

Notes From The Underground:
A Cultural, Political, and Aesthetic Mapping of
Underground Music.

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Signed:

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Abstract

The term ‘underground music’, in my account, connects various forms of music-making that exist largely outside ‘mainstream’ cultural discourse, such as Drone Metal, Free Improvisation, Power Electronics, and DIY Noise, amongst others. Its connotations of concealment and obscurity indicate what I argue to be the music’s central tenets of cultural reclusion, political independence, and aesthetic experiment. In response to a lack of scholarly discussion of this music, my thesis provides a cultural, political, and aesthetic mapping of the underground, whose existence as a coherent entity is being both argued for and ‘mapped’ here. Outlining the historical context, but focusing on the underground in the digital age, I use a wide range of interdisciplinary research methodologies, including primary interviews, musical analysis, and a critical engagement with various pertinent theoretical sources.

In my account, the underground emerges as a marginal, ‘antemediated’ cultural ‘scene’ based both on the web and in large urban centres, the latter of whose concentration of resources facilitates the growth of various localised underground scenes. I explore the radical anti-capitalist politics of many underground figures, whilst also examining their financial ties to big business and the state(s). This contradiction is critically explored, with three conclusions being drawn.

First, the underground is shown in Part II to be so marginal as to escape, in effect, post-Fordist capitalist subsumption. Second, the practice of ‘co-determination’ is seen to allow politically engaged underground artists to channel public and private funds into various practices of contestation. Third, and finally, I argue across Part III that in its distinctive musical and iconographic forms, the underground offers a kind of profaning, deforming, sublimating aesthetic ‘counter-magic’, where radical aesthetic modes and radical practices of representation communicate a kind of ‘reconfiguration of the sensible’ to audiences. I argue that this ‘reconfiguration’ might yield emancipatory political readings, whilst also reflecting the kinds of experimental and exploratory musical practices typical in the underground.

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Part One:

Introduction to
the Underground

Chapter One – Introduction to the Underground

This thesis is about what I am calling ‘underground music’. It is an attempt to come to grips in a scholarly way with the music I deem as falling under that heading, music which, I suggest, draws in varying ways from the musical strategies and aesthetic ambitions of both popular music and experimental notated music.¹ It is also an attempt to map in broad but critical terms the political and cultural contours of what I describe as the ‘scene’ surrounding and contextualising that music. That scene, I argue, exists as a marginalised, what I will come to call ‘anintermediated’ music-cultural configuration, marked particularly by close affiliation with emancipatory radical politics, links to but partial independence from capital and the state(s), and various aesthetic strategies and techniques of contestation and subversion, including techniques I variously, but complementarily, describe as deformation, undermining, profanation, sublimation, and ‘counter-magic’. These various techniques are deployed, I argue, to the effect of suggesting to underground audiences a kind of ‘reconfiguration of the sensible’. This contention about the contestatory, exploratory aesthetics of the underground echoes the similarly contestatory, radical political and cultural practices and positionality of the underground scene.

Before getting to the extensive, systematic extrapolation of each of these claims, I’ll spend some time in this opening section explaining a little more of the context,

¹ These two categories are of course ambiguous and perpetually in flux, but for present purposes they are being used to represent commercial, seemingly aesthetically ‘moderate’ music on the one hand, and institutional, seemingly aesthetically ‘challenging’ music on the other.

underlying assumptions, and basic framework of my research.

The thesis seeks to map underground music in as broad a sense as possible and as such follows the line of the multi-dimensional contexts just referenced into cultural and political discussions, as well as into more rigorously music-aesthetic² ones. However, notwithstanding these important distinctions, the multi-dimensional influences that co-determine underground music are shown to be inextricable from each other throughout the thesis. Accordingly, sections of music analysis overlap with discussions of cultural politics, which coincide with sociological discussions in turn, and so on. The sections overlap in a quite deliberate way, such that the multiple discourses shaping and being shaped by the music are reflected in my own dynamic critical approach.

That is the broad subject matter. Ultimately, the inclusion or exclusion of music – the determination as to whether different musics qualify as ‘underground’ or not – will come down to a matter of personal intuition. However, as will become clear later in the Introduction, this intuition will be situated within a context of rationally defined parameters of commercial appeal, musical style, ideology,³ industrial behaviour and allegiance, and so on.

² I use the term ‘aesthetic’ throughout the thesis to refer to passages in which judgements about artistic quality and composition are considered at a remove from political, utilitarian, or cultural issues, which may otherwise be pressing on the discussion but are being temporarily bracketed away.

³ I use ‘ideology’ throughout the thesis in a quite basic sense to refer to individuals and groups’ (conscious or implicit) core set of ‘values’, beliefs, and instincts, particularly as these inform basic moral and attitudinal perspectives. In this use I am of course drawing on Althusser, who famously spoke of ideology as representing ‘the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (Louis Althusser, trans. Ben Brewster. ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)’, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001, p. 109). In other words, ideology is the dynamic but often hidden framework of values, emerging out of material conditions of existence as well as out of discursive constructions and perspectives, which guide individuals’ dispositional attitude to events and experiences in the world.

My approach as regards chronology is as follows. The conception of musical history I employ is very much a materialist-dialectical one. Music is understood not to emerge in a vacuum. Technological, social, cultural, industrial, and economic changes and phenomena produce the space in which musical history happens, and through which musical history is constructed. This conviction lies at the heart of the inner nature of the thesis, as I am seeking in part to track a cultural paradigm shift which occurred as a result of developments in communication technology, developments which have changed how music, and this music specifically, both sounds and proliferates. Whilst it *is* a concern to convey to some degree the historical development of underground music, whose direct origins I trace broadly to the 1960s, it is a *particular* concern of the thesis to examine the concrete cultural existence of underground music in the digital age, that is, roughly since the 1990s.⁴ This focus is a response to three important and interrelated phenomena.

First, underground music has developed and diversified to a considerable extent over the past two decades. As such, underground music in the digital age will be seen, simply put, to provide a particularly vibrant subject for research that seeks to be wide-ranging in perspective and diverse in focus.

Second, it is also the case that, speaking in the broadest terms, the media and tools of the underground have shifted dramatically within the timeframe just mentioned. In the 1970s,

⁴ However, pre-digital eras are important at various points, most notably in the 'listening' chapters of Part III. In Chapter Eight, for example, I track the aesthetic history of Noise and DIY, spending a substantial amount of time discussing music from the late-1970s and the 1980s, simply because the musical scene under examination (Noise, Power Electronics) was flourishing at those points.

1980s, and into the transitional period of the 1990s, the underground existed within the pages of fanzines, and through networks of distribution dominated by mail order and, to a lesser extent, by the physical locations of record shops and concerts. Whilst a taste for physical media such as cassettes, records, and CD-Rs persists amongst underground audiences and labels – as we will see particularly in the case studies of Chapter Six – the former predominance of physically-anchored distribution networks and media of criticism and promotion has shifted since the 1990s, alongside the rest of musical culture, to embrace immaterial digital files (such as the MP3) and web-based distribution and promotion practices. As such, we could speak of two chronologically distinct undergrounds, the second drawing its values and some of its procedures from the first, but differing fundamentally in its media and tools. It would be foolhardy to attempt to trace this full historical context and evolution of the underground within the constrained space of a doctoral thesis, and consequently I have chosen to focus on the latter part of the analogue-digital underground dyad, albeit with the caveats outlined in footnote three above.

The third motive for my focus on the digital age resides in the fact that one of the defining features of my version of underground music is its ‘undergroundness’. That is to say, is its independence from the mainstream⁵ as regards both its musical and its wider cultural dimensions. Practices of self-determination in production and distribution, and to a lesser, though in some cases more important extent, autonomy from capitalism and sympathy with far-left political-cultural models, have dominated the underground since

⁵ This term is used throughout the thesis to represent the cultural objects that are ‘visible’ in society without much or any effort on the part of the observer, with aesthetic consequences or qualities being attendant on or causal of that widespread visibility. The slight mixing of metaphors, underground/mainstream, is noted.

its earliest period. With these points in mind, it is my wager that an examination of the ongoing status of the underground's 'undergroundness' as this is subject to pressure from the new digital age phenomena of immaterial music, widespread piracy, global sharing networks, and easily cultivated self-determining models of production, promotion, and distribution, will be particularly revealing of both the contemporary breadth and character of the underground, and of the underlying political tension emergent in the digital age. This is the basic perspective of the thesis.

I will use the rest of the introduction to explore with a little more precision the nature of my subject. I begin by developing an account of the term 'underground' itself, discussing its use as a modifier for 'music' in a general sense. I consider the nature of the musical 'scene'⁶ being addressed, dovetail previous usage of the term 'underground' with my own more precise mobilisation, and offer a brief introduction to some of the cultural and theoretical issues addressed at length in subsequent chapters. I conclude by explaining the structure and (in a broad sense) the method adopted within the thesis.

1.1 'Underground'?

The term 'underground music' will be familiar to most. It is a category with many applications, the meaning of which shift according to whatever register of music is being described. If we were to speak of underground rock music, for example, we could

⁶ I address the use of this concept as an organising principle in Chapter Two. Briefly, following Andy Bennett, the term denotes an ambient but cohesive group of music and musicians united by shared cultural values and codes, by models of distribution and production, and by a broad set of musical styles and tropes. A scene is not bound by geographical or temporal barriers. It relates to Bourdieu's concept of the field, both of which concepts I explore in Chapter Two.

meaningfully refer to anyone from Nirvana to The Sonics to Harry Pussy, to pick three divergent examples. In the case of Nirvana, that group's 'undergroundness' could be related to its members' oft-proclaimed cultural aversion to the mainstream, or equally to the group's musical sympathy with Noise and Metal⁷ groups such as the Melvins or Earth. The Sonics could be described as being 'underground' as a result of their status as one of the first garage bands, who thus occupied a comparatively separate position from mainstream modes of industrial production and distribution. Noise Rock band Harry Pussy, finally, would achieve underground status as a result of their almost total aesthetic, cultural, and practical separation from mainstream culture. This last category in fact well represents my subject matter.

Across each of these examples, the character of what is meant by the term 'underground' varies, though in each case the term performs a shared function of gesturing towards an anti- or trans-mainstream set of practices. I can remark simply at this point that 'underground music', in its general usage, is a comparative term without agreed upon meaning outside of context. It basically signifies something of artists' aesthetic, or cultural, or personal, or indeed all of the above, separation from mainstream practice, without pinning down the precise register or degree of that separation. I evidence this in some examples momentarily.

Another key aspect of the term 'underground' is that it is often used in discussions of

⁷ Genre names are capitalised throughout. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, I needed to be able to distinguish clearly between, for example, 'noise' and the genre of Noise; 'hauntology' and the genre of Hauntology; 'improvisation' and the genre of Free Improvisation; and 'lo-fi' and the genre of Lo-fi. The second reason derives from my desire to treat genre names as proper names, and thus to grant them more rhetorical solidity than is usually the case.

music with an implicit or explicit awareness of its ideological resonance. When this or that music's underground status is discussed, a certain degree of 'authenticity' or credibility is commonly ascribed to the music. In that gesture of ascription, a value judgement is expressed about the music being discussed. That value judgement discloses the ideological investment made in attributes of the music, whether that investment is in the music's commercial obscurity, its sense of artistic experiment, or in the forms of social behaviour and etiquette that accompany it as regards both the audience and the artists themselves.

This kind of double function of the term 'underground' as applied to music — that is, its ability to convey comparative positioning outside the mainstream *and* its ideological resonance — can be found throughout musical culture widely conceived. However, a notion of the 'underground' is particularly important to Hip Hop, Dance, and Metal, genre forms each with their own particularly significant set of investments in both credibility and in distinction from the mainstream.

Examples are plenty. The British website Underground Music describes itself as 'The World's #1 source for all styles of hardcore techno records/CDs/merchandise and information'.⁸ The site serves as an online retailer which sells a broad range of hardcore techno vinyl and MP3 releases. The name of the site, Underground Music, seems to engage with the loose idea of 'underground' as signifying some kind of clandestine cool. The music it covers, in commercial position as much as formal style, reflects that idea, but the label is used only loosely. Here, the term 'underground music' is perhaps serving

⁸ www.undergroundmusic.co.uk, accessed 20 October 2011.

less of an ideological function than it is operating simply as a designator of market and cultural position. It is tempting to read investment into the glamour of being ‘underground’, but the site’s neutral tone rebuts any such interpretation.

News and reviews site Metal Underground, on the other hand, seems to proclaim its ideology front and centre.⁹ It suggests, ‘some music was meant to stay underground...’. However, the site’s coverage of popular metal acts such as Metallica or Danzig, alongside the attention it gives to more esoteric fare such as Wolves in the Throne Room or Assemble the Chariots, reveals that it, too, is using the ‘underground’ label not necessarily as an evaluative or ideological marker, but more as a simple (broadly-configured) designator of commerciality.¹⁰ ‘Underground’, here, serves as a way of organising the market potential of various artists into an easily discussed and promoted category whose parameters stretch even to Metallica, though the focus is largely on esoteric acts such as those just mentioned. Such a function is explicitly engaged in the site’s weekly column, ‘Unearthing the Metal Underground’, where the site’s authors ‘take a look at three quality bands that haven’t gotten as much exposure yet as they should’.¹¹

‘The Underground Music Awards’, which describes itself as ‘like the Grammy Awards for underground urban artists’, has a similar agenda.¹² Whilst using the allure of the ‘underground’ label in its title and its publicity materials, the awards are less about the

⁹ <http://www.metalunderground.com>, accessed 23 October 2011.

¹⁰ Its range of reviews, articles, and interviews, accessible via the home page just given, attest to this.

¹¹ ‘Unearthing The Metal Underground: The Moroccan Metal Scene’, <http://www.metalunderground.com/news/details.cfm?newsid=79386>, accessed 5 May 2012.

¹² <http://www.undergroundmusicawards.com/>, accessed 24 October 2011.

recognition of underground production qua *underground* production, than they are about a strategic framing of urban music in terms of its commercial potential. Run by the music marketing firm Urban Threshold, the Underground Music Awards are ‘a national award show for independent artists, producers and songwriters’, which has ‘received major press coverage from MTV, *The Source Magazine*, *XXL*, *the Village Voice* and More’.¹³ The concern of the awards is clearly less for the music it covers to stay underground, than it is to get the artists signed, to publicise their music, and to enable them to make connections with companies or other artists. We see here the key marketing potential and function of the category ‘underground music’. The three examples surveyed so far illustrate the commercial and marketing dimensions of the term ‘underground’.

The case is somewhat different as regards Underground Hip Hop.¹⁴ This is an online retailer and forum for hip hop fans which in the main covers relatively mainstream acts, such as Jedi Mind Tricks or M.E.D., although the focus, it should be noted, is more on these sorts of respected but somewhat commercially alternative acts, than it is on more generally popular hip hop artists such as, say, Kanye West. The site thus uses the term ‘underground’ to indicate a comparative position of commercial obscurity, in a like fashion to Underground Music. However, the bracketing use of the term serves to ascribe meaning and value along ideological grounds to the music being covered, if the content of the discussions and the imagery used on the forums are reliable indicators in this regard.¹⁵ The site’s forums are full of coded language and private jokes, forms of communication governed by social and ideological rules regarding behaviour, language,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <http://www.undergroundhiphop.com/>, accessed 20 October.

¹⁵ <http://forums.undergroundhiphop.com/>, accessed 20 October.

and image. Personal avatars include titles such as ‘Lethal Weapon’, ‘The Real’, ‘Criminal MinDead’, ‘ImagrownassmanwitNoHoes’, ‘Project Blaze’, and ‘Dr. Demise’, whilst the topics for discussion on the forum frequently include judgements on clothes (the site also sells clothing), the authenticity of white rappers, sexual judgements of women, and more general canonisation or rejection of different examples of new hip hop music.

It is clear from the general tone of sarcasm and exclusivity, and from the insider language employed by the users, that every statement or comment on the forum represents an event conducted according to a set of generic rules, rules which relate back to the musical establishment of a version of those rules through the deployment of musical tropes fitting to the character of the site’s alternative ideology. The process is dynamic as well as being reflexive. The music creates and reinforces the social etiquette, which itself in turn informs the reception of music on the forum.

‘Underground’ in this example links to ideological ideas of credibility and ‘realness’. These are dynamic though rule-based categories of behaviour and image familiar from both mainstream and more esoteric Hip Hop, Metal, and other forms. Being ‘underground’ here means being ‘authentic’, means making, as Simon Reynolds put it in 1996, ‘authentic, uncompromised music that refuses to sell out to the music industry and soften its message for crossover’.¹⁶ For Reynolds, such authenticity, which he describes in terms of a framework of ‘realness’, ‘also signifies that the music reflects a ‘reality’ constituted by late capitalist economic instability, institutionalised racism, and increased

¹⁶ Simon Reynolds, ‘On the Hardcore Continuum #4’, <http://thewire.co.uk/articles/2028/print>, accessed 25 October 2011.

surveillance and harassment of youth by the police'.¹⁷

This ascribing of ideological value both to formal musical qualities as well as to social behaviour is in sharp evidence in the underground hip hop magazine *Above Ground*.¹⁸ The mission statement of *Above Ground* explicitly engages ideas of credibility in hip hop, although it is a particular type of historical or mythological credibility at which the magazine is aiming. The mission statement draws on a range of oppositions, including those between authenticity and the commercial imperative, expression and vulgarity, and, most fundamentally, hip hop and commercial rap: 'To us, underground hip hop culture is today what hip hop culture represented 20 years ago. It's about expression through art. It's about rap music, turntablism, graffiti and break. The culture that has been stripped from hip-hop by commercialization and overzealous record executives'.¹⁹ The editors of *Above Ground* set out in this statement an exclusion zone for hip hop culture, which for them would have to include commercial modern rap, 'swag', guns, major record labels, and other musical and social tropes of mainstream hip hop as they see it. Their mission statement invokes an ideologically informed discourse of 'authentic' underground values for hip hop, and seeks to reclaim a cultural space in which these values might once again thrive. These last two examples thus invoke 'underground' in explicitly ideological (and divergent) senses, in contrast to the commercial connotations of the previous examples.

The term 'underground' has thus lacked cohesion in its application to Hip Hop, Metal, and Dance. It has indexed commercial and ideological values. In the case of the former,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ <http://abovegroundmagazine.com/>, accessed 22 October 2011.

¹⁹ 'About', <http://abovegroundmagazine.com/about/>, accessed 23 October 2011.

‘underground’ does not denote a shared set of sonic signifiers, instead being used in a comparative sense indicating separation from the mainstream. In the latter, ‘underground’ is an ideological category integrating commercial, lifestyle, and musical choices under one label, a label that serves an ideological function of creating a value discourse around the musical and social culture of the ‘genre world’ to which the label is being applied. In the next section I elaborate, in contrast to the general survey given so far, on *my* use of the term ‘underground’.

1.2 ‘My’ Underground: Genre, Style, and Ideology

The applications of ‘underground’ surveyed so far precisely highlight, albeit in discrete terms, the concurrence between ideology and commerciality drawn out in the thesis. I use ‘underground music’ in an integrative sense, where the ideological *and* the (non-) commercial dimensions of the above examples are united in a deliberate way and with respect to a distinct musical scene. When I use the term ‘underground music’, I mean to address a generically diverse scene of music that is essentially ideologically-configured, at least in some important respects, and under whose banner a shared (though diverse) repertoire of social behaviours, musical codes, and practical models of production and distribution has been developed. The scene being addressed is also united by its lack of commercial appeal. My use of the term ‘underground’ thus integrates commercial, political, musical, and social codes.

