mary Chain employ irony in an ambivalent play with the expressionist gesture, emphasizing its character as a chosen effect. There is a parallel here, perhaps, with some of the neo-expressionist painting in the 1980s.

This points to another aspect of minimalism - its literal and theatrical character. Michael Fried famously criticized minimal art for its literalness, meaning that it is non-metaphorical, non-illusionistic, and for its "theatricality", meaning that its non-relational objecthood points out from the simple work towards the staged context, the concrete space, audience and institutionality (Fried, 1967). The simple object is not illusionary enough for the spectator to forget her everyday life and become immersed in a virtual experience. As a mirror it reflects the concrete situation of relating to a sculpture in time and space with your body staged in an institutional setting. The contemporary art scene has, of course, considered this a virtue rather than a vice.

A similar thing happens in response to extreme, minimal noise. When there is seemingly not much to describe in the music itself,<sup>16</sup> the focus is often on the context and on the conceptual meanings that are always intertwined with the musical gesture. There is a focus on the act of making pure noise as a statement about music or about noise, as a reflection of the chaos in contemporary urban culture, as a test of how far you can go physically, as a political manifesto against order, etc. These are, as always, relevant in the full interpretation of a musical work of art. Here, however, I have focused on the gesture of the screaming mantra.

#### 4.5. The De-centering of Subjectivity

The three gestures sketched here are very different in what and how they express. They have, however, at least one thing in common, a thing that dissociates them from traditional mainstream rock and pop music: a de-centering of subjectivity. In the expressionist gesture the gestural subject explodes in Dionysian ecstasy; in the introvert gesture the gestural subject implodes in a blurring of its boundaries; in the minimal gesture the gestural subject is detached and minimized. This points towards what I discovered in my research on the aesthetics of noise: that noise in music points away from any stable subjectivity, towards the abject, the heterogeneous, the Dionysian, and the multiple (Sangild, 2003, 90-107).

There are, of course, other gestures that involve noise. An important one in contemporary electronica is the *fragile* gesture in Oval, Microstoria, Andreas Tiliander and many others. Here, the gestural subject seems almost to crumble or decompose. This should be analyzed further elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Theoretically, a language could be developed that was able to differentiate noise sounds far more than the one we have today. This would make it much easier to describe the music in detail, and would probably enhance our auditory sensibility as well.

<sup>17</sup> I have taken some preliminary steps in that direction in relation to the "glitch" genre (Sangild, 2004b).

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