In terms of more general stylistic-generic classification, underground music does not slot comfortably into the trichotomic arrangement that has largely governed musicological

classifications (of both formal and informal kinds) of musical style, a trichotomy that Phillip Tagg refers to as the ‘axiomatic triangle consisting of “folk”, “art” and “popular” musics’.²⁰ Tagg defines popular music (and art music, by negative implication) in the following terms:

Popular music, unlike art music, is (1) conceived for mass distribution to large and often socioculturally heterogeneous groups of listeners, (2) stored and distributed in non-written form, (3) only possible in an industrial monetary economy where it becomes a commodity and (4) in capitalist societies, subject to the laws of ‘free’ enterprise, according to which it should ideally sell as much as possible of as little as possible to as many as possible.²¹²²

Underground music satisfies some of these conditions, but falls outside others. The primary ‘ontology’ of underground music resides in sounding forms (such as performances or recordings), not in written ones. This would seem to suggest its congruity with popular music as defined by Tagg. But it is not conceived for mass distribution, nor it is expected to ‘sell well’, even if its production and distribution is to a large extent ‘only possible in an industrial monetary economy’. Therefore a congruity with ‘art music’ is also in evidence.

This multilateral allegiance is mirrored if we expand Tagg’s mainly industrial criteria to include issues of musical style more directly. As a general principle (which nevertheless is inadequate as regards actually existing musical history), art music has tended to

²⁰ Philip Tagg, ‘Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice’ in *Popular Music* 2, January (1982), p. 41.

²¹ Ibid.

²² This definition, being thirty years old, might be seen to be a little outmoded, however in its broad application and its basic accuracy, it repays use here. A lively debate taking place recently in the pages of *Popular Music* sees author such as Tagg responding directly to the question of whether we ‘can get rid of the “popular”’: Can We Get Rid of the 'Popular' in Popular Music? A Virtual Symposium with Contributions from the International Advisory Editors of "Popular Music", The International Advisory Editors, *Popular Music* , Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan., 2005), pp. 133-145.

extended durations and what has been described as ‘complexity’²³ of expression, and popular music to shortened durations and ‘simplicity’ of expression. Popular music is generally a small ensemble art form, whilst art music has traditionally made use of both small and very large ensembles. Applying this imperfect but broadly useful set of criteria to underground music, it is obvious that such a model of binary distinctions is woefully inadequate as a classificatory tool; underground music commonly uses not only the small ensemble model of popular music, but often mirrors the exact set up of those ensembles. And yet, on the other hand, underground music tends to extended durations and ‘complexity’ of expression, or, at the least, to the latter. To be metaphorical about this; if popular music is lowbrow and art music highbrow, underground music is a ‘nobrow’ form, where tendencies from the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ forms percolate and resolve in distinct and sometimes strange ways.

Of the factors uniting ‘my’ – and I use this term simply to indicate the hermeneutical, i.e. interpretative, analytical-intuitive, conclusions I have arrived at under the influence of the long course of research undertaken here – underground on the musical, political, and cultural levels, the following are the most important.²⁴ Underground music, under the rubric being employed here, should:

1) Be musically experimental.

²³ Complexity here being understood as a basic intricacy or ‘thickness’ of texture or form, and not as a normative category of musical value.

²⁴ The pervasiveness of radical, anti-capitalist political views is also important, but is not definitionally binding. Of more significance, as illustrated by the list above, are the aesthetic nature of the music and the practical circumstances of its distribution. Politics, as will be argued across Chapters Four to Seven, is a critical catalysing element in the underground, but political characteristics are somewhat secondary in my discussions to cultural or musical circumstances. These may, nevertheless, yield political readings.

- 2) Be aesthetically challenging.
- 3) Hold essentially minor commercial interest or potential.
- 4) Operate outside, or at least tangential to, large institutions.
- 5) Largely adhere to self-determining models of production, promotion, and distribution, models that are usually reliant on digital technologies.
- 6) Be derivative of western musical or cultural traditions, directly or indirectly.

Now, of course, these criteria themselves lack rigour to some extent. Describing something as being ‘musically experimental’ or ‘aesthetically challenging’ obviously represents a hermeneutical contention. A professor of musicology weaned on ‘classical’ music might, for example, find Britney Spears aesthetically ‘challenging’. We might even describe Spears’ music as being experimental - this would not be an unreasonable assertion to make, considering her music’s occasional challenges to mainstream pop sensibilities, as with the 2001 track ‘I’m a Slave for You’. ‘Experimental’ is at least in one sense a relative term. However, in the sense I mean it, where experiments with musical style and technique are accompanied by a fundamental uncertainty as to the results of those experiments *that is then presented as an important and discernible element of textual production*, the term ‘experimental’ is at least a little more precisely applied, even if it ends up as a matter of interpretation, as indicated.

Meanwhile, being challenged by something on an aesthetic level similarly depends on circumstance and experience. And yet, viewed from the perspective of generally accepted mainstream musical values — that is, the commonly recognised stylistic traits and

techniques, not to mention affects, of popular musical genres, from symphonic music to chart pop — what can be described as challenging or upsetting to those values is fairly predictable, and will usually involve some element of chromaticism, apparent textural or formal chaos, noise, improvisation, aggression, reduction of material, or durational play. The underground music being written about in this thesis variously explores all of these ‘challenging’ tropes, in one way or another.

The remaining four conditions outlined above are less amorphous, and are more easily measured. This specificity relates something key about my conditions more generally: they do not represent a set of premises, but conclusions. Or, at least, they operate for the purposes of the thesis both as dynamic premises defining what gets included, and conclusions about what is included. The conditions form a sort of argument on behalf of my own conception of a wide-ranging scene of music. I am describing this scene – and in some sense creating, or at least ‘mapping’: as Alex Williams has suggested, ‘The act of naming is not a naturalistic or scientific act of description, but a creative act itself, an invention, not a discovery²⁵ – as the ‘underground music scene’, where, through observation and research, I have concluded that what is critical to the scene, and indeed what is shared across that scene, is adherence to these six conditions.

This might seem a circular argument: I am asserting and nominally creating the boundaries of a scene of music with shared attributes in common; I verify those attributes through analysis; and then I conclude that the scene does ‘exist’ and indeed possesses

²⁵ Alex Williams, ‘Invention or Discovery- or, when is a genre not a genre?’, <http://splinteringboneashes.blogspot.co.uk/2009/04/invention-or-discovery-or-when-is-genre.html>, accessed 26 September 2012.

those attributes. But this is missing the point. I am here offering the conclusion of an argument formed and resolved through the course of this research, with the proof to come in the body of the thesis. The conditions themselves represent the conclusions of an argument where underground music, as will be shown, is claimed to be an experimental and challenging practice that draws on largely western styles of music (even in underground music hailing from outside the West, such as from Japan); that exists at a tangent to cultural and societal institutions; that does not make much of a commercial impact; and that, generally, relies on tiny, artist or audience-determined, web-mediated models of distribution.

More importantly, it is not the primary aim of my work to demonstrate that the underground scene exists and is cohesive. Rather, the primary aims are to show *how* the underground exists on the musical and cultural levels, in detail, and to develop theoretical arguments about the interactions of ideology, culture, politics, and music that go into forming the underground scene, and which arise out of the underground as emergent artistic or cultural practices. The thesis seeks, then, both to chronicle and to theorise.

1.3 Why 'Underground'?

We have seen that 'underground' is a term that has been applied in various ways to many different kinds of music. We have also seen that in my application, 'underground' is meant to denote a distinctive scene of music united by a shared set of practices.

Following from these two observations, the question might be asked as to why I have chosen such a widely used and invariably imprecisely applied term. The reasoning is

quite simple; the term captures very well the metaphorical space in which this music exists, ‘below’ or submerged ‘beneath’ the above ground practices of popular and notated music, apparent only to a few, concealed and obscure to most. The metaphor is an appropriate one.

Secondly, it is the case that the term is *already* used to describe this music; if any term has integrated this music under one banner, then it has been ‘underground’, though its use is far from canonical. One of the arguments of this thesis is that the scene has been little recognised as a coherent entity, particularly in scholarly writing. And yet this does not mean its artists and its audience do not recognise some collegiality in their interest and their practice. Some writers and observers have indeed employed the term in a sense comparable to the one in which it is meant here.

For instance, Simon Reynolds addresses the effects of the digital culture on underground music in sections of his most recent book, *Retromania*, and in an article of the same name for the June 2011 issue of *The Wire* magazine.²⁶ Reynolds also addresses the topic in similar language in his piece on Amanda and Britt Brown in the following month’s issue of *The Wire*, where the Browns themselves recognise and engage the topic.²⁷ David Keenan’s ‘Collateral Damage’ article in the July 2011 issue of the same magazine addresses similar subject matter and uses similar language to do so.²⁸ *The Wire* also describes its regular series of downloads, ‘Below the Radar’, as ‘our ongoing download

²⁶ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania*, London: Faber and Faber, 2011; ‘Retromania’, in *The Wire*, June 2011, pp. 30 – 35.

²⁷ Simon Reynolds, ‘Not Not Fun’, in *The Wire*, May 2011, pp. 36 - 43.

²⁸ David Keenan, ‘Collateral Damage’, in *The Wire*, July 2011, p. 19.

series featuring music from a wide range of cutting edge, underground artists'.²⁹ *The Wire* in fact implicitly covers a similar musical range as is comprised by 'my' version of the underground, and one finds many references in its archives, here and there, to a musical 'underground', without that 'underground' ever being explicitly acknowledged and argued for as a coherent entity.

Many other miscellaneous examples exist. The website Negative Creep describes itself as an 'underground musik archive', and covers Industrial, Extreme Metal, and other related genres.³⁰ The now defunct but still prominent 'blog collective', Altered Zones, describes its aims as being 'to highlight one of the more overlooked narratives in contemporary music – the proliferation of home-recorded sounds, small-scale releases, and pockets of underground activity all over the world'.³¹ The festival Instal, examined in depth in Chapter Seven, is described as 'a festival of underground music. Not mainstream or indie music – underground music... Instal is the largest, best-attended and most exciting underground music festival in the UK'.³² Finally, Counterflows, an international festival that took place in Berlin, Glasgow, and London in 2012, describes itself as 'a new series of festivals exploring international networks of underground music'.³³

These few examples will have to suffice here as a testament to a general recognition of underground music as something like as such. What is important to bear in mind at this point is that my recognition of the scene of underground music is merely the

²⁹ 'Below the Radar', <http://www.thewire.co.uk/articles/7651/>, accessed 24 October 2011.

³⁰ <http://www.freewebs.com/negativekreep/>, accessed 23 October 2011.

³¹ 'About', <http://alteredzones.com/about/>, accessed 18 September 2012.

³² 'Instal 2006', http://arika.org.uk/instal/2006/instal_06_music_festival.html, accessed 3 March 2012.

³³ 'Counterflows', <http://www.thearches.co.uk/events/gigs/counterflows>, accessed 3 May 2012.

formalisation of a process that is ongoing in the wider cultural discourse around this music. My deployment of ‘underground’ should thus be understood to be operating across two distinct, though permeable, discursive spaces; that of the academy, to which I am introducing it, and that of the ‘underground’ itself, in regards to which I am connecting and, in so doing, formalising its previous use.

1.4 Introduction to Cultural and Theoretical Background

By way of staking out the theoretical orientation of the thesis more generally, I will quickly examine the thematic framework of my subject as I see it. In Chapters Three to Seven I develop specific issues that underlie or arise out of the general thematic terrain covered in an introductory fashion here. My broaching here of the underlying thematic framework here is both brief and, straightforwardly, preliminary.

One of the most common complaints made against digital culture is that, due to its liberation of ‘content’ both from the punitive pricing strategies of the artificial scarcity industry model *and* from the arduous physical constraints of record shops and artefactual music media (such as the LP), it has produced passive, listless audiences, grown weary on the most expansive range of taken-for-granted music, available anytime and often for free. This complaint is as pressing in the underground as elsewhere, both as a result of the digital age’s inculcation of an apparently ‘superficial’ mode of engagement (according to David Keenan³⁴), and as a result of the fact that, in this marginal cultural context, the

³⁴ Keenan: ‘Digital downloads – not to say Wikipedia entries, music blogs and even sites like UbuWeb – encourage a superficial engagement with culture. The quality and depth of interaction between an individual and a piece of art is no longer paramount; ‘Collateral Damage’, p. 19.

reduction in artist revenue that this free culture supposedly precipitates is being felt even more keenly than it has been by mainstream artists and record companies. Writers such as Simon Reynolds even suggest that such easy access to formerly esoteric music means that the validity of ‘underground’ as a cultural category in 2012 has been undermined, perhaps fatally. Reynolds’ and Keenan’s accusations will be examined at length at a later point. These three themes, then – the apparent superficiality or passivity of digital audiences resulting from the liberation of content, the continued viability, or not, of underground cultures, and the supposedly exploitative political economy of digital piracy and digital culture more generally, are explored at length across Chapters Three, Four, and Six.

Concomitant with this sense of exploitation by the wider culture are the notions of capitalist subsumption and flexible accumulation, where the logic of the market comes to dictate private and public funding decisions, and precarious working lives have become the norm for artists and audiences alike, particularly in the context of the fragile micro-economies of the underground. These themes of political economy will be explored in Chapters Four, Five, and Seven.

Other key thematics and issues bearing on particular underground genres, such as for example the communalist cultural practices and musical modelling of Free Improvisation, or the transgressive and radical political character of much of the Noise and Extreme Metal under discussion, are raised and addressed in the appropriate sections.

1.5 Method, Subject Position, and Structure

That is the subject matter of the thesis very broadly given. Again, by way of a general introduction, let me mention the approach I will take as regards structure and methodology. The latter is expanded upon at length in Chapter Two.

Considering the stark lack of academic research being done on this music culture, I have sought to mitigate that lack by developing as wide an account of underground music culture as I can. Thus, I write extensively on its politics, its musical styles, and its practical existence as a cultural form, without skewing to either one of these three key thematic areas. Focussing in on one of them – or indeed on any one particular musical style within the underground – would have obviously allowed me to develop an account with more depth in respect of that area, but my preference, rightly or wrongly, has been to establish as panoramic an account as possible within the broadest sense of what a philosophical, politically-, culturally-, and musically-concerned interdisciplinary musicological framework allows. This ‘panoramic’, *intertextual* interdisciplinary approach was seen by me to hold the most potential for alleviating the dearth of academic research on this topic, and for offering the most promising basis for future research done in the area, by me or others.

An immanent intertextual strategy and argument thus underlies the whole thesis. I am using ‘intertextual’ here, drawing on Kristeva,³⁵ to integrate the many different media and cultural ‘texts’ that fill out the discursive space of underground music. I see musical

³⁵ Julia Kristeva, trans Thomas Gora, ed. Leon S. Roudiez. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art.*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

meaning and value as operating in terms of dynamic but conventional frames and contexts, i.e. intertexts, such as genre conventions, or more general musical practices, or social behaviours, and so on. Kristeva's notion of 'intertextuality' tries to describe different texts' (such as a musical work) interrelation/s, both in terms of their construction and design (i.e. the inspiration they draw from previous 'texts'), and in terms of how their receivers construct meaning in their experience of those texts (i.e. through the aforementioned 'frames'). Kristeva has stated in this respect that 'every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it'.³⁶

My use of 'intertextual' relates closely to Kristeva's in the sense that I recognise the importance of paying heed both to 'music', and to its various contexts (be they social, symbolic, iconographic, political, artistic, cultural or otherwise), when engaged in an interpretative investigation that is trying to be as pertinent, (inter)discursive, and wholistic as possible. My intertextual argument manifests throughout the thesis in my emphasis on political and cultural factors as well as purely sonic ones.

At this point it will be apropos to discuss, however briefly, my own subject position and how it may or may not inform or bias my research. I have been an audience member, critic, and occasional musician on what I call the 'underground' scene for approximately seven years, first in Ireland (2005 – 2008), and then in the UK, the latter being primarily in London (2008 – present). This experience, as I see it, provides crucial context to my research, without crossing over in to anything like participant observation type models of

³⁶ Cited in Jonathan Culler. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 105.

inquiry. My own experience and biography is seen to shape the unavoidable biases of my research such as they are, whilst also giving me vital access to many of the musicians and venues that make an appearance in, and have substantially shaped, this thesis.

The thesis is divided into three parts. Broadly speaking, the first two parts, consisting of Chapters One to Seven, are concerned with answering questions about the general cultural and political characteristics of the underground. Part I does so in a basically introductory fashion, with the second refining the political and cultural discussion with extensive interviews. I look at what the underground is, how it exists at a practical level, and what the implications of that existence might be. I use a range of primary and secondary sources, including interviews conducted by myself and others with musicians, curators, and other key figures from the underground scene, in combination with information generated through original research and through participation in the scene.³⁷

The methodological approach of Parts I and II aims to build up a picture of the general cultural and political context and character of underground music. This picture is contextualised with concepts drawn from various works of philosophical and political theory. The broad methodology in these sections is thus primary research based and heavily informed by both practitioners' own experiences and my own participation on the scene for many years, whilst being always theoretically inclined and conducted within the spirit of a wide-ranging interdisciplinary critical musicology.

³⁷ I interviewed sixteen individuals as part of this research: A full list of interviewees is included in the appendix.

More specifically, Chapter Two (which follows this first, introductory, chapter) consists of a Methodology that elaborates on the conceptual framework being employed and on the particular analytical perspective of ‘pertinence’ used throughout, but particularly in Part III (since the pertinence is more generally directed at political and cultural matters in Parts I and II). Chapter Three extends the introductory discussion offered above, refining it and putting it in concrete terms with a series of case studies focusing on different international cities, and on Ireland.

Chapters Four to Seven turn to a more explicit discussion of the relationship(s) between politics and underground music culture.³⁸ Chapter Four investigates the theoretical basis for discussing music in political terms (and vice versa), whilst moving on to examine more expansively the general political contexts and characteristics of underground music culture. I ground and develop this general discussion in a range of case studies in Chapters Five to Seven, where I investigate through my own interviews and original research the political economy of various key aspects of underground music culture, from its festivals and concert venues, to its labels, to its artists. These case studies are offered in order to test and refine the cultural and political aspects of the underground examined more generally in the theoretically-based Chapter Four.

Part III, consisting of Chapters Eight to Ten, turns from the cultural and political issues of Parts I and II, to more ‘purely’ aesthetic ones, although as noted such a sharp division

³⁸ I use ‘underground music culture’ here and throughout the thesis when speaking in a general sense about cultural and/or political issues around underground music. Occasionally ‘underground’ is used to stand in for the longer term, but context should make the intention behind my usage clear.

rarely holds in practice. I focus on particular musical styles and genres of the underground, specifically on Noise/Lo-Fi/post-Noise and Extreme Metal, attempting to build up a critical and theoretical discourse around each music in turn. Through this process I also build up a discourse around each 'genre world' being discussed, ultimately with the aim of reconciling this focus on individual 'discourses' with the overall burden of the thesis, which is concerned with conceiving of these multiple styles within the unified framework of the 'underground'. It should also be noted here that the point made earlier as regards my six conditions being both premises for inclusion and conclusions of an argument applies equally to the generic categories under which I divide underground music; these generic categories define what gets included in each section, but they are also meant to represent an argument as to what styles are constitutive of underground music.

Before concluding I would like briefly to address the issue of a literature review. In keeping with the composite character of my subject matter, where many different genres are under examination, I have opted not to include an extensive literature review either here, towards the beginning, or in one piece elsewhere. Instead, literature is investigated at length across various sections. Specific critical discourses are addressed as regards each particular musical genre or practice in each chapter of Part III, for example, whilst broad consideration of apposite literature takes place in Chapters Two and Four. I chose to organise the thesis in this way for two reasons. First, the general lack of scholarly or even authoritative journalistic writing on this music (which has led to the judicious use of web sources throughout) means that a conventional literature review would have ended

up, simply put, looking quite strange. Second, by dispersing examination of specific critical discourses to their appropriate sections, a certain reflexivity is allowed into my analysis such that the character of each differing musical genre can determine the discursive character of that section. This approach is intended to situate adequately my own analyses in a wider literary, critical, and musicological frame.

I thus use various analytical methods drawn from musicology and the social sciences as a way of ‘mapping’, as my title has it, underground music considered in terms of culture, politics, and aesthetics. Whilst it is to be regretted that considerations of space mean that the thesis has ended up being far from exhaustive, and that expediencies of circumstance have meant that it exudes a distinctive Anglo-American bias, notwithstanding both the coverage of Japan and the underground’s native prominence in western cultures, it is to be hoped, nevertheless, that the thesis gives as full and as rich an account as is possible of what is a vibrant and sorely academically under-explored musical scene.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Taken together, the two larger sections that follow, ‘Theoretical Framework’ and ‘Notes on Style and Listening’, in addition to the broad descriptions of method given in **1.5.**, constitute my Methodology. Additional notes on methodology are of course offered at appropriate points within each chapter.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The term ‘underground’ has been deployed with an immense degree of flexibility in music-critical discourse, as stated in Chapter One. At this general level of understanding, to restate my claims, the notion of a musical underground orbits around such fuzzy ideological notions as creative and cultural ‘authenticity’, and the anti-commercial valuing of sincerity, intimacy, autonomy of creative expression, and privately shared music, social, and cultural codes of various kinds. In practice, these twin dynamics of ideology and anti-commercialism (the latter often manifesting only as a *relative* anti-commercialism) or esotericism interpenetrate, so that ideological residues are attached to avowed anti-commercialist practices or claims, and esotericism results from ideologies of authenticity.

What I have in mind when I introduce the term ‘underground music’, though not entirely divorced from these ideas of ‘authenticity’, intimacy, and creative autonomy, is something quite distinct. Mapping my own interpretation of the boundaries of such underground music in the digital age will be complex, requiring consideration of a host of cultural, economic, artistic, and social factors. Developing a flexible but effective analytical perspective that can ground local and trans-local iterations of underground music making within global networks of activity is vital here, and has led me to draw on a range of tools derived from the music

sociology literature.

2.1.1 From Subculture to Scene, Through Bourdieu's 'Field'

One of the dominant theoretical paradigms for categorising musical cultures in terms of their essential embodiment of 'music, social action and collective identity' has been, since the early 1970s, that of the subculture.¹ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' (CCCS) adaptation of Chicago School ideas, musicologists and music critics have routinely used the subculture concept to delineate forms of class-based youth resistance movements such as the mods and skinheads, movements in which music and fashion were of central importance.²

Yet as has been frequently pointed out, the subculture model as practiced by the CCCS presents a rigid vision of musical cultures as being almost exclusively the preserve of male working-class youths.³ Moreover, the image of a 'fixed' and 'coherent' subculture that such theory presents,⁴ actually ignores the temporal, permeable, shifting flux of alliances and energies that youth movements most often bring into play. From the perspective of the present research, then, the class- and age-based sociological underpinning of subculture theory is problematic. The underground is constituted by a range of ages and classes (and by both genders), and as such a more fluid and adaptable model is required.

¹ Andy Bennett, 'Introduction to Part Three', in Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, Jason Toynbee eds., *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, 2006, New York: Routledge, p. 95.

² For example: P. Cohen, 'Subcultural conflict and working class community', in *Papers in Cultural Studies 2*, 1972, University of Birmingham; J. Clarke, 'The skinheads and the magical recovery of community', in S. Hall and T. Jefferson eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, 1976, London: Hutchinson.

³ Andy Bennett, 'Introduction to Part Three'; Sarah Thornton, 'Understanding Hipness, Subcultural capital as feminist tool', in *Ibid*, pp. 99 – 105.

⁴ Simon Frith in Bennett, 'Subcultures and Neotribes: Rethinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste', in Bennett, Shank, Toynbee, p. 108.

Moving away from the localised sense of subculture theory, more recently it has been the concept of a 'scene', courtesy primarily of Barry Shank and Will Straw, that has come to the fore in explaining activity orientating around musical practices and cultures.⁵ 'Scene', compared to 'subculture', connotes a broader kind of context for music making, giving us a global paradigm into which we can insert local, global, and trans-local⁶ musical practices.

Shank's and Straw's articulation and deployment of the scenic concept diverge, whilst being mutually complementary to a degree. Shank focuses on the transformative aspects of *local* rock scenes, within a local framework. Within those scenes, as described by Shank, individuals who constantly strive to self-actualise and to master what they see as their own identity, experience what he calls 'productive anxiety' when they come face to face with scenic peers operating at different levels within that scene (for example a spectator observing a musician).⁷ The individuals thus experience a distance between themselves and their scenic peers. These individuals seek to close down that distance, moving through a series of 'temporary identifications', ultimately marking out a dynamic whereby 'spectators become fans, fans become musicians, musicians are always already fans'.⁸ For Shank, in David Hesmondhalgh's words, a 'signifying community' is thus produced.⁹

Will Straw's focus, on the other hand, is more global, seeking to show how local scenes allow participants to transcend place. Straw sees the process of globalisation as enforcing a

⁵ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas*, London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994; Will Straw, 'Systems of articulation, logics of change: communities and scenes in popular music', in *Cultural Studies*, 5(3), 1991, pp. 368 – 388.

⁶ I use these closely related terms, 'trans-local' and 'global', to denote local scenes considered in terms of a coherent, omni-directional aggregate. My use is determined by context, since one indicates more of a specifically web-reticulated dynamic (i.e. trans-local) than the other, global, which is a more straightforward category.

⁷ Shank, p. 131.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David Hesmondhalgh, 'Recent Concepts in youth cultural studies', in eds. Paul Hodkinson, Wolfgang Deicke. *Youth Cultures, Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*, 2007, New York: Routledge, pp. 37 – 50.

radical shift in ‘the status of the local’.¹⁰ Articulating the ‘scene’ in terms of a productive relation of what he calls ‘musical communities’, Straw describes a musical scene as ‘that cultural space in which a range of musical practices co-exist’.¹¹ For Straw, the scene functions as a holdall category where canonical limitations of social class, cultural capital, physical location, and so on, do not necessarily apply in the ways they would have in a pre-globalised world. Instead, affective alliances crossing class and national boundaries have become *de rigueur*, facilitated by global telecommunication and increasing cultural homogenisation, and leading to the implicit formation of international scenes comprised of local, trans-local, and global iterations.

Using the late-1980s dance music scene in Newcastle as a springboard, Straw develops an account of the globally configured dance music scene where ‘alliances’ between such disparate groups as young girls listening to the radio, black teens, and clubbers in a range of urban centres produce a cosmopolitan and highly modern social process of interaction.¹²

Straw states that this is possible because the aforementioned constituencies are ‘all ones that value the redirective and novel over the stable and the canonical, or international circuits of influence over the mining of a locally stable heritage’.¹³ Globalisation thus produces international music communities defined less by traditional local cultures and customs, as they are by elective affective affinities, mediated (now) through the web and other forms of mass media.

Looking to the web-mediated international underground music culture of shifting borders and miscellaneous localities, Straw’s theoretical framework helps to explain how that

¹⁰ Straw, p. 369.

¹¹ Ibid, p 373.

¹² Ibid, pp. 379 – 388.

¹³ Ibid, p. 385.

underground scene is constituted in a global sense, as an international network of affective and practical alliances, and also gives an impression of the identities of its local, trans-local, and global scenes and communities, which feed and shape the network as it does them.

Keith Kahn-Harris develops Straws' theoretical model in his essay 'Roots?',¹⁴ applying it to the global Extreme Metal scene in a manner that is highly suggestive of the sort of conception apposite to underground music. Kahn-Harris proposes that scenes can provide us with an analytical perspective 'that would enable us to relate particular cases to global processes'.¹⁵

He goes on:

A scenic methodology recontextualises musical texts, institutions and practices within the social spaces in which they are enmeshed. It provides an alternative both to atomising forms of research that ignore wider contexts of music production and consumption, and to forms of research that overdetermine those concepts in a subcultural framework.¹⁶

Kahn-Harris shows us, through an analysis of the career of the Brazilian death metal group Sepultura, precisely how the 'scenic methodology' can provide us with a way of contextualising and explaining local processes within their appropriate global context. Within this methodology, 'scene' is understood as a 'flexible, loose kind of space within which music is produced; a kind of "context" for musical practice'.¹⁷

Sepultura's career followed a comparable trajectory to many other bands of their era.

However, important distinctions arose as a result of the group's comparatively niche musical style (Death Metal), resulting in Sepultura's divergence from the common popular music

¹⁴ Keith Kahn-Harris, 'Roots?: The relationship between the global and the local in the Extreme Metal scene', in Bennett, Shank, Toynbee, pp. 128 - 136.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 128.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 134.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 128 – 129.

trajectory. This divergence was intensified by the band's existence, as Brazilians, outside the framework of Anglo-American popular musical institutions. Kahn Harris shows that a scenic methodology can facilitate rationalisation of some of these divergences within a dynamic theoretical perspective. Kahn-Harris discusses how, following an early career building up a fanbase and a range of industry contacts in the local Death Metal scene, Sepultura used their 'subcultural capital' to propel themselves into the global 'Extreme Metal scene'.¹⁸ Once the group paid their dues within this international context, building up a corresponding level of (international) subcultural capital, Kahn-Harris describes how they were able to exploit institutional support in the form of an international record company and its tenured circuits of live large venues and festivals. The band was thus ultimately able to convert local success in to global prominence, all within the context of one scenic aggregate, made up of local and trans-local scenes.

Kahn-Harris' endorsement of the scenic framework is echoed by Andy Bennett, who praises the concept in similar terms, whilst also spelling out its wide applicability in his assertion that the concept of a scene is concerned with 'a broad spectrum of musical activities, which also include musical performance, production, marketing, promotion and distribution'.¹⁹ Straw's assertion that the scenic concept is 'usefully flexible and anti-essentialising', and that it allows us to uncouple our subjects from the 'more fixed and theoretically troubled unities of class and subculture',²⁰ is also important to bear in mind here.

Before moving on to a discussion of my own application of 'scene', I should briefly mention Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'field', which relates closely to my notion of 'scene'.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 130.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 96.

²⁰ Will Straw, 'Scenes and Sensibilities', in *Public*, 22/23, 2001, p. 248.

Bourdieu's concept of the 'field', as discussed first in *Distinction*²¹ and with most directness in *Rules of Art*,²² offers a meso-level framework for understanding the way in which art practices can be seen to be imbricated within the social contexts of their production and circulation, contexts defined by various kinds of capital, from the symbolic to the social to the cultural. As sociologist Alan Warde states, Bourdieu's field is 'a relatively autonomous structured domain or space, which has been socially instituted', and an 'arena of constant struggle for 'stakes'; particular types of field-specific and generic capitals'.²³

Like Bourdieu's field, the scene captures the interplay of various cultural and social processes. Both scene and field seek to document the hybridised cultural, political and social nature of distinct practices such as musical production and social discourse. Like 'field', too, scene, as Straw points out, is non-essentialising and flexible. However, 'scene' as a concept is more idiomatically predisposed to the musical context, having less correspondence with notions of power and competition as field, and enjoying a degree of canonical authority as a musicological term as it does. It has the potential, considering that canonical usage, to capture peculiarly musical patterns of digital age transformation in a way that field, it seems to me, does not. As such, whilst Bourdieu's 'field' provides a key conceptual antecedent for my own application of 'scene', the latter term is preferred here as a theoretical resource.

As was noted in Chapter One, my project focuses on the social, cultural and political frameworks in which underground music is produced, whilst also considering the aesthetics of the music somewhat at a remove from such concerns. The scenic model, as it has been

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, trans. Richard Nice. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge, 1984.

²² Pierre Bourdieu, trans. Susan Emanuel. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford University Press, 1996.

²³ Alan Warde, 'Practice and field: Revising Bourdieusian concepts', CRIC Discussion Paper No. 65, April 2004, p. 12.

discussed by Will Straw, Andy Bennett, and David Hesmondhalgh²⁴ and applied by, amongst others, Barry Shank, Keith Kahn-Harris and Dunja Brill,²⁵ provides a way of conceiving of such a span of activity within an integrated, cohesive, but ‘usefully flexible’ framework.

2.1.2 The Underground Scene

But how might the scene as I have explicated it here through writers such as Kahn-Harris and Straw apply to underground music culture? Whilst the underground scene²⁶ is not beholden to quite the same commercial concerns as Death Metal, a form of music which despite its name proved to be highly lucrative throughout the 1980s and 1990s,²⁷ Kahn-Harris’ example of Sepultura nevertheless provides us with some salutary lessons.

The Extreme Metal scene, like that of the underground, is decentralised – notwithstanding the importance of various urban centres – and homogenised. Music being produced within local underground scenes does not generally explore a sense of place, nor does it deploy local accents as markers of style. Instead, global flows of musical and cultural commerce guide musical style. A Noise group from Japan, such as Hijokaidan, is likely to sound broadly similar to a Noise group from Italy, such as Le Syndicat, or a Noise group from the UK, such as Ramleh. Minor differences in style across these three named groups have less to do with

²⁴ Who, following Simon Frith, points out that the concept of the scene has been used so far in ‘fruitfully muddled’, and, even, ‘downright confusing’ ways (Hesmondhalgh, pp. 41 – 42). It is hoped that the present study avoids such confusing muddles.

²⁵ The latter of whose ‘Gender, status and subcultural capital in the goth scene’ yokes together the concepts of the scene and the subculture in the context of a discussion of what Brill terms the ‘goth subculture’; Dunja Brill, in *Youth Cultures, Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*, 2007, New York: Routledge, pp. 111 – 126.

²⁶ It should be understood that when I use the term ‘underground scene’ I am referring to the international underground scene, not any of its local or virtual iterations. Scenes operate at multiple levels, as noted.

²⁷ The following article quotes Nielsen Soundscan figures (which account for U.S. sales since May 25 1991) that indicate that nine Death Metal acts had sold in excess of 200,000 units in the U.S. between May 25 1991 and the article’s publication on November 17 2003. These figures are believed only to be partial, since the Nielsen metrics only account for sales through large chain stores:

<http://legacy.roadrunnerrecords.com/blabbermouth.net/news.aspx?mode=Article&newsitemID=16769>, accessed 3 June 2012.

national identity than they do (sub-) generic conventions. At the same time, however, local political and cultural circumstances, such as an affluent capitalist economy where audiences have plenty of disposable income to spend on music, or a generous federal or state arts policy, evidently have a huge impact on the nature of local scenes.

The relationship between the different levels of the underground scene, between the local, the trans-local (which is mediated by local and global dynamics), and global, is thus one of multivalent imbrication. The global scene influences musical style more than particular local scenes do, particularly in the digital age context, whilst it is also the case that regional cultural and political circumstances impact local scenes greatly. The dynamics here are global-to-local (through the web or dominant artists), and local-to-local (the influence of the local economy and context and the underground). The scene also presents its local affiliates with a multitude of musical, commercial, and cultural possibilities which permit them to move beyond the logic of their regional scenes into a much more expansive context. We will see examples of this sort of digital age synergy, where new possibilities of promotion and access allow musicians and audiences to participate in the global underground scene in unprecedented ways, throughout the thesis, but particularly across the many case studies of Chapter Five. This type of local-to-global dynamic, I would also point out, reflects Kahn-Harris' discussion of Sepultura's similar trajectory within the Extreme Metal scene.

Such a plastic conceptual underpinning as we find in Kahn-Harris and Straw's conception of the scene captures well the shifting borders of what is being addressed when I use the term 'underground scene'. This music, particularly in the digital age, exists within a network of interconnected, decentred (although urban locations such as London, Berlin, and New York obviously serve to some degree as centres), and reflexive scenes. International festivals such

as No Fun Fest in New York or Roadburn in Tilburg serve as nodes connecting local scenic practices to global processes, whilst websites and platforms such as SoundCloud allow local musicians and audiences to transcend limitations of place, facilitating access to obscure music that was previously bound by snail mail at best, or impassable physical borders at worst (where a small run of, for example, cassettes, would only be available to audiences in the immediate vicinity of the producer).

Another advantage of using the term ‘scene’ is that it connects to music-critical and colloquial usage; ‘scene’ is commonly deployed by critics and audiences alike to describe physically bounded musical cultures, as for example with the Greenwich Village folk ‘scene’ in the 1960s, or the CBGB-anchored New York punk scene of the 1970s, or the ‘Madchester’ Indie Dance scene of the late-1980s, and so on. This usage is not unrelated to my own, though it is more limited in a geographical sense, and less theoretically worked out. However, the resonance is deliberate; the underground generally considered relates to those ‘colloquial’ scenes in being founded on a patchwork of affinities, albeit on a global scale, whilst its ‘local’ iterations share an obvious correspondence with the more colloquially designated scenes just mentioned. Of course, my appropriation of the term also has to contend with the disparity between the two uses, the colloquial and my own, but it is hoped that the benefits of using such a familiar term in a broadly similar way to its idiomatic usage, outweigh any problems that may be thrown up by that disparity.

2.1.3 A Short Note on the ‘Neotribe’

As has been suggested, the underground exists primarily as a globally determined homogeneity with local divergences of culture and politics. It is nevertheless the case, however, that some of its constituent parts diverge more than others. The Extreme Metal

scene that takes in Drone and Black Metal and Dark Ambient, operates under the auspices of a rather unique moral-political sensibility relating to nihilism, dysphoria, and a sort of tellurian revanchism. The concept of the neotribe – tribe referring here, in French sociologist Michel Maffesoli's words, to 'a certain ambience, a state of mind',²⁸ where, as described by Barry Shields, individuals' dramatic 'postmodern personae' manifest in one of their multiple roles or masks²⁹ – serves as a supplementary analytical perspective when discussing this music. The neotribe, as developed by Andy Bennett³⁰ out of Maffesoli,³¹ captures a certain moral, in many cases iconographic allegiance, which the concept of the scene, though it similarly responds to effects of postmodern multiplicity and dynamism, does not.

So, where 'subculture' models stable, class-based resistance, and 'scene' responds to the new postmodern virtual and trans-local participatory formations with a framework for understanding these trans-national flows of affection and allegiance, which are produced and mediated by mass media and digital technology – as well as by shifting cultural values that place less and less importance in puritanical modernist ideas of artistic and audience authenticity – 'neotribe' complements the scene's discursive, expansionist variety, by adding to its somewhat neutral modelisation of audience and artist behaviour a more colourful sense of tribal allegiance, where 'tribe' denotes basic bonds of affection, behaviour, and taste. The neotribe captures audience idiosyncracies, where the scene only models cold discursive and dialogical formations. The neotribe thus provides us with a framework for conceiving of divergent local scenic behaviour within the global underground scene, accounting for, for example, the particular moral and iconographic uniformity of the drone musics just mentioned, without compromising the more culturalist and mereological framework of the

²⁸ Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, London: Sage, 1996, p. 98.

²⁹ In Bennett, 'Subcultures or Neotribes?' p. 108.

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 106 – 113.

³¹ Maffesoli, *ibid.*

scene.

2.1.4 The Configuration

The concept of the scene incorporates sociological, political, and cultural dynamics. I want however to add something vital, a theoretical element that ‘sweeps up’ the historic-*aesthetic* debris left out by my so-called scenic methodology. In doing so I turn from the music sociology literature, to the rather more convoluted philosophical prose of Alain Badiou.

In approaching the culture of the twentieth century from a historiographical framework, and after rejecting the idea of art as being something ‘reducible’ to higher truths through the processes of criticism or philosophy – rather seeing art itself as a ‘truth procedure’ – Alain Badiou states that,

The pertinent unit for a thinking of art as an immanent and singular truth is thus neither the work or the author, but rather the artistic configuration... (which is) initiated by an event (in general, an event is a group of works, a singular multiple of works) and unfolded through chance in the form of works that serve as its subject points.³²

Badiou cites the classical style in music and the novel in literature as germane examples of past ‘configurations’ (‘affective procedures’).³³ The task of interpretation and philosophy in the face of these ‘configurations’, Badiou insists, is not to ‘think’ them (for they think themselves), but to ‘seize’ and to ‘show’ their truths.³⁴ By separating ‘fact’ from ‘opinion’ the analyst will in this way reveal the power of the works. This separation is especially pressing for Badiou as regards uncovering each work’s role as part of a transcending configuration, for

³² Alain Badiou, trans Alberto Toscano, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 12.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 13.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 14.

which feat analysis will have to make ‘disparate truths compossible’.³⁵³⁶

As with the scene, the assembling function of the configuration works against atomisation of culture, whilst at the same time capturing more specifically *aesthetic* phenomena than are granted by the scene. The configuration presents us with a useful framework for understanding, in a different register to the sociology and culturalism of the scene or the neotribe, the fact that the *music* of the underground is analogous across local scenes. Badiou’s ‘configuration’ offers the sort of open, shifting analytical lattice that will be useful in my own attempts to frame the aesthetic activity taking place across the underground.

2.1.5 Scene, Neotribe, Configuration

To be clear, then: the configuration provides a model for understanding the underground as an aesthetic singularity (albeit with much local and generic divergence). The distinction made by Badiou in his configuratory model between *thinking* truths in art and simply ‘seizing’ it will be less important for my purposes than will be that model’s ability to clarify and make coherent the aesthetic allegiances of underground music considered collectively. The scene, on the other hand, captures the underground’s cultural and political dimensions, whilst also allowing me to connect these to aesthetic aspects. The scene is the primary theoretical framework being employed, and appears explicitly throughout the thesis, whilst the configuration provides an important conceptual underpinning to my discussions of the homogenous aspects of underground music, even if it explicitly appears much less frequently. The neotribe, finally, is a supplementary analytical frame which is used to account for distinct aspects of specific musical scenes within the global underground.

³⁵ Compossibility is a Leibnizian concept that denotes the possibility of heterogeneous truths or beings existing together.

³⁶ Ibid.

2.2. A Note on Style: Underground Music Analysis and Critical Musicology

Underground music habitually prioritises experimental³⁷ processes and ‘complex’ modes of expression, where musical structure, organisation, and gesture are not easily placed into a critical and/or comparative frame of reference. This is the configuratory unity adverted to above. Harsh Wall Noise music, for example, often appears on first listen – even to ears coded in to the genre’s conventions – to be musically devolved, chaotic, and haphazard, and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of drone music, and of Improv. Whilst, for example, symphonic music of the nineteenth century, or pop songs of today, invariably evince some normative mode of formal or textural common practice, underground music scrambles such normativity (notwithstanding its ‘norms’ of experimentalism and complexity), even if some degree of standardisation inevitably occurs within different scenes, and even if buried, obscured forms and orders lie within performances or pieces, waiting to be picked apart. Underground music, I suggest, works in a register of estrangement. Decoding and textual re-articulations of various kinds – affective, cognitive, musical – inevitably take place across each listening; repeated exposure to any kind of music, experimental or otherwise, will eventually occasion meaning production and the perception of structural coherences. However, this music’s primary affective and technical model is, it seems to me, one of estrangement. Underground music, as I explore particularly in Chapter Eight, operates within a sublime affective modality,³⁸ whilst also invoking Lacanian *jouissance* across many of its

³⁷ In the sense outlined in Chapter One.

³⁸ The term ‘sublime’ has of course had a rich history in philosophy and aesthetics. Following Burke, the most apropos theorist in this respect is Immanuel Kant, who wrote in *The Critique of Judgement* about sublime’s relation to cognition and its evocation of a ‘monstrous’ sense of infinity, that sublime judgement ‘indicates a faculty of mind which surpasses every standard of Sense’ (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, New York: Cosima, 2007, pp. 66 - 67). In other words, the sublime, so often exemplified in terms of individuals’ contemplation of literally awesome concepts such as the size of the known universe, or the ocean, and so on, concerns aesthetic experiences where sensible boundaries are exceeded in some way; and we can expand this sense of excess to cognition and aesthetics, too. Sublime, in its historical application deriving from Kant, concerns aesthetic experiences in which conventional conceptual and sensible boundaries are estranged by the thing being experienced. We find ourselves lacking, temporarily or not, categorical and conceptual language

forms, as I explore and explain further in Chapter Ten.

In order to be best placed to develop a persuasive, responsive analytical framework for this music, attention must be paid to the dual demands of the academy and the music. Whilst it is obviously important to describe and assess the music (and its discursive context) somewhat neutrally, it is also important to reflect the affective, corporeal intensities of that music, else risking, as I suggested, a total ‘cancelling absorption’ into the academy.

I therefore deal to a certain extent with both the academic demand to bring cohesion to a wide data set, and with the vernacular modes of expression and the vernacular responses of the audience present in the scene under analysis. Parts I and II focus on the former, and Part III opens out more to the latter, with looser, more hermeneutically- and lyrically-rendered sections of writing attempting to map some of the music’s processes in literary form.³⁹ These sections, which punctuate the last four chapters, represent a form of ‘complicating theory’, compared to the preceding and parallel ‘objective scholasticism’ (which nevertheless dominates the thesis). It is intended that through this ‘complication’ a form of clarification will emerge that is comparable to the complex reveals and poetic revelations of the music itself. The thesis would suffer, I argue, if it placed objectivity a priori above vividness and sympathy with its subject. Academic writing benefits in explanatory richness from opening out in this way. Hence, the dual approach just described, an approach that seeks, alongside objectivity and edification, to bear within a hermeneutical context ‘explicit traces of the

proper to the thing, in our case music, being experienced. Modern developments of the term build on this sense of conceptual and cognitive breakage and transcendence, with, for example, Lyotard discussing sublime ‘aporias’ in modernist art (Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime’, *Artforum*, Apr. 1982), and Mark Fisher discussing Kraftwerk’s mobilisation of what he calls the ‘communicational sublime’, which relates to the sense-exceeding properties of modern technoculture: Lyotard, ; Mark Fisher, ‘Kraftwerk 12345678 The Catalogue Mute 8×CD’, in *The Wire*, October 2009, p. 59.

³⁹ In respect of my emphasis on hermeneutics here I echo, for example, Robert Walser’s approach as evinced in his article ‘Popular music analysis: ten apothegms and four instances’, in ed. Moore, *Analysing Popular Music*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 16 - 38, whilst also adding my own stress on what I call ‘lyrical’ language, which, however, is used sparingly and judiciously.

partial, the excessive, and the unbalanced, the “personal”’.⁴⁰

This latter approach can be understood to intersect with critical musicology considered in an interdisciplinary context. As Derek B. Scott suggests, critical musicology can be understood as ‘an intertextual field of inquiry rather than a discipline’,⁴¹ with ‘a concern for critique’,⁴² and this is the spirit in which my own analyses are conducted, as wide-ranging and intertextual (i.e. based on a conception of pertinent ‘texts’ as residing across, for example, music, images, words, politics, culture, and so on) critiques of the examined music’s sounds, emerging semantic fields and mediating discourses, and cultural contexts. The interpretative, sometimes ‘lyrical’ analytical passages within the thesis, along with the more general approach of pertinence (see below) and intertextuality, should be understood as complementary endorsements and manifestations of the kind of critical musicology just discussed.

2.3 A Note on Listening

Throughout the thesis, although primarily in Part III, I occasionally employ a mode of interpretative analysis, almost exclusively when talking directly about how the music is put together and its mode of affect as I see it. But there is a further methodological dimension which deserves lengthier explanation. Of particular importance here is the question of what it is that I take to be constitutive of musical and cultural text/s, and what sort of analytical mode various determinations of text would suggest. In order to resolve these questions adequately for the purposes of my own thesis, I briefly survey here some important critical writing on the subject of music-analytical methodologies, before developing these thoughts within the

⁴⁰ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 1993, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, ix.

⁴¹ Derek B. Scott, ‘Introduction’ to *Musical Style and Social Meaning*, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010.

⁴² Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p.5.

context of the peculiar demands of underground music. Much of the material addressed here emerges from the comparatively young discipline of popular music studies, where new conceptual and critical models are continuously being developed in response to shifting notions of musical textuality.

2.3.1 Music Analysis: Consumptionism - Pertinence - Notational Centricity

The tripartite heading above describes the spectrum of approaches, as determined by Richard Middleton in the Introduction to *Reading Pop*,⁴³ that had dominated popular musical studies from its early stages in the late 1960s and early 1970s, up until the year 2000. I will come to each of these concepts in turn.

The key issue underlying the debates that Middleton describes concerns the question of what constitutes a musical ‘text’ in the absence of a score (and indeed in the context of an enriched critical framework), and in a discipline where greater emphasis has naturally been placed on the social context of meaning production than has been the case in score-focused mainstream musicology, although these issues have of course come increasingly to the fore in that discipline too. For Middleton, textual analysis within popular music ‘has been marked with methodological hesitations which suggest deep-lying doubts about the viability of the enterprise itself’.⁴⁴ Middleton locates this hesitancy in an abiding uncertainty within academic popular music study as to the relationship of ‘elite and vernacular values’.⁴⁵ The claims made by each side of this opposition are seen to be mutually contradictory, at least considered in their stereotypical registers, orientating as they do around ‘disinterested objectivity’ on the

⁴³ Richard Middleton ed. *Reading Pop*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴⁴ Middleton, ‘Introduction: Locating the Popular Music Text’, in *Reading Pop*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

one hand, and a pull to ‘switch off your mind and boogie’ on the other.⁴⁶

And yet, although Middleton acknowledges that no ‘single core methodological trajectory’ has been established, the diverging claims of the above mentioned frameworks on the evaluation of popular music have not prevented the development of ‘a variety of approaches’ for the textual analysis of pop music,⁴⁷⁴⁸ as Middleton describes them. Middleton’s spectrum outlines such variety, being defined at one end by what we might call discursive values derived from vernacular experiences of musical meaning as emerging in use, and at the other by fixed text-based determinations of musical value as being enshrined in finite ‘musical’ texts divorced from context.

Middleton comes to argue that, underlying the dominant tendencies of the 1970s, 1980s, and the 1990s – Birmingham School subcultural theory, Madonna exegesis, dance music discussion – has been a form of what he calls ‘consumptionism’. This tendency wants ‘to locate the textual moment, the moment of meaning production, overwhelmingly in the acts of use...The specificities of the sounds shrink’.⁴⁹ On the other hand, Middleton discusses the range of problems besetting approaches that work with ‘old-style’ musicological pop texts (that is, a ‘formally constituted [some would say, reified] image of the text’⁵⁰). Falling prey to such problems as ‘abstraction’, where musical meaning is equated with an idealised image of ‘the work’ and ‘effects of structure’, this approach orbits most fundamentally around what Philip Tagg has called ‘notational centrality’.⁵¹ Notational centrality, as will be obvious, ‘tends to equate music with a score’, and as such, not only is abstraction a key stumbling

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 2.

⁴⁸ A variety that has only increased since 2000, with the work of scholars such as Adam Krims, David Machin, Tia DeNora, and David Brackett.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 4.

block, but an overemphasis occurs on ‘features which can be notated easily (such as fixed pitches) at the expense of others which cannot (complex rhythmic detail, pitch nuance, sound qualities)’.⁵² Middleton relates notational centrality to deep ‘conceptual contradictions within the traditional musicological paradigm’,⁵³ which he in turn relates to a broader ‘transcendentalising tendency within post-Enlightenment bourgeois aesthetics’, where the ‘trans-historical authority of the work’ is asserted, and the separation of a spiritual realm of aesthetics from a lower, physical realm, is pursued.⁵⁴ At the same time, Middleton underlines the problems attending consumptionism, which include the danger of ‘collapsing the specificity of the musical into a vapid contextual soup’.⁵⁵ Both consumptionism and notational approaches, then, incorporate constitutive contradiction and inadequacy.

Middleton addresses a range of methodological approaches which, in their emphasis on such concepts as mediation⁵⁶ (where fixed ‘musical’ texts, social contexts, even body processes, are all situated as intermediations in a chain of mediations that rebounds and reflexes on itself across multiple textual levels), plurality of meaning⁵⁷ (where the ‘discursive architecture’ of any musical text needs to be ‘excavated’ in order to denaturalise the hegemonic power discourses which are produced in such a way to appear ‘natural’), and Bakhtinian dialogics⁵⁸ (where production of meaning is seen to result from interactions between listener, context, text, and ideology), can be seen to be in sympathy with each other, and might be seen to constitute emerging analytical paradigms somewhat free of the contradictions and inadequacies found in previous critical styles.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 4 -5.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 12.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 13.

Drawing from each of these three approaches, Middleton outlines what he sees as the indispensable conditions of analysis. ‘Apparent univocality’, Middleton suggests, ‘represents the attempt at hegemonic closure, but needs to give way, in interpretation, to recognition of impurity and contingency’.⁵⁹ Analysed as such, (pop) music would be seen as a sort of hypertext of branching and reactive motion, an open and dynamic network of intertexts that are multiply constituted and consolidated according to the ideologies in play at any one moment. It would be the analyst’s job to discern what is important, or at least interesting, within that ‘hypertext’, to determine what each element (including prior mediations and interpretations) might be seen to be doing or producing, and to add a layer of interpretation on top or in addition to the already-existent signifying stream, which might serve to clarify or deepen the dynamics of that stream.

2.3.2 *Idioethnomusicology*

Easier said than done, of course. Developing a compelling, balanced, it might even be said panoramic, interpretation of Middleton’s semiotic and hermeneutic ‘dialogue’ would be a very difficult task. In practice such good intentions have invariably trailed back into accusations of monologic, authoritarian solipsism, as has so vividly been discussed by Chris Kennet.⁶⁰ Different approaches – from Tagg’s ‘hermeneutic-semiological’ method that uses the ‘analysis object’ as a ‘kind of neutralist bridge between what he calls the “guild mentality” of formalism at one extreme, and the at times “exegetic guesswork” of musical hermeneutics at the other’,⁶¹ or Middleton’s ‘sophisticated (if in this case “contextually

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Chris Kennet, ‘A tribe called Chris: pop music analysis as idioethnomusicology’, *The Open Space magazine* (10), 2008, pp. 8-19.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 13.

naïve’’) theory of gesture’⁶² – for Kennet, end up being ‘more revealing about the analyst and the listening conditions of the analysis...than [they have] been about the music ipse’.⁶³ As Kennett notes,

Change the listener’s demography or prior lived experience, and you change the very nature of the text. Indeed, in such situations, there is no music ipse, as the individual listening experience becomes the text.⁶⁴

For Kennet, then, musicology is better conceived as a form of ‘idioethnomusicology’. In such a discipline, the biases and ideologies produced during the course of one’s life are acknowledged during the course of the analysis, thus situating the reading, with emphasis accordingly being placed on ‘lived life as a locus for meaning-creation, rather than the recording-as-text as a source for meaning-affordance’.⁶⁵

2.3.3 Method - Pertinence ‘In’ and ‘Around’ The Musical Text

And yet, though monologism *may* present problems for interpretations claiming objectivity, it seems that analytical approaches seeking to prioritise the way that music mediates meaning, and not the other way around,⁶⁶ will invariably bump up against the monologic barrier. And why shouldn’t they? Analysis by its very nature claims a privileged perspective, and once objectivity is not aimed at, monologism should not prove especially problematic. In any case, whilst Kennet’s insights reveal something key about dominant analytical approaches, I have discussed them here in order to provide clarifying context to my own approach, which emphasises musical texts within a discursive and intertextual context of dialogical meaning

⁶² Ibid, pp. 14 - 15.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 15.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

⁶⁶ As for example is the meaning-mediating-music case with some of Tia DeNora’s work: DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 2003, Cambridge University Press.

productions, a context impacted by culture, technology, politics, and more. In my discussions of the music in Part III, then, I use recorded ‘musical’ texts as central textual objects (since I want to emphasise music mediating meaning), albeit considered within a wide-ranging contextual framework of textual production, and semiotic variety. Parts I and II, meanwhile, complement this textual focus, with complementary contextual analyses of politics, culture, and other dimensions that inextricably impinge on that of the music.

Thus, for my own purposes I have sought to attend to something like the dialogue Middleton idealises, whilst also acknowledging through hermeneutical contingency and lyricism in some of the language the limits, and the circumstantial and ideological prior conditions, of my unavoidably monologic interpretations. Middleton in fact inadvertently articulates the guiding principle of my own approach early on in the Introduction surveyed above, when he alights on the question of ‘pertinence’: ‘which ‘text’ is pertinent in a given situation, to given subjects (whose roles – as listeners, mediators, practitioners, or imaginary practitioners – will in any case overlap)? How can we find this out? What terms should we use to describe it?’⁶⁷

Pertinence seems an important concept to hold on to when engaged in the analysis of a musical scene as wide and multiform as that of underground music. Such has been my method; I have sought to engage with the discourse of underground music at multiple levels, from the economic, to the cultural, to the political, to the philosophical, to the literary, to the iconographic, to the musical, always seeing these various levels as being mutually constitutive of the others, without neglecting the importance of the ‘musical’ within what is after all a musicological thesis (although, of course, musicology does not require such a perspective if it is to have value). Where the concept of pertinence comes in is in the

⁶⁷ Middleton, ‘Introduction: Locating the Popular Music Text’, p. 5.

emphases I have given to each of these textual levels or ‘moments’ within various sections. In looking at Extreme Metal, for instance, I emphasise the literary precedents, and the moral-political implications, of the world view expressed in the music’s lyrics and imagery (which elements are seen to interact both with the musical as such, and our interpretation of the musical in turn). In the section on Noise, I focus on the dialogue between far right politics, the notion of noise as music, and the reception possibilities of Noise’s particular musical forms in mediative contexts. As regards post-Noise, I examine the theoretical and pop cultural foundation of the critical reception of that music, particularly in dialogue with the sonic contents of the music itself. And so on. The musical ‘texts’ of all of these genres are understood as floating signs with various ‘affordances’, and my analyses simply seek to attend to the shifting parameters of those semiotic affordances.⁶⁸

The more general approach of ‘pertinence’ – which in Parts I and II produces a focus on political and cultural matters – mirrors that adopted with respect to the ‘sounds themselves’. Tonal and formal strategies are mentioned in the passages on Extreme Metal, for example, but only in such a way that my analysis might correspond, at least to a degree, with idiomatic aspects of the music genre itself. . Taking another tack, with Harsh Wall Noise I use spectrum analyses to attempt to discern musical form and dynamic as these might be experienced, subliminally or otherwise, by the specialist listener, i.e. in terms of the genre idiom. These approaches are intended to cohere with the musical scene under discussion’s own internal conventions and genre dynamics, without being slavish to these and thus running the risk of rejecting any productive disruption that might result from confrontations with alien or semi-alien analytical regimes. I attempt with my musical analyses to ‘re-originate’,⁶⁹ to use a term employed by Tim Hodgkinson perhaps in homage to Barthes’ notion of ‘structuration’, the

⁶⁸ For a discussion of the notion of ‘affordance’ in a semiotic context, see DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, pp. 38 - 40.

⁶⁹ Tim Hodgkinson, ‘On Listening’, *Perspectives of New Music*, Summer 2010, p. 152 - 158.

aesthetic context of the music as such, conceived within generic and stylistic paradigms and discourses, and to get at the various paramusical, contextual, intertextual, and affective meanings that might be seen to accrue around the musical object.

These sorts of musical discussions sit comfortably alongside investigation of other apparently supra-textual features such as band logos or stage banter as adequate resources for analysis. Both textual levels, the intra- and the extra-musical, play a role in my research. Their presence is determined by my own conception of what is *pertinent* to a discussion of the music. So, pertinence is a guiding framework both in terms of what I discuss with respect to sound, and what I discuss with respect to the wider articulatory and mediative contexts of that sound.

It is hoped that the thesis ultimately achieves a broad-based, catholic, and compelling account of underground musical culture as I conceive it, considered particularly within the realms of the cultural, the political, and the musical, as these are produced at mutually constituting and determining textual levels of discourse and dialogue.

Chapter Three: Underground Issues and Contexts

I move in this chapter from a discussion of issues and topics around the nature of the underground, particularly in the context of the digital age, on to a range of case studies intended to illustrate some of those issues and topics in concrete terms. The case studies are comprised of a generalised discussion of the international underground scene as it is manifest across various cities, first, and second of a more focused examination of the local Irish underground scene. They consider political and cultural issues as these apply to the underground, particularly in terms of institutional or private funding, relative commerciality and commercial performance, practitioners' habits of promotion, distribution and performing, and so on. More direct accrual and development of data within a cultural-political-economic theoretical framework is offered in Part II. For now, the goal is somewhat more limited and more general. The Irish case study focuses more directly on some key thematic issues, whilst also making use of primary research interviews, which, as later, serve both as a nonreplicable source of data and as a deliberate opening out of perspectives to artists' experiences.

3.1 Underground Culture in the Digital Age: Issues and Topics

Defining the underground in concrete terms is a tricky business, as I sought to make clear in Chapter One. Frank Zappa attempted to pin it down in commercial terms: 'The mainstream comes to you, but you have to go to the underground'.¹ This definition uses the model of consumption to give a picture of how the underground was configured in terms of the experience of the audience. In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the fact of having to *go to* the underground was clearer cut. Mail order, esoteric fanzines, and obscure record labels and

¹ The provenance of this quotation has been difficult to trace, and its source is possibly apocryphal, but it has been cited as Zappa's in many different contexts, for example: Lawrence Zeegan, 'Going Underground', <http://www.computerarts.co.uk/features/going-underground>, accessed 23 May 2012.

shops dominated. Since the advent of digital technologies such as the web, however, this type of relation has become confused. Culture has become flat, at least in the sense of availability and dissemination. MP3 blogs and file sharing websites, in addition to music disseminating and networking platforms such as MySpace, Bandcamp, and SoundCloud, and easily copied CD-Rs, have all facilitated the spread of underground music in a way that was inconceivable in the pre-digital and pre-internet age, when bootlegged tapes and tiny small runs of records dominated its commercial flow.

For the critic Simon Reynolds, 'the web has extinguished the idea of a true underground; it's too easy for anybody to find out anything now...it's hard for me to see the changes as anything other than dis-intensifying'.² In his book *Retromania*, whilst discussing Dylan Jones' *iPod Therefore I am*, Reynolds expands on this theme of a disappearing or disappeared underground, refining it somewhat to the specific context of 'popular music':³

Dylan Jones retraces in *iPod Therefore I am* the trajectory by which seventies punk evolved into eighties style culture, which in turn led to the current state of play, where nothing is subcultural anymore and ideas of 'underground' and 'subversive' seem untenable, at least in popular music.⁴

Martin Raymond, co-founder of The Future Laboratory, a trend forecasting company, echoes Reynolds' practical observations (if not his desultory sentiment). Commenting in a 2008 *Independent* article on what he describes as a 'global scenester', Tim Walker quotes Raymond:

² The quotation originated in a FACT magazine interview with Reynolds on the release of his *Bring the Noise* collection. The interview is currently unavailable, but the quotation re-appears across the web, for example: <http://jahsonic.wordpress.com/2008/10/14/>, accessed 23 May 2012.

³ Although the boundaries of that context are unclear. In addition, Reynolds' expresses similar sentiments with relation to the Californian underground in an article discussed in Chapter Four. For these reasons, his critique seems germane here.

⁴ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania*, London: Faber and Faber, 2011, p. 115.

Trends aren't transmitted hierarchically, as they used to be. They're now transmitted laterally and collaboratively via the internet. You once had a series of gatekeepers in the adoption of a trend: the innovator, the early adopter, the late adopter, the early mainstream, the late mainstream, and finally the conservative. But now it goes straight from the innovator to the mainstream.⁵

The shift in the means of musical production and consumption that has been occasioned by the internet and by the development of digital technologies has, as suggested by Reynolds' complaint and Raymond's observation, considerably affected the underground scene. This is clear. Audiences no longer have to 'go to' the underground in the same way that was required of them in the pre-digital era/s. In this sense, the underground now shares with commercial (popular, classical, or otherwise) music more generally the quality of *unproblematic potential access*. Commercial music has benefited from such a quality since its incorporation to the marketplace. The digital age has imbued underground music culture with the same quality. What has happened to the musical underground over the past ten or so years thus bears many of the same general hallmarks as the processes that have taken place in relation to more mainstream musics (even if that music was already potentially accessible). The physical artefact has been displaced, though not erased, by digital code, and musicians have embraced new technologies of production, reproduction, and distribution.

However, contra Reynolds' suggestion that such potential access renders the concept of an underground redundant, I want to argue that, in fact, the underground scene persists in digital age contexts. Not only that, but that it actually thrives as a direct result of the web's facilitation of precisely the sort of trans-local and global networks of communication mentioned in Chapter Two. The democratisation of musical production and promotion that comes with the present easy access to music software and social networking sites furnishes

⁵ Raymond quoted in Tim Walker, 'Meet the global scenester: He's hip. He's cool. He's everywhere', in *The Independent*, 14 August 2008, also available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/features/meet-the-global-scenester-hes-hip-hes-cool-hes-everywhere-894199.html>, accessed 23 May 2012.

the growth of the underground scene just as it does the mainstream.

Reynolds' protestation about the ease of access to the underground, and about the lack of risk, difficulty, and intensity⁶ he thus detects in contemporary underground music culture, as with Keenan's accusations of a 'superficial engagement with culture', are tenuous. I have found it useful to hold onto the term 'underground', despite the *possibility* of general access which Reynolds draws attention to, simply because of the *actual* character and cultural presence of the music. As I suggested in the Abstract, 'Underground' connotes a sense of concealment, even of contraband, and this sensibility is preserved amongst contemporary underground cultures. The covert, esoteric, and marginal qualities of the underground have not been dispelled by the fact that underground cultures are now notionally open to all.

Underground music's general abrasiveness means that its likely natural home will remain outside the mainstream. The willingness of the general public either to turn away or to ignore its existence in the first place has been the historical source of the underground's marginality and reclusion, not some farcical public inability to locate it, as Reynolds seems to be suggesting. Despite the web, which has obviously allowed greater numbers of people access to previously unreachable music through databases such as UbuWeb,⁷ the underground remains underground, even if it is easier, for those who so desire, to get to it.

So, the underground persists in the digital age, since its very abrasive 'undergroundness' forestalls the possibility of a large number of people desiring access to it. But the digital age has had other impacts on the underground, notably concerning the liberation of content just

⁶ In the same interview Reynolds remarks, 'it's totally easy to hear anything you want to hear, in this risk-less, desultory way that has no cost, either financially or emotionally'; the interview is re-printed at <http://www.strangefamousrecords.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=594386&sid=54777058c2ba84c5c7c4c47029014d68>, accessed 23 May 2012.

⁷ The renowned site run by Kenneth Goldsmith that hosts a huge range of examples of avant garde and experimental sound poetry, film, music, and so on: <http://www.ubu.com/>, accessed 23 May 2012.

discussed, particularly in terms of that liberation's effective removal of critical, financial, and physical boundaries which formerly circumscribed the discourses around the music.

Since digital containers are theoretically infinite, and since the digital age has been characterised by lax attitudes to copyright control, digital archives now contain essentially every piece of music that has ever been commercially released, with the vast majority of it available instantaneously and often for free to anyone with access to a computer. This cultural state of affairs was given the epithet 'ETEWAF' – that is, 'Everything That Ever Was, Available Forever' – in a *Wired* magazine article in January 2011.⁸ The digital age and its ETEWAF culture have seen transformative shifts in how mainstream musical forms are produced, circulated, and consumed. 'Disintermediation' describes one of those major shifts, where the increasing importance of PR companies, large publishing houses, and multinational record labels in the 1990s has been displaced by the fact that audiences can now gain access to new music at the same time as music reviewers through MP3 blogs, torrent sites, and other media, and thus the intermediary function those large corporate firms served has been undermined.⁹

Underground music culture exists within ETEWAF culture as much as more mainstream cultural forms do. As in mainstream culture, the media of production and reproduction have shifted to digital technologies and digital media in underground music culture, with distribution largely taking place through the web, although a concomitant nostalgia for physical products has persisted within the underground as it has elsewhere, such that artists and label heads like Amanda Brown and Richard Skelton¹⁰ produce highly perishable and

⁸ Patton Oswalt, 'Wake Up, Geek Culture. Time to Die', *Wired*, January 2011.

⁹ Anthony Bruno, 'Blog Jam: As Internet Marketing Comes Of Age, Can The Majors Keep Themselves From Ruining The Cool?' *Billboard*, 118/7, 18 February 2006, pp. 28 - 29.

¹⁰ Skelton releases small-run CD recordings of his music on his Sustain-Release label under his own name and

distinctive physical artefacts (which are nevertheless sold via the internet).

Notwithstanding the direct correspondence in effect of ETEWAF culture on the underground and the mainstream, since there are a different set of aesthetic and political objectives and a very different cultural scope in play in that underground culture, the effects of ETEWAF digitisation are distinct both in terms of practical reality and political implication. For one thing, the underground has not undergone a comparable process of disintermediation. This is for the simple reason that large PR companies, publishing houses, and record companies have never served as intermediaries between the underground audience and its musicians and their music. One of the central tenets of underground culture is that it has existed outside the dominant channels of capitalist distribution. Another is that it is a specialist culture with limited commercial reach. From the 1960s, underground artists and record labels led clandestine existences often visible only to those who knew where to look. Groups such as the Los Angeles Free Music Society sold their material to audiences through mail order. Record labels such as Broken Flag in Britain operated with a staff of only one or two,¹¹ creating releases with very limited recording and production budgets. Small publishing houses such as the fringe culture specialists RE/Search compiled books and fanzines featuring interviews and writing on underground music culture.¹²

This sort of DIY approach both to production and distribution was characteristic of underground music culture in the decades before the advent of widespread digital

under a range of pseudonym's, including A Broken Consort, with hand-crafted packaging which often includes artefacts from the landscape in which the music was recorded, such as twigs. Brown's label Not Not Fun also specialises in bespoke, handcrafted releases. Not Not Fun serve as a case study in Chapter Six.

¹¹ Reflecting the sort of 'micro-independent' record label modelled by Robert Strachan; 'Micro-independent Record Labels in the UK: Discourse, DIY Cultural Production and the Music Industry', in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/2 (2007), pp. 245 – 266.

¹² RE/Search's *Industrial Culture Handbook*, for example, included interviews and profiles of many leading Industrial music artists, such as Throbbing Gristle, Boyd Rice, and SPK; RE/Search No. 6/7: *Industrial Culture Handbook*, RE/Search Publications, 1983.

technologies and the internet. With this advent, access has undoubtedly been made easier, particularly for those who so desire it. But what is crucial here is the desire to learn about and participate in these cultures. It is no longer necessarily the *ability* to find the information, but rather the *desire* to seek it out, that is key, as I said.

Thus, with digital subsumption, underground music culture obviously did not undergo a process of disintermediation. The culture, instead, has always been, at heart, an ‘anintermediated’ culture (i.e. it has never been defined by institutional intermediations relating to, for example, large record companies or music publications). This cultural ‘anintermediation’, this DIY, commercially constricted agenda, has aesthetic roots – the desire to participate in constricted cultural activities, as well as the appreciation of the particular sounds of underground music, seems to me to be at the core of the underground’s allure – whilst also having political implications, providing an alternative to dominant cultural channels of capitalism as it does.

I explore this ‘anintermediation’, and other key issues raised here around the continued existence of an ‘underground’, across Part II. I will now turn to examples of specific local underground scenes as a way of concretising the general discussion offered thus far.

3.2. Local Underground Scenes: Introduction

Whilst the digital age has seen underground music culture being appreciably liberated from physical limitations such as record shops and even snail mail, it is still the case that the global scene orbits around local physical scenic nuclei to a significant degree. We are still social animals, in music as in other areas of cultural activity, and live shows and festivals have proved an important ‘bonding agent’ for connections that might have been facilitated by the

web in the first place, and in any case continue after those live shows to be cultivated over the web, whether that is through direct communication on social media, or the easy collaboration between performers and the easy consumption or distribution of music it facilitates.

Local iterations of the global underground scene demonstrate the importance of institutional backing, social prosperity, and a thriving mainstream culture to the formation and subsistence of underground music. As David Keenan suggests,

The US has the healthiest DIY underground rock scene in the world; as a capitalist country it has the potential to support small economies and provide the conditions that allow them to survive while remaining relatively autonomous.¹³

Further, cities with a rich cultural history and with firmly established public arts institutions and federal or state funding for the arts at comparatively high levels, unsurprisingly host the busiest underground scenes. This is an obvious consequence of musicians and promoters having access to a higher concentration of people, wealth, and resources than would otherwise be the case.

An illustrative example. Jonny Mugwump, presenter of the Exotic Pylon programme on *Resonance FM* and head of the homonymous record label¹⁴ (which releases music by such acts as Infinite Livez and Band of Holy Joy), told me in an interview conducted for this research that he ‘could not get anything going in Manchester in the late-1980s. There was just too many cliques, and the whole system was closed off to people wanting to get in from outside’. Mugwump had attempted to start a small label, run a club night, and develop his performing career, all in the context of ‘fairly esoteric rock and noise music’. These ventures came to nothing, despite the city’s relative size, and its thriving Indie and Dance music

¹³ David Keenan, ‘Agent Provocateur’, in *The Wire*, February 2010, p. 33

¹⁴ <http://exoticpylon.com/>, accessed 21 September 2012.

scenes. Once Mugwump came to London, however, he found ‘a mix of willing collaborators’. From an engineering position at *Resonance FM*, Mugwump developed his own show with assistance from ‘endless collaborators’ in ‘venues, at the station, and bands’. Mugwump’s Exotic Pylon show eventually evolved into monthly concerts at London’s Vortex, which finally evolved into the Exotic Pylon record label in 2011, a label that releases limited edition CDs and 7” and 12” records. Mugwump credits his residence in London with the emergence and relative success of the Exotic Pylon marker.

Somewhat ironically, capitalism has been a reliable engine for the formation of underground scenes. The concentration of people in urban centres that resulted from Fordist capitalism has produced a concomitant concentration of musicians, promoters, audiences, and resources. Various underground scenes have exploited this concentration. Capitalism has also driven the growth of these scenes through the wide distribution of wealth via state apparatuses which has taken place in liberal democratic capitalist economies, as seen for example in public funding for the arts and artists or in social welfare programmes. Other forms of cultural funding, as for example with artist or project bursaries from privately run foundations, similarly derive from capitalist structures, in this case in whole or in part from the personal wealth of private capitalist benefactors. In addition, liberal democratic capitalism’s (however illusory) granting of cultural and creative freedom to its citizens, has been accompanied by the development not only of thriving mainstream cultures, but also of smaller, more esoteric cultures, such as that of the underground. So, through its concentration of people and amenities in centres of power, its facilitation of distribution of capital, and its basic non-renunciation of cultural activity made possible by this flow and concentration of resources, capitalism has inadvertently driven the development of city-based local underground scenes, and, as a result, has driven the global underground scene in general. I explore this

correspondence between capitalism and the underground in Chapter Four.

The following case studies are offered in the straightforward hope of providing a general anecdotal impression of the international scene, without claiming much authority as an explanatory resource for the precise political and cultural economies of the underground scene. These are examined with more authority in the following chapters. The section on Ireland which follows the next one contains more primary research material, and is thus better able to claim some degree of authority as an account of the cultural, social, and political aspects of that scene.

3.2.1 Local Underground Scenes: Cities

Berlin has seen a remarkable upsurge in artistic activity since Germany's reunification in 1990. Institutions such as the Deutsches Theatre, the Berlin State Opera, and the Berlin Philharmonie reflect the city's rich artistic heritage. Meanwhile, Berlin's extremely low cost of living¹⁵ and its highly centralised artistic culture¹⁶ combine to allow the development of an array of artistic activity, amongst which we find a thriving underground scene. Orientating around totemic minimal techno producers such as the duo behind the label and group Basic Channel, Mark Ernestus and Moritz von Oswald; Robert Henke from Monolake; and also Noise and experimental pop musicians such as Felix Kubin and Gudrun Gut, the Berlin underground scene connects back within the country's own history to the fertile days of the Weimar Republic. But it also connects outward to other local 'divisions' of the international underground scene, both through the digital means alluded to earlier, and also through

¹⁵ 'According to the Mercer Worldwide Cost of Living survey 2010, Berlin is the least expensive location of any major MBA city in Europe': <http://www.businessbecause.com/news/MBA-Europe/cost-of-living-at-b-school-berlin-8448>, accessed 23 May 2012.

¹⁶ Hundreds of gallery and concert spaces are concentrated around such central districts such as Kreuzberg, Mitte, and Friedrichshain.

festivals such as Club Transmediale and MaerzMusik, venues such as Berghain, and shops such as Hard Wax in Kreuzberg, to name only a few of the city's conduits to other scenes.

Berlin-based artists figure heavily in *The Wire*, a publication that provides one of the critical nuclei of the international underground scene. Featuring heavily likewise are London musicians, though in contrast to the Dance-orientated music of Berlin, it is rather networks of improvisers and Noise musicians that dominate the London underground. Live activity in London takes place at venues such as the Vortex, Boat'ing, Corsica Studios, the Shacklewell Arms, the Old Blue Last, and Café Oto. Shops such as Sound 323 and older venues such as the Red Rose formerly provided a physical core for London underground musicians, but that function has largely been usurped by the aforementioned venues, in addition to the web presence maintained by London music writers, labels, and promoters, such as, to take a significant example, the leading Black Metal, Death Ambient and Noise 'organisation' Cold Spring.¹⁷

Tokyo is another international city in which postwar prosperity and a rich artistic culture have facilitated the emergence of a flourishing musical underground. As so often happens (cf. Berlin's Berghain and London's Café Oto), the Tokyo scene grew out of a single venue – Bar Aoyama – where a confluence of musicians such as Toshimaru Nakamura and Taku Sugimoto collaborated in performances. From 1998, for example, a regular concert series, first entitled 'The Improvisation Meeting at Bar Aoyama', and, later, 'The Experimental Meeting at Bar Aoyama', was established by Tetuzi Akiyama, Sugimoto, and Nakamura.¹⁸ The series featured a range of guest appearances and collaborative lineups. The impetus behind the series was transferred to Off Site in 2000, a new venue housed in a tiny residential

¹⁷ <http://www.coldspring.co.uk/>, accessed 3 June 2012.

¹⁸ 'Bar Aoyama', <http://www.japanimprov.com/baraooyama/profile.html>, accessed 23 May 2012.

property in Shinjuku, which has played host to a range of Japanese musicians, from Sugimoto, Nakamaru and Akiyama, to Sachiko M and Otomo Yoshihide.

Clive Bell describes the venue and introduces ‘Onkyo’ improvisation, the subgenre of music that arose out of the new ‘Meeting at Off Site’ concert series:

Off Site is one of a row of old, highly ordinary houses somehow clinging on in the shadow of Shinjuku’s skyscrapers. These are flimsy constructions of wood and plaster. Inside, Atsuhiko Ito and his wife have converted their house into a Spartan gallery and performing space on the ground floor, seating about fifty maximum, and a welcoming café-cum-book-and-record shop upstairs. This is home for a gang of musicians playing a new kind of improvised music – usually quiet, sometimes bewilderingly minimalist, but astonishingly fertile.¹⁹

This ‘Onkyo’ form of improvisation has since been given international exposure through the ‘Improvised Music From Japan’ website and label, which releases the series ‘Meeting at Off Site’, in addition to a range of other recordings.²⁰ Through these recordings and through the publicity which arose around the Tokyo scene, the aforementioned musicians began to develop a major presence in the international underground scene, appearing regularly in venues and at festivals across Europe and America.²¹

Thus the Tokyo scene provides us with an example where local activity enables practitioners to connect, and then, through global promotional machineries anchored in the web, to build this connection into wider activities. Commerce and connection between the local and the global in the underground scene is invariably mediated through such portals as are visible here; articles, concerts, and record labels, who generally – as noted and as will be evidenced

¹⁹ Clive Bell, ‘Off Site’, <http://www.clivebell.co.uk/offsite.htm>, accessed 24 May 2012.

²⁰ <http://www.japanimprov.com/>, accessed 23 May 2012.

²¹ For example, Otomo Yoshihide and Sachiko M had a three day residency at Café Oto in 2010. Nakamura performed at Instal 2010 and has recently released a duet album with John Butcher. Yoshihide has released collaborations with everyone from Derek Bailey, to Fennesz, to Christian Marclay, to Luc Ferrari, to David Sylvain. A full Yoshihide discography is available at the following page: <http://www.discogs.com/artist/Otomo+Yoshihide>, accessed 5 May 2012.

in Chapter Six – conduct most of their activity through the web.

3.2.2 The Underground Scene in Ireland

The underground scene features a flattened plane of activity, where divisions between audiences, musicians, promoters, critics, and so on are much less stark than they are in other contexts, perhaps mainly as a result of the comparatively tiny size of the scene, though the scene's size and its aesthetic and political ethos are in a somewhat reflexive relationship. The 'flattened plane of activity', in any case, is particularly conspicuous in Ireland, a country in which the institutional frameworks that buttress activity in London and Berlin simply do not exist in the same way, even if other correspondences with those cities can be drawn, such as in the crucial web-mediated local-to-global connections just discussed.

Despite its comparative dearth of 'institutional frameworks', Ireland nonetheless boasts a vigorous underground scene. In July 2010 I interviewed Paul Hegarty and Gavin Prior, two of the scene's leading figures, for the purposes of this research, in order to get a sense of their perspectives on and experiences within the Irish scene. I will here place Hegarty and Prior's answers into something like a dialogue with my own observations, which are drawn in the main from extensive secondary research, and also from participation on the scene as a critic, audience member, and (very occasional) musician.

Hegarty's responses give a general sense of the Irish scene, particularly as regards its personnel and its venues. Prior's responses focus more on the cultural context which he feels has hampered the development of the Irish scene. Taken together, the interviews speak to the varying cultural and economic pressures influencing underground scenes, whilst also illustrating the practical methods by which those scenes progress. The contrasting tone of the

interviews also reveals the inescapable personal slant that such primary, practitioner-centred research as this must sometimes take. The account given here of the Irish scene will be expanded somewhat in Chapter Five, incidentally, where one of the case study subjects is Vicky Langan, referenced in passing below.

Paul Hegarty is an author,²² lecturer at UCC, member of Noise group Safe, and head of the label Dot Dot Dot Music.²³ Hegarty spoke volubly in our interview about a range of underground activities across Ireland, beginning by discussing the sorts of venues and musicians that have been important to the Cork scene since the late-1990s:

I came to Cork from Nottingham in the late-90s, where I found there was a very healthy experimental music scene, notably in the Triskel Arts Centre, the Lobby, and Fred Zeppelins. There were also links between musicians that would feature in the Jimmy Cake and musicians down here, notably the band Philip K Dick (who became PKD), as well as with improvisers like Fergus Kelly, David Lacey, Paul Smyth.

These venues, which Hegarty acknowledges serve other musical agendas much of the time – the Lobby, for example, is more known as a folk venue than for anything more obscure – host a wide range of underground activities, with decent audiences in attendance. Ireland’s capital city, Dublin, according to Hegarty, lagged somewhat behind in the late-1990s:

From then until now, shows in Cork ranged from noise, to industrial, to free jazz, to weird folk, to DIY, to avant rock, avant metal etc. It took Dublin quite a while to reach the audience levels the music has down here, including in West Cork, with gigs at Connolly’s and the Leap.

Hegarty expanded on the stylistic breadth of the activity just described:

²² Of, for example, *Noise/Music: A History*, 2007, London: Continuum. I discuss this book in Chapter Seven.

²³ Dot Dot Dot sells music on physical media by Noise artists such as the New Blockaders, accepting payment through Paypal. This type of set up is common in the underground, as we will see in Chapter Six; <http://www.dotdotdotmusic.com/>, accessed 22 May 2012.

It goes from the rock end of Rest and tenpastseven, through the noise of Safe and laptop types, through free improvisation, through to hardcore industrial messiness to sound art, as exemplified in the Quiet Club of Mick O'Shea and Danny McCarthy.

Hegarty also mentioned his work with artist Alex Rose, who, in Hegarty's words, 'has recently done covers for Deerhunter, Horrors, Of the Wand and The Moon, as well as our band Safe, and others to come'. Hegarty was keen to stress what he sees as the comparative health and prosperity of the Irish underground scene, which he sees as being full of fruitful collaboration across genres and forms (as with Rose), and as being well integrated into the global underground scene:

All this to show how much the Irish scene is internationally integrated, and punches above its weight - which I'm not sure applies in classical/programme music. Brian [O'Shaughnessy, from PKD, and Hegarty's co-label head] curated a CD, 'Grain', which was 99 tracks, and it features some very established artists, archive recordings, and artists from all around Ireland. I think that was 2002. In 2001, Brian and myself started our extreme noise band Safe, which is about to release its fifth album, having collaborated with world-renowned experimental writer Dennis Cooper for the fourth. Crowds are strong, and Safe (albiet just me) has played in several locations in Canada, and the UK, and once in Kazakhstan. Self-promotion halfway through, this is the point to say that this putting on of gigs has played some part in what is now a very varied, odd, and successful music scene in Cork.

Hegarty also addressed the rich underground scene of cities other than Cork, stating that, 'Limerick has had a pretty vibrant experimental music scene for some time. Galway has hosted avant stuff, but I'm not sure how much of it is still going on, though Steven Stapleton of Nurse With Wound lives in Clare, and DJs in Galway, along with characters like Peat Bog'.

So, for Hegarty, it has been the putting on of gigs, which facilitate the meeting of fellow practitioners and the developing of a physical network of contacts, venues, and so on, in addition to the cultivation of independent record labels and a generally self-determining and enthusiastic practice, that have been the chief source of what he perceives as the success of

the underground scene across Ireland. Hegarty also underlined, though, that that success must be understood always to be constrained by natural limitations. He pointed out that within this context of esoteric and marginal music, there is ‘an almost natural limit on audience size’, and indeed that there is a natural limit on ‘how much can be going on at any one time’. This limit notwithstanding, though, Hegarty believes that ‘Ireland compares pretty favourably with European countries on that side, and we would definitely have better audience levels, even in raw numbers, than equivalent stuff in the UK’.

Hegarty’s volubility is as we will see tempered somewhat by Prior. However, even still, Hegarty’s enthusiasm is reflected to at least a substantial degree by the range of underground activity evident in Ireland. Hegarty, Andrew Fogarty,²⁴ and Vicky Langan²⁵ are just some of those involved with developing a cultural alternative to leading Irish rock magazine *Hot Press* on the one hand, and the National Concert Hall on the other (a double binary raised by Prior). In Dublin, groups such as the Redneck Manifesto, Children Under Hoof, Patrick Kelleher and His Cold Dead Hands, and others, gig in venues such as Upstairs in Anseo, Upstairs at Whelan’s, the contemporary art space The Joinery, and in the (*echt* underground) ‘box socials’ on South Circular Road, a ‘BYOB’ venue with minimal cover charge, which hosted a series of concerts from 2009 to 2010 in the ‘shed behind No. 236 South Circular Road’²⁶ in Dublin.

The welter of underground activity in Ireland reveals a vibrant enough scene, but the country’s comparative lack of international visibility in the global underground scene

²⁴ Member of weird electronics outfit Boys of Summer, of Toymonger, and head of the Munitions Family label.

²⁵ Who runs the Black Sun weirdo/outer limits music and film nights in Cork and performs as a solo artist under the name Wölflinge. As noted, Langan is examined in greater detail as one of the subjects of the case studies in Chapter Five.

²⁶ <http://pascalscountrysounds.blogspot.co.uk/2009/06/our-anniversary-10th-box-social-show.html>, accessed 24 May 2012.

(notwithstanding Hegarty's assertions) requires explanation. Despite the underground's alienation from the mainstream, the healthy existence of such a mainstream is crucial to the success of any underground scene, as was suggested by Keenan in the quotation included above, and by my own points relating to the concentration of people, wealth, and resources in centres of power. Ireland, historically, has endured relative poverty, with concomitant cultural poverty in terms of the range of established institutions, mainstream cultural vibrancy, and substantial public funding programmes resulting. For this reason, perhaps – notwithstanding its prominent writers and selected popular music artists – Ireland has simply not produced many significant artists working in classical or contemporary or underground music, areas of culture depending crucially on such programmes of public funding. Of course, there are manifold cultural reasons playing into this situation of comparative reclusion (a reclusion that is showing at least some signs of abating in contemporary classical music, with the emergence of composers such as Donnacha Dennehy), only some of which concern money and capital,²⁷ but in the main I would argue that these two factors – the lack of a core music-cultural mainstream on which to draw, and the lack of public or private funding – have proved pivotal in undermining or simply forestalling attempts to get an underground scene off the ground in any internationally-visible sense.

The underground's dependence on mainstream culture was likewise stressed by Gavin Prior in our interview. Prior is an improvising noise musician, head of the Deserted Village label,²⁸ and member of such bands as Wyntr Ravn and United Bible Studies. He sees the problem of Ireland's comparative lack of visibility on the international scene, whether that lack be identified in the failure of any Irish underground musician to attain prominence beyond the

²⁷ Harry White, for instance, argues that Ireland's comparative dearth of prominent composers can be traced to residues of cultural imperialism that attach themselves to classical music: *The Progress of Music in Ireland*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005.

²⁸ <http://www.desertedvillage.com/>, accessed 23 May 2012.

country's borders, or in the country's lack of a significant bespoke underground venue or festival, in institutional and geographic terms. The media in Ireland, according to Prior, have been,

Pretty much useless for underground music. United Bible Studies is a relatively accessible group compared to other projects I'm involved in, yet Cian O'Ciobhain is the only Irish DJ to play our music and the *Journal of Music* is the only publication to have reviewed our last widely available release.²⁹ You could say that I am bitter and that our music is totally without merit but we can tour the USA and get flown over to record radio sessions with VPRO in the Netherlands and sell records all over the world on labels from various countries. We make an effort to contact the Irish media and are ignored. On the other hand reviewers and DJs from the USA, Britain, Europe and Australia write to us out of the blue looking for promo copies. Some reviewers buy them with their own money.

Prior asserts that the Irish media 'don't bother seriously covering music unless there's a label or a PA firm behind it'. Moreover, as he points out, underground musicians lack (by definition) the institutional backing that 'classical experimenters' rely upon; the Arts Council, Lyric FM, and other media outlets concentrate on what Prior describes as the 'holy trinity' of jazz, trad, and academic composition, thereby potentially denying Irish underground music some of the attention it might deserve, and surely needs. As Prior says,

Classical experimenters have had the advantage of Arts Council funding and a very receptive Lyric FM so they can perform live without losing money. For example, the long running series of free concerts in the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin has made modern music accessible to all sorts of people, but focuses exclusively on academic music.

Compounding matters, as Prior suggests but as is clear from familiarity with the country, is the relatively small size³⁰ and the unusual population spread of Ireland. With over a quarter of

²⁹ I should say that I was the author of that review: 'United Bible Studies', in *Journal of Music*, October/November 2009.

³⁰ According to the Irish Central Statistics Office the Republic's population as of the 2011 census was 4,588,252: <http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/saveselections.asp>, accessed 3 June 2012. This is obviously a tiny figure when compared with close neighbour the UK, which, according to a BBC report, had a population of 62,262,000 as of mid-2010: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13975481>, accessed 3 June 2012.

the people concentrated in Dublin,³¹ and the population density being unevenly spread throughout the rest of the country,³² tours from local or international underground acts can fall apart before they have begun, due to promoters' inability to book concerts outside the capital:

Sometimes there's an imbalance which causes tours to fall apart because an overseas act can get a gig in Dublin, but if promoters in other towns don't go for it they have to pull out because it's not economical to travel to Ireland for just one gig.

This geographical influence on underground activity shows that it is hard, outside economically established and institutionally rich locations, for underground scenes to reach maturity, at least in a large number of cases; the general absence of vibrant scenes in other comparatively small cities and countries supports this hypothesis.

Prior laments the results of the difficult geo-cultural Irish situation:

So on one hand Ireland is a small country where the media are of no use to underground musicians, yet on the other it's where I live and enjoy playing live, so it's frustrating when we try to break even playing live especially when trying to bring musicians from overseas.

Prior went on to contrast the Irish situation with that of the United States, echoing Keenan's earlier discussion of the importance of the latter country's wealth in the development and undergirding of underground culture:

The USA has the population to support a magazine like *Arthur* dedicated to the

³¹ The Irish Central Statistics Office gives Dublin's population as of the 2011 census as being 1,273,069, in comparison to the state's 4,588,252, which equates to approximately 27.8%:
<http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/Define.asp?maintable=CD102&PLanguage=0>, accessed 3 June 2012.

³² The Central Statistics Office also state that 'In 2011 the urban population (comprising 62 per cent of the total population) lived on just 2.4 per cent of the total land area':
<http://www.cso.ie/en/newsandevents/pressreleases/2012pressreleases/pressreleasecensus2011profile1townandcountryandpopulationclassifiedbyarea/>, accessed 3 June 2012.

underground. In the USA you can tour for a couple of months even if you only play to 40-50 people a night. We got more money playing house shows than in the Knitting Factory.

Prior elaborated on how his group attempted to transcend local scenic limitations, by using the new web platforms afforded by digital technologies:

Through trading CD-Rs, we've gotten our music released on underground labels in other countries. It was a case of 'To hell or to the internet'!³³ We could sell and swap our music with people in other countries while being met with indifference in our own. It's nothing to do with trying to be famous, but I'd like to see more Irish underground releases on labels in other countries and bands looking to sell their music abroad through online media. A lot of people are proud to not make a profit from their music but that doesn't mean they shouldn't try to get people to hear it.

Hegarty's positive appraisal of putting on gigs and performing, and starting labels, of forming personal contacts, and of generating activity out of those means (with a lesser, but still significant, emphasis on web platforms), thus contrasts with Prior's stark observations about the institutional and geographic stranglehold in which the Irish underground scene finds itself, according to him at the least. For Prior, the scene is weighed down by Irish culture's retrograde emphasis on folk and classical forms, observing as he did that the Irish Arts Council do very little to support the recording or otherwise promotion of music falling outside these parameters.³⁴ As a result, Prior turned to the internet to promote his own work and to form the type of network of contacts that Hegarty had found through gigs.

However, Prior's perspective was not a wholly negative one. Indeed he finished our interview (which took place, I should emphasise once again, in July 2010) by pointing out some of the

³³ Paraphrasing Oliver Cromwell's famous command to Irish natives in the seventeenth century, 'To hell or to Connaught'.

³⁴ Prior compared Ireland with Norway during our interview: 'Irish acts tend to go to London to get on major labels whereas the Norwegian government nurtures independent labels so artists stay with them. In Finland the 'fonal' label has done great things for local artists with government funding. I can remember Angela Dorgan of First Music Contact telling a group of musicians that The Arts Council didn't fund album releases because they were commercially available. This reasoning has never been applied to sculpture and painting, for instance'.

positive aspects of the Irish scene, emphasising that the country's social deprivation may actually lead to positive cultural transformation:

To me the Irish underground(s) seem healthier than ever. In Dublin a lot of places like The Joinery have been springing up where people can bring their own beer and all the door money goes to the musicians and the space, and not to the bouncers who start herding everyone like cattle at 11:30 on the dot. Our towns are already full of un-leasable retail spaces and many more are locked into completion. We might finally see the dawn of a squatting culture in Ireland. The combination of Arts Council cuts and a deep recession will make it easier to justify.

This quotation contrasts with my earlier assertions regarding the importance of healthy capitalist economies in the formation of underground scenes, although Prior's optimism is yet to be borne out in a sustained way in practice. For Prior, a background of deflating sudden wealth might prove to be the catalyst that the Irish scene needs, where the previous emphasis on the profit-motive could be replaced by a communitarian spirit befitting the underground context of low revenues and marginal commercial appeal. The sentiment highlights the curious double bind of underground scenes: they have invariably emerged in thriving capitalist contexts, and yet they renounce commercial imperatives, relying instead on community collaboration and free digital platforms.

Concluding Thoughts

It is difficult, as noted, for underground scenes to reach a degree of exposure and maturity without surrounding economic and institutional stability. And yet such stability does not necessarily preclude the development of an underground scene. Underground scenes after all rise and fall on the collective enthusiasm of a small number of people. The relative vibrancy³⁵

³⁵ This is a personal judgement, but I would come down somewhere between Hegarty's optimism and Prior's negativity, if I were to assess the health of the scene. It has undoubtedly grown in the past decade, aided in no small part both by the internet and by the efforts of a small group of people, and yet at the same time it has been gravely held back by just the sorts of cultural prejudices outlined by Prior, and by the more general cultural

of the Irish underground scene indeed testifies to the ability of underground cultures to emerge in adverse economic or cultural circumstances.

Similar processes can be identified in other burgeoning scenes around the world, such as that in Buenos Aires, where local musical traditions combine fruitfully with experimental dance styles and contexts,³⁶ or in Beijing, where recent economic accomplishment, amongst other cultural factors, has facilitated musicians' desires to found and cultivate an underground scene fitting to such a bustling, thriving modern economy. This desire has been satisfied in Beijing in the form of the scene that has developed around the improviser and promoter Yan Jun and artists such as FM3, the former of whom runs an annual underground music festival called 'Mini Midi',³⁷ and also leads a famous series of improvised and experimental music weeklies, 'Waterland Kwanyin'.³⁸

The guerrilla nature of the underground persists in digital contexts, has even been invigorated by the new possibilities of trans-local communication, as will be demonstrated at length in subsequent chapters. The institutional and cultural richness of larger metropolitan centres such as Tokyo, Berlin, and London has led to the development of a strong backbone of underground musicians, many of whom have been able, by virtue of the platform developed in their own country and through the web, to connect across local boundaries with musicians and promoters from across the world. Gavin Prior's wonderful coinage 'To hell or to the internet', meanwhile, sums up the situation for many underground musicians from smaller

poverty alluded to above.

³⁶ Experimenta Festival, running since 1997 in the city, was the first sound art and experimental music festival in Latin America: <http://freeimprovisationexperimentalmusic.blogspot.co.uk/2009/12/sound-out-2010-festival-of-free.html>, accessed 3 June 2012.

³⁷ The following article outlines in brief the context of Mini Midi and of the Beijing underground scene more generally, as of 2010: <http://www.echinacities.com/wuhan/city-life/mini-midi-festival-brings-experimental-music-to-wuhan-this.html>, accessed 3 June 2012.

³⁸ The record label Subjam, headed up by Yan Jun, produce the nights: <http://www.subjam.org/archives/25>, accessed 28 May 2012.

musical centres.

The vitality of local underground scenes, as we have seen, depends on the relative health and wealth of the general culture in which the musical underground is enmeshed. Economic, cultural, and institutional factors are critical in facilitating the growth of underground scenes, but factors such as a socially liberal and (apparently) permissive government, and a thriving cultural scene more generally, are just as crucial in being able to make possible the development of an underground scene. The formation of a sort of guerrilla underground at the ‘edge’ of culture, antagonising it and redreaming its resources for obscure ends, requires both a desire to push that culture into unforeseen places *and*, in most cases, a stable and receptive mainstream media and institutional framework. The lesson of the Irish scene is that institutional backing is vital, but not inalienable, to the successful survival of local underground cultures. The exploitation of the web as a resource for promotion, production, and dissemination is perhaps an even more significant factor in that survival, as demonstrated particularly in the case of Prior.

Access to people, resources, and capital, and the context of a relatively permissive culture, have thus been vital (though in varying proportions) to the formation and development of underground music cultures. The enthusiasm of participants and practitioners, and the opportunities opened up by the web and the digital age more generally, have been equally decisive. These sorts of tensions and dynamics, considered more broadly within a framework of politics and political economy, are the core subject of Part II.

Part II –

The Political and

Cultural Underground

Chapter Four: Politics and Underground Music

The following chapter investigates notions of the interaction of politics and music, first in an abstract theoretical sense, and then in a more general fashion pertaining to the actual political contexts and then the specific political characteristics of the underground. The chapter deploys the kind of hermeneutical, intertextual approach discussed in Chapter Two, in this case emphasising a critical engagement with theoretical issues in the context of an interdisciplinary critical musicology, where I draw extensively on secondary sources, such as political and cultural theory, in order to frame the primary research subjects – the politics and political economy of the underground – of the subsequent three chapters, which develop these theoretical findings in a range of case studies. My observations here about the politics of underground music are meant to organise in one place tensions and allegiances that permeate both underground music and this thesis.

4.1 How Can Music be Political?

Music generally equates to politics only through contexts of interpretation and use. That is, because musical meaning is so heavily shaped by different forms of cultural mediation, from biography to criticism to literary discussion to affective modelling, gaining ‘objective’ access to musical sound for the purposes of determining straightforwardly referential political content is very difficult, if not impossible. The question of music’s politics is thus invariably answered with recourse to circumstance and context, though certain qualities – notably, for example, an explicit political engagement in the lyrics, or call and response musical structures – clearly increase the likelihood of music being aligned with some sort of political programme or perspective. Hence, although the character of music’s semiotic ‘affordances’ means that it is more or less suited to political appropriation, music generally becomes

political only *in its use*, within an articulatory frame provided by a critic, campaigner, or someone else. It is not generally a matter of sonic inscription, but critical ascription. This is the first of the three propositions I want to endorse in respect of the question of how music can be political. These propositions, taken together, are not fundamental to my own analysis of the politics of underground music, but they provide *crucial* framing devices for my discussion nonetheless.

This ascription of political content takes place across numerous levels. Sometimes musical works are ascribed political status because of the proclamations or behaviour of the artists. Sometimes music is ascribed such status because of the context, such as the band Queen's apparently non-political music becoming freighted with politics following their concert in apartheid era South Africa. At another level, the means of production and/or consumption shape political conceptions of the music, so that mass produced pop music is seen to reinforce capitalist markets, whilst smaller, independent chains of production are (rightly or wrongly) seen to be more politically oppositional, or at least to represent a less problematic form of political engagement. The ascription of political content to music has proved to be malleable and multiform.

The processes of ascription, theoretically speaking, can as easily cohere around sound as they do the types of actions and words attached to that sound that were just surveyed. It just so happens, due to music's polysemous, referentially ambiguous nature, that the most common line of interpretation proceeds in terms of actions, images, and words (attached to music or not), and not in terms of sounds. This amounts to proposition two of how music can be political.

Notwithstanding proposition two is the work of such writers as Adam Krims, Susan McClary, Robert Walser, Theodor Adorno, Steve Goodman, and Jacques Attali, all of whom attempt at some level to articulate sound in terms of political allegory or reference. Adorno, for example, interprets musical form and gesture in terms of the freedom or containment of an allegorical musical ‘subjectivity’;¹ Goodman constructs a ‘politics of frequency’² related to the use of extreme frequencies as methods of control; Krims, McClary, and Walser ‘read’ sound in terms of semiotic encoding, interpreting musical material referentially as, for example, articulating gendered or racial meanings;³ and Attali mixes this sort of semiotic approach (where music ‘heralds’, is ‘prophetic’⁴) with a more general discussion of how, for example, the Association for the Advancement of Coloured Musicians and the Jazz Composers’ Orchestra Association mobilised forms of collectivity in opposition to mainstream capitalism in the 1960s and beyond, through localised networks of self-organising musicians.⁵ The sorts of ‘politics of sound’ developed by these writers are much rarer than the dominant form of ascription based on actions, images, and words, but it has been an equally valid mode of interpretation of music in political terms as that dominant form. This amounts to proposition three.

¹ This approach is of particular significance in such Adorno essays as ‘The Aging of the New Music’, and in the book *Philosophy of Modern Music*: Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Aging of the New Music’, in intro. and commentary Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, *Essays on Music*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 181 – 202; *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Wesley V. Blomster and Anne G. Mitchell, New York, Continuum, 2004.

² In Matthew Fuller, ‘Beat Blasted Planet’, <http://www.spc.org/fuller/interviews/sonicwarfareinterview/>, accessed 2 March 2012.

³ Krims’ book *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, examines music from the artist Ice Cube in terms of its articulation of a notion of a ‘revolutionary identity’; Robert Walser analyses Public Enemy’s work in political terms in ‘Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy’, *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Spring - Summer, 1995), pp. 193-217; McClary seeks to show how, in her words, ‘many of the forms and conventional procedures of presumably value-free music are saturated with hidden patriarchal narratives, images, agendas’, Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p. 154.

⁴ Jacques Attali, trans. Brian Massumi, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Manchester University Press, 1985, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 138.

4.2 Political Contexts: Real Subsumption and Flexible Accumulation

With respect to the work of a number of political and cultural theorists, some of whose work is discussed below, I draw here on theories of ‘real subsumption’, which itself draws on the Marxian critical tradition, and ‘flexible accumulation’ and post-Fordism, which derive largely from David Harvey, as we will see. I start by discussing the general political context of the twenty-first century, the so-called ‘real subsumption’ of Marxism and ‘flexible accumulation’ of post-Fordist capitalism, before analysing the possibility of an *excess* to Marxian notions of subsumption, particularly as regards different notions of self-organisation. Underground music will be suggested as announcing a sense of that excess or escape. I move from there into a discussion of the underground’s specific political character.

The category of ‘subsumption’ – drawing on the term ‘subsumed’, meaning to absorb something in something else – is introduced by Marx in the unpublished (though later published as an appendix) sixth chapter⁶ to the first volume of *Capital*, to account for the way previously autonomous or exterior elements of work are absorbed, integrated into capital, more specifically into the wage-labour relation. *Formal* subsumption, according to Scott Eric Kaufman, ‘occurs when capitalists take command of labor processes that originate outside of or prior to the capital relation via the imposition of the wage’.⁷ In Marx’s own language; ‘The labour process is subsumed under capital (it is capital’s own process) and the capitalist enters the process as its conductor, its director; for him it is at the same time directly a process of the exploitation of alien labour’.⁸ By contrast, *real* subsumption occurs for Kaufman where ‘the

⁶ Karl Marx, ‘The Direct Production Process’, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/index.htm>, accessed 24 August 2011.

⁷ Scott Eric Kaufman, ‘What in the hell...is real subsumption?’, <http://whatinthehell.blogspot.com/2008/12/19/is-real-subsumption/>, accessed 25 August 2011.

⁸ Marx, ‘The Direct Production Process’.

labor process is internally reorganized to meet the dictates of capital’;⁹ for Marx, this is summed up, simply, as the arising of a ‘capitalist mode of production’.¹⁰ Formal subsumption occurs when, for example, manufacturing processes that would have existed before capital are arrogated to capitalism through the imposition of the wage-labour relation (and hence the imposition of Marxian surplus value). Real subsumption, by contrast, occurs when the actual processes of manufacture are absorbed into capitalism through, for example, the introduction of mechanised production processes.

Contemporary thinkers such as Hardt & Negri and Steven Shaviro expand the category of real subsumption from capital to society as a whole. In this understanding (in which the term ‘total’ is sometimes substituted for ‘real’¹¹), real subsumption corresponds to the oppressive, Kafkaesque ambience through which so many utterances and emotions in our lives are subsumed into capital in the form of affective/immaterial labour. To express emotion is often to participate in both the production and circulation of affective labour, as can be seen in the example of Facebook status updates, blog posts, Twitter comments, Tumblr forwards, and even word of mouth discussions of experiences of films; the individuals performing these actions receive no financial recompense, even though their ‘affective labour’ drives the profits of the large corporations and agglomerations who own these platforms and products, simply by increasing – even making possible – the user base and content archive of those platforms.

Old Marxist categories of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ transform here, and we see the emergence of the key Hardt & Negri concept of ‘Empire’; ‘Empire takes form when language

⁹ Kaufman, ‘What in the hell...is real subsumption?’.

¹⁰ Marx, ‘The Direct Production Process’.

¹¹ Eric Empson, ‘Subsumption’, <http://www.generation-online.org/c/csubsumption.htm>, accessed 11 February 2012.

and communication, or really when immaterial labour and cooperation, become the dominant productive force'.¹² The real subsumption of society under capital (as opposed to the Marxian real subsumption of *labour* under capital) is the context for Empire's emergence. Shaviro elaborates Hardt & Negri's theories;

What they are describing, under the rubric of biopolitics, affective labor, and the 'real subsumption' of all aspects of social existence – and indeed of 'life itself' – under capital, is a living nightmare, or a situation of unmitigated horror. For what it means is that we... are not just being exploited nine-to-five, but rather all the time, 24/7: in our leisure as well as our work, when we are not being paid as well as when we are being paid, indeed even when we are asleep. This is what it means for capital to appropriate general intellect, and to capture, commodify, and sell not only quantifiable goods and services, but also such impalpable things as atmospheres, feelings, ways of being, or forms of life.¹³

Shaviro outlines the specific terms of this 'real' subsumption, and lays out some of the features of our 'postmodern capitalist' world, in a review of Frederic Jameson's

Archaeologies of the Future:

Private enterprise, the free market, cutthroat competition and the survival of the fittest; vast and highly diversified transnational corporations; shopping as a form of sexual satisfaction; shady financial transactions zapping across the globe in fractions of a second; mortgages, student loans, and credit cards that can never be paid off; the proliferation of brand names, corporate logos, and celebrity endorsements; gated communities and suburban McMansions on the one hand, and immense shantytowns and slums on the other: These are the contours of the world we live in.¹⁴

Updating Marx, Hardt & Negri and Shaviro give us a vivid picture of the cultural-political contexts of the early twenty-first century. These contexts have been described by Manuel Castells as an 'information age'. The information age has resulted from such phenomena as globalised economic interdependence amongst apparently distinct nation states and the decentralisation and dematerialisation of labour processes and market dynamics. Castells'

¹² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 385 - 386.

¹³ Steven Shaviro, 'More on (or against) bio politics', <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=987>, accessed 25 August 2011.

¹⁴ Shaviro, 'A Desire Called Utopia', in *The Stranger*, December 15 – December 21, 2005.

information age ‘network society’¹⁵ is reliant on new digital communication technologies and produces new conceptions of political, economic, and individual value, such that even our most basic phenomenological categories, space and time, have collapsed in on themselves, being rendered anew as ‘timeless time and the space of flows’.¹⁶

Relating closely to the decentralisation and dematerialisation analysed by Castells is what has been called ‘flexible accumulation’.¹⁷ Flexible accumulation describes the post-Fordist situation of precarity, where the ‘regimes of accumulation’ (the way capital is accrued), not the modes of production (the dichotomy of owners and workers), of traditional Fordist capitalism have shifted from steady, salaried labour and centralised mass produced products, to part-time and temporary contracts with few rights or benefits, and outsourced, subcontracted, small batch and automated production lines and services, run by huge conglomerates. Privatisation and the collapse of the public sector have been other features of post-Fordist economies. Flexible accumulation ultimately sees an increasing bifurcation of society, where concentrations of capital and wealth are intensified, and day-to-day existence for the ‘precariat class’,¹⁸ amongst whom many of the artists discussed in this thesis count as members, becomes ever more financially strained.

Adam Krims describes many of these factors, with respect particularly to their impact on the continued relevance of Adorno’s model of cultural criticism, in his article ‘Marxist Music Analysis Without Adorno’.¹⁹ Krims flags up the central paradox of post-Fordism (from the perspective of Adorno): the ever-increasing *concentration* of wealth that capitalism facilitates

¹⁵ Manuel Castells, ‘Toward a sociology of the network society’, *Contemporary Sociology*, 29, p.695.

¹⁶ Castells, *The Rise Of The Network Society*, New York: Blackwell, 1996, p.423.

¹⁷ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, pp. 141 – 200.

¹⁸ Guy Standing, *The Precariat*, London: Bloomsbury, 2011.

¹⁹ Krims, ‘Marxist music Analysis without Adorno’, in Allan Moore ed. *Analysing Popular Music*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 131 – 157.

has not led in the context of flexible accumulation to a ‘standardisation’ of culture, but instead in the opposite direction, through the *deconcentration* of control that has taken place with outsourcing and dispersal of production, to a proliferation of music genres and audiences, to an unprecedented quantity of local scenes, ‘whose scale, in previous years, would not have attained economic viability’.²⁰

The range of these subaltern and minority ‘voices’ should not, cautions Krims, be viewed wholly in terms of a resistance to capitalism, since they *are a formation of capitalism* in the first place, directly enabled by the increased mobilisation of capital that has resulted from the deconcentration of control of flexible accumulation,²¹ although their potential to reveal or participate in some way in kinds of *discursive* liberation – for example in increasing the visibility of certain ethnic minorities, or offering an aesthetic vision/experience of new kinds of thought and sociality – should not be ignored. Theorist Ivor Southwood, meanwhile, articulates a view from ‘inside’ precarity:

The state of emergency seems to have been made permanent. Employers in the UK and elsewhere routinely impose competitive performance targets, use short term contracts and rely on casual agency labour, and workers accept these arrangements along with their effects: continual stress, disrupted workplace relations and irregular income... There is a sense of overwhelming precariousness, in work, in matters of money, and in culture generally.²²

So, taking these various views into account, I’ll offer some concluding observations about the situation. Shaviro’s words were written in 2005; since that time, with the world credit crisis and state-backed banks, collapsing markets, and pervasive ‘austerity’, the end of capitalism perversely seems further away than ever. Our subsumption into market economies and into consumerist ideology has only been precipitated by these developments, for they expose us to

²⁰ Ibid, p. 136.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 139 – 140.

²² Ivor Southwood, *Non-Stop Inertia*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2011, p.3 and p.7.

our utter failure, particularly at the state level, to consent to an alternative.

As I show below, contemporary underground music culture is beholden to this context of real subsumption and flexible accumulation as more explicitly capitalist practices are. Whilst it has always relied on the kinds of ‘small batch’ productions endemic to post-Fordism (and thus in this respect should not be seen to be in a causal relationship), and whilst, too, as argued below the sheer *size* of the underground’s local scenes mean that it is somewhat removed from subsumption, it participates directly in the mobilisations of capital just discussed, whilst also being immersed in the discourses of precarity. The case studies of Chapter Five and Chapter Seven illustrate the pervasiveness of precarity and the diminishing public sector as determinants in the context of the underground. I argue, in addition to these correlations between the underground and current socio-economic paradigms, that the underground might also be seen to be contributing to the development of an alternative to or re-articulation of the political context of real subsumption and flexible accumulation.

4.3. Excess and Alternatives: Escape from or Imprisonment by Capital?

If the story really is as one-sided as Shaviro, Hardt & Negri, and other political and cultural theorists of twenty-first century life would have it,²³ escaping from the ‘real subsumption of society under capital’ would be impossible. Whilst the transformations of work and culture wrought within post-Fordist contexts and described in terms of flexible accumulation seem undeniable, the veracity of theories of real subsumption seems to be a matter of interpretation.

²³ Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* articulates just this kind of perspective, for example; Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, Zero Books, 2009.

Philosopher and political scientist Jodi Dean views the situation negatively. Dean writes in *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*²⁴ and *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*²⁵ about how networked communication media undermine political activism by displacing activist energy, reducing it to the registration of opinion and the transmission of feelings within those media. Dean writes in her article, ‘Communicative Capitalism and the Foreclosure of Politics’, that

The proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite – the post-political formation of communicative capitalism.²⁶

Communicative capitalism, for Dean, is the condition in which the market-influenced capitalist ideology of choice and thus (false) democracy dominates:

The notion of communicative capitalism conceptualizes the commonplace idea that the market, today, is the site of democratic aspirations, indeed, the mechanism by which the will of the demos manifests itself.²⁷

Dean expands on this point,

The concept of communicative capitalism tries to capture this strange merging of democracy and capitalism. It does so by highlighting the way networked communications bring the two together...Instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence...the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world’s peoples.²⁸

Dean’s exploration of the way that ‘participatory’ media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter serve to capture resistance by transforming desire for change into an affect of Lacanian *jouissance* – where feedback is ‘captured’ by the ‘circuits of drive’, which circuits

²⁴ Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Polity Press, 2010.

²⁵ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*, Duke University Press, 2009.

²⁶ Jodi Dean, ‘Communicative Capitalism and the Foreclosure of Politics’, in *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 1, Issue 1.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

cause users' engagements with these media to devolve into an endless cycle of repetitive status updates and re-tweets – conveys something key about our experience of these media. Moreover, when Facebook, Twitter, and the rest are considered in terms of their corporate affiliation (with Facebook being a corporate behemoth in its own right, and YouTube, for example, being owned by Google), the efficacy of their use by left activists becomes even more problematic.

Striking a counter note, Dean picks up on the positive aspects of social media in a post on her own blog, I Cite, from June 2011. There, she explores the possibility that 'Tactical media, particularly Indymedia and outlets like Altnet and Dissident Voice but also potentially including a wide variety of artistic projects and experiments, is important in providing alternatives to mainstream media'. She also suggests that 'Participatory media is important as a critical practice against elitism...The more people participate in the production of content, the more they start to realize – through their very practice – the fundamental inequality and injustice of our contemporary arrangements'.²⁹ Dean ends the post by stressing the importance of emphasising 'the problem of unpaid net labor', where the many create profit for the few. And yet, ultimately, Dean strikes at least a cautious note of optimism:

Maybe, though, a combination of these experiments and consciousness-raising... could have effects. So my mistake would be in treating as settled a terrain of practice that is turbulent. The very platforms that suck up our data give us opportunities to connect and redeploy them.³⁰

Dean thus underscores two key tensions within the underground, with respect to its musicians' use of digital media; that media's ultimate ties to large corporations and the possibly exploitative relationship involved in artists increasing the profits of those

²⁹ Jodi Dean, 'On tactical media: fail again?', http://jdeanicate.typepad.com/i_cite/2011/06/on-tactical-media-fail-again.html, accessed 28 February 2012.

³⁰ Ibid.

corporations by posting their work on participatory media platforms for free, on the one hand, and the positive aspects of the relationship on the other, where tools of publicity, dissemination, and communication are made available to the (generally) impoverished underground musicians free of charge.

In a response to the accusation that by accepting real subsumption at the rhetorical level he himself is somehow aiding its advance, Steven Shaviro strikes a note of overwrought pessimism:

I do not share Gibson-Graham's happy vision of all sorts of wonderful utopian alternatives burgeoning under the surface of actually existing capitalism. If I instead present what seems like a totalizing picture, this is only to the extent that capitalism 'itself' — however multiple and without-identity it may actually be — involves an incessant drive towards totalization.³¹

This grim prognosis is leavened by a dash of hope, just as Dean's similar prognosis was, which is embodied in Shaviro's simple point that, 'No system of exploitation is ever total, just as no machine is ever one hundred per cent efficient. There is always some friction, some entropy, some dissipation of heat. In every process of transformation, some energy is lost. And this is true of capitalism as well'.³² Theorist Michael Strangelove echoes Shaviro, saying that 'Capitalism and its empire of mind constitute a system that substantially determines thought and action, but it is neither omnipotent nor eternal. In the Internet Age, resistance is not futile'.³³ Although being less concretely grounded than Dean's positive appraisals of the possibilities of using tactical media for productive ends, this drawing of attention to the natural limitations of all systems at least works as an effective counterblast to the doom and

³¹ Steven Shaviro, 'Post-Cinematic Affect Symposium', <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1006>, accessed 29 February 2012.

³² Steven Shaviro, 'Capitalism, Consumerism and Waste', <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=651>, accessed 29 February 2012.

³³ Michael Strangelove, *The Empire of Mind: Digital Piracy and the Anti-Capitalist Movement*, University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 231.

gloom of discourses around real subsumption. Shaviro even suggests that the realm of the aesthetic is one in which we might make contact with counter-hegemonic ideas and experiences:

The goal of complete subsumption is of course never entirely realized, precisely because accumulation can never come to an end. Also, we cannot see, feel, hear, or touch this project or process: in itself it is a version of what Ivakhiv calls ‘magic’. And to my mind, this makes the aesthetic a kind of counter-magic, a spell to force the monstrosity to reveal itself, an effort to make it visible, audible, and palpable.³⁴

Such aesthetic ‘counter-magic’ is apparent, I suggest and explain, in Chapter Eight in Noise music, and again, in Chapter Ten, in Extreme Metal. The term itself playfully positions capitalism’s awesome, terrible ineffable transcendence of the individual human and its allure to those individuals, too, in terms of a kind of sublime ‘magic’, and posits certain aesthetic forms as manifesting a kind of de-mystifying ‘counter’ magic or ‘spell’ to capital in their own deforming, undermining aesthetic procedures. This magic would work at the affective level, primarily, encouraging receiver’s to imagine new possibilities and new routes through convention, as well as working more intensely at the level of instinctual positionality and affect. This ‘counter-magic’ obviously exists in the realm of the suggestive and the intuitive, as opposed to the intellectual or the structural, and as such the resistances it might occasion would likely be small scale, local, and difficult to describe in precise terms. However, that is not to dismiss the powerful affective transformations that can take place as a result of such aesthetic counter-magic, in respect of which transformations I use the concept extensively throughout this thesis, particularly across Part III.

More directly, we will see across the case studies of the next two chapters some of the ways in which underground musicians have deployed participatory media and public funds more

³⁴ Shaviro, ‘Post-Cinematic Affect Symposium’.

generally, within a context of ‘co-determination’ and ‘re-articulation’. These sorts of struggles are not endemic to the musical underground, though, and as such, before moving on to underground music culture specifically, I will briefly consider self-organising frameworks in which counter- or trans-hegemonic philosophies of a sort related to practices ongoing within the underground are expressed.

4.3.1 Excess and Alternatives: Self-Organisation

Although obviously a music culture and a political philosophy are two distinct entities, the way that the former is organised, implicitly or explicitly, speaks of politics. As such, apparently politically emptied-out ‘anarchistic-ecological’ (see footnote thirty-six) philosophies such as the cybernetic theory of Buckminster Fuller, Steven Brand, Jay Wright Forrester, and others, or the free market of Reagan and Thatcher,³⁵ seem a comfortable fit for a decentralised, networked underground music culture, which after all operates in its various local and trans-local ‘scenes’ (seemingly) without much outside pressure from or association with large corporations and political organisations. But the correlation is not such a comfortable fit; the anarchist philosophies of the market³⁶ and of cybernetic theory are immanent. They seek to be organising principles and to achieve the status of ideological

³⁵Two models of organisation that have been posited as alternatives to top-down power. Both of these hold to the hypothesis that the fairest model of political organisation is one in which the influence of governing bodies is minimal and in which an ecological model of horizontal self-regulation is sought. The ‘free market’ ideology has been heavily shaped by the so-called ‘Reagonomic’ Anglo-American adoption and radicalisation of basically nineteenth century notions of economic liberalism, where the ‘invisible hand’ of the market ostensibly serves as market regulator. Cybernetic theory of the 1960s and 1970s entertained visions of a new model of social organisation, where authoritarianism and hierarchy would be replaced with an ecological notion of organisation governed by self-regulating processes of feedback loops. Both cybernetic theory and Reagonomics espouse decentralisation as a way of overcoming iniquity. And yet both conceal a fundamental truth about power: it doesn’t go away. In de-regulated contexts, power stays with those able to take bigger chances, make bigger gains, and influence the organisation of the system to favour their own ends. In the same respect, apparently anarchistic computing environments (such as the web) end up skewing to those able to control the system through prior knowledge and through the volume of their voices.

³⁶ It will be noticed that I am here yoking ‘anarchism’ with a modern day iteration of conservatism (neoliberal economics). The two dovetail in this important respect of being opposed to top down forms of power at least in the fiscal sense, and in providing a sort of self-sustaining ‘ecological’ model, but of course it should also be pointed out that anarchism and conservatism differ fundamentally in other respects, such as military policy, social issues, and notions of private property.

bedrock for whole political movements, and even nation states. Underground music culture features a more dispersed braiding of activity. Even if overriding ideologies can be read into the culture, its multiple discourses are more internally configured, smaller scale and local, than is neoliberal economic policy. As such, the fundamental principles, and attendant problems, of anarchist-ecological models do not obtain in the underground, even if some of the issues around the notion of a decentralised network affect its organisation.

Another kind of self-organising alternative exists to real subsumption, an alternative which might provide a more profitable comparative political framework for underground music culture. The organising principles of self-run artistic or commercial communities are based on a much more restricted, centralised, regulated, and localised sense of self-organisation than the Leviathan ecology of the anarchist-ecology models. These communities express a kind of independence from mainstream capitalism. Examples of such models of self-organisation are plenty, from the genuine local farmer's market to the network of artist-run spaces which exists in London. These latter include, for instance, Between Bridges, Hats Plus, and Auto Italia,³⁷ the latter of which is run by three artists (Kate Cooper, Amanda Dennis and Richard John Jones), and is currently housed in a temporary site on the Old Kent Road in South London. Auto Italia hosts,

talks, screenings, shoots, and (has) flexible studio space for projects whilst remaining a free resource, with no need to fulfil funding criteria or to sell work in order to operate. The first show in this new space - EPIC - was a cross section of 50 artists involved in this critical peer network examining the space as a future context for making work, and as a starting point for new networks.³⁸

Showing further critical engagement with the idea of an independent cultural network, Auto

³⁷The Institute of Contemporary Arts website hosts a directory of these local, artist-run ventures: <http://www.ica.org.uk/16697/Artistrun-spaces-London/autoitalia.html>, accessed 23 February 2012.

³⁸'Auto-Italia', <http://www.ica.org.uk/16697/Artistrun-spaces-London/autoitalia.html>, accessed 23 February 2012.

Italia ran a mini-festival entitled ‘We have our own idea of Time and Motion’ in August 2011. At this festival thinkers such as Mark Fisher engaged in debates over whether the organisational model pursued by Auto Italia, and by other art organisations and cultural movements, could go some way to providing an alternative to mainstream capitalism without getting caught up in the contradictions of real subsumption mentioned with respect to Dean above, where supposedly anti-capitalist activists or artists or arts organisations are forced to rely on the bandwidth and the technologies developed and administered by large corporate conglomerates, and in many cases even to rely on state funding for their existence. Most of the discussions were inconclusive on this point, but the sentiment was expressed repeatedly that even if we are caught in the bind of real subsumption, activists and artists should at least deploy the tools of that subsumption for what they see as worthwhile ends.

My taking of a farmer’s market and self-run art spaces as illustrative examples may seem somewhat arbitrary, but the point is merely to demonstrate the prevalence of such frameworks of self-organisation, to demonstrate the prevalence of these *political* frameworks which are more or less self-consciously political depending on the example. I mention these examples briefly here simply to introduce the point that, when scale is reduced and organisation centralised, the implied political philosophy of self-organisation becomes much less all-encompassing than it is in, for example, the cases of the free market or the anarchist-ecological movement. Thus, issues around power (which remains with the already-powerful in the anarchist-ecology examples) – notwithstanding the likely impossibility of full independence from capital (if it is so desired) – are transformed, and possible dissonances in apparently left-leaning movements between anti-capital values and capitalist-dependent practices are thus somewhat alleviated.

4.3.2 *Excess and Alternatives: Underground?*

It is a sense of an alternative to hegemonic capitalism at a localised level comparable to the art-run spaces just mentioned, which underground music culture articulates. It is not that underground culture is *necessarily* anti-capitalist: the point is that through its small networks of ‘anintermediated’ web-mediated activity (although the underground’s self-organising anintermediation, as pointed out, pre-dates the digital age), underground culture works, like the Association for the Advancement of Coloured Musicians and the Jazz Composers’ Orchestra in the Attali example, to distance itself from the workings of capital, even if it can’t avoid ultimately being implicated through subsumption in those workings.

In the review of Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* quoted above Shaviro remarks that ‘We are missing what Fredric Jameson terms “the desire called utopia”’;³⁹ underground culture does not posit such a desire, even if figures such as Mattin or Eddie Prévost explicitly engage the *topos* of utopia, but instead refracts the desire into a series of alternatives. Underground culture is comprised of a collection of nested structures existing within capitalism (i.e. within subsumption), either deriving funding directly from large state-affiliated organisations, such as arts foundations and councils, or making use of even larger, non-state-affiliated organisations’ technologies and tools (i.e. computers and other digital technologies). This ultimate subsumption is leavened by the fact that the underground ‘co-determines’⁴⁰ these funds within a critical perspective, whilst also, at a more pragmatic level, offering a local alternative to hegemony in its small networks of audiences, producers, and promoters.

³⁹ Shaviro, ‘A Desire Called Utopia’.

⁴⁰ A term derived from Mute Publishing Company, addressed in Chapter Seven. Mute state, ‘If the state has earmarked funds to keep alive its conceptions of citizenship and the public sphere, then there is scope for organisations to redirect these towards emergent alternatives’. The full quotation is in Chapter Seven.

4.4. Real but Partial Subsumption: The Political Character of Underground Music

So, whether it is explicitly politically minded or not, underground music outlines an alternative to capitalism in its anintermediated modes of production and circulation, whilst also offering aesthetic ‘counter-magic’ in its sounds: Underground music can be said in a sense to re-imagine the cognitive map of our consciousness through its organisation of sound, and thus to disarticulate our bonded relationship with the world of real subsumption and ‘no alternative’ capitalism. At the same time, its practitioners’ activities, whether these be in terms of financing their own lives and art, in running labels or magazines, or in putting on festivals or concerts, very often rely on institutional funding and capital of one kind or another, which they co-determine or ‘re-articulate’ through critical practice. This co-determination has another key function, besides the subversion of potentially pernicious governmental funding practices, in that it allows underground musicians to sidestep the commercial imperative, taking their work largely out of the strictures of the market and into an alliance with public sector funds instead.

These, then, are the three central dimensions of the underground’s political character: anintermediated alternatives to capital; aesthetic counter-magic; and co-determining of capital’s resources.

Concluding Thoughts

Underground music culture thrives, invariably, in wealthy and prosperous capitalist economies, such as Germany, the United States, Britain, and Japan. This prosperity seems crucial, since it provides concentrations of people, capital, and resources, but also because a stable mainstream arts culture and a permissive cultural attitude usually prevail in such

territories likewise (crucial aspects for underground formation, as discussed in Chapter Three). Hence, the general character of underground music culture's contestatory politics, which orientate around the three dimensions just mentioned, can be described in terms of a real, but partial (i.e. resistant in some way), subsumption. The underground exists within and invariably depends upon capitalism, whilst its resistance to capitalism plays out in the three respects just mentioned. The underground's parallels and conjunctions, meanwhile, with the kinds of precarious post-Fordist mentioned above will become clear throughout the next chapter.

Political tensions in the underground as these pertain to questions of economics orbit not only around how or why artists are paid for their work, earn/generate a living, and participate in wider capitalist structures, but also on how the digital economy is affecting that work and on how record labels approach the issue, and on how festivals or venues operate economically within the political framework of the underground. These are the areas I will explore through the case studies of the next three chapters, which investigate, particularly, the specific ways that musicians on the scene, festival programmers, and record labels have not only produced aesthetic challenges to dominant ideologies, but also embodied those challenges in the way they conduct their own artistic practices.

Chapter Five, The Politics and Culture of Underground Music:

Artists

In the following three chapters of case studies, which seek to anchor the general discussions of politics of Chapter Four in specific discourses and contexts of experience, I use primary research material derived from interviews and also draw somewhat on my own experience on the underground scene, all within a framework of critical analysis. The writing is socially-situated and the methodology systematic, although it does not strive to be comprehensive or scientific in the manner of some kinds of quantitative sociology. Within each case study I make use of my own interviews with four or five key underground figures, combined with evidence drawn from critical writings, interviews conducted by other writers, and the existing cultural-political literature. This approach is intended to offer a wide-ranging and coherent account of the politics and political economy of underground music culture.

5.1 Artists and Political Economy

I will start by outlining my general conception of the predominant economic situation of underground artists. I will then flesh this out with material on politics more generally and on political economy specifically, which is drawn from the interviews I have conducted and from secondary sources. Whilst the majority of the material included below focuses on the issue of political economy in underground musicians' lives, I also discuss politics in a more fluid sense, for example in the Prévost case study diverting in to politically-freighted discussions of the Free Improvisation scene.

I have found it instructive to draw up a general schema detailing the spectrum of underground

musicians' economic situations, derived from observation on the scene itself, acquaintance with many of its important figures, and primary and secondary research. The schema proceeds from, at the category one end of the scale, all or the bulk of artists' income deriving from musical activity, through to no or little income from musical activity in the case of category four, with categories two and three designating midpoints between these two polar categories, differentiated by the nature of the musicians' external sources of income. For clarity, the following table lists the four categories:

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1: All or bulk of income from musical activities.2. Musical income supplemented by secondary or tertiary artistic activities.3. Musical activity supplemented by public or private funds.4. Musical activity does not provide substantial income. |
|--|

Schema of Underground Musicians' Sources of Income

Category One) Only a very select few artists derive all or the bulk of their income from their activities as musicians, for example those with the highest of profiles, such as Merzbow or the members of Sunn O))), or alternatively artists whose music places them somewhat across generic and cultural boundaries. An example of the latter would be the Stoner Metal band Sleep, whose Drone Metal corresponds directly with the type of music made by Sunn O))) in the single track *Dopesmoker* album, but generally exists in a more lucrative cultural context.¹

Category Two) Many underground musicians at least supplement their income by engaging

¹ Sleep even signed to London Records, a subsidiary of Universal, in 1995 following the relative success of their *Sleep's Holy Mountain* album. Matt Pike and Al Cisneros of Sleep make a living from sales and royalties of the Sleep back catalogue, and from steady touring, and additionally in the case of Cisneros from his other band, Om.

in secondary and tertiary artistic practices, such as teaching or writing, as is the case with Irish Noise musician Paul Hegarty and the many other artists who also take up formal or informal academic positions of one kind or another, such as improviser Steve Beresford (who also writes a lot of sleeve notes) at the University of Westminster, or composer/improviser Jennifer Walshe at Brunel University. This practice of musicians taking academic posts is hardly unusual, since composers have held comfortable, tenured positions in academia for many decades. However, these kinds of positions are much less viable for underground musicians; Beresford and Walshe are exceptions that prove the rule, with the latter not even being directly assimilable to the underground, since her practice concentrates on notated work.

I discussed the issue with Beresford, whom I interviewed for this research, who agreed that his was a 'unique' position to be in as an improviser, 'particularly in Britain'. When I probed him on this, he said he wasn't sure how he ended up at Westminster, where he has been teaching since 1995, but remarked that 'it may have something to do with my training in music, my degree at York, and so on, but I really don't know'. Ultimately, Beresford told me, since he had taken the position he has been 'earning more money as a musician than ever before' (which he agreed is likely to do more with his growing experience and reputation than anything else), but that the money derived from teaching had nevertheless been crucial.

Other secondary or tertiary artistic activities include running record labels,² as is the case for example with Aaron Turner and Hydra Head Records, or Jim Jupp and Julian House with

² Although evidently money is far from the only reason these labels have been set up – Aaron Turner issued a statement in September 2012 about the loss-making status of Hydra Head, and its 'imminent demise': 'The Imminent Demise of Hydra Head Records', <http://hydraheadlines.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/the-imminent-demise-of-hydra-head.html?spref=tw>, accessed 23 September 2012. Besides this, many underground labels exist primarily as curatorial entities, as with Thurston Moore's Ecstatic Peace, or as devices of self-publicity, as with Prurient's Hospital Productions.

Ghost Box, or Hijokaidan's Jojo Hiroshige with Alchemy Records, or Britt and Amanda Brown with Not Not Fun, or John Olson and Aaron Dilloway of Wolf Eyes and American Tapes and Hanson Records respectively.³ Still other activities would be things such as designing instruments or music production suites and software programmes, as can be seen in the example of Robert Henke, who makes Minimal Techno under the name 'Monolake' and had a hand in designing Ableton Live, in Germany.

Category Three) Some underground musicians supplement the earnings they derive from performance with arts funding from local authorities, arts councils, or private foundations. This sort of funding is not available to all, being much more common in primarily non-underground scenes such as those of composition and Sound Art and, to a lesser extent, Free Improvisation, than it is in, for example, Noise or D.I.Y. or Extreme Metal. Before moving on to my fourth category, it will be worth digressing for a moment to discuss this funding situation in a little more detail.

The listing page for the British Arts Council's music rewards gives details of grants and funding to a range of organisations and groups, such as, for instance:

Britten Sinfonia, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, NMC Recordings, Inner City Music (Band on the Wall) and The Sage Gateshead... Birmingham Opera Company, Eye Music Trust, Africa Oyé, English Folk Song and Dance Society, Darbar Arts Culture Heritage Trust... Kapa Productions, Serious, Opera North, Punch, Music in the Round, Orchestras Live, The Opera Group and Welsh National Opera... Glyndebourne, the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Royal Opera House, Darbar Arts Culture Heritage Trust and Inner City Music (Band on the Wall).⁴

Whilst this list could be seen to accommodate the para-underground Sound Art and even the

³ Carlos Giffoni, a collaborator of the group, gives an idea of the context: 'Wolf Eyes. Those guys, they're not working; they don't have day jobs. But, you know, they have to be touring all the time and they have other avenues of making money, like with their own label and things like that—it's a lot of hard work.' In <http://darkforcesswing.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/in-full-no-fun-fests-carlos-giffoni.html>, accessed 23 April 2012.

⁴'Music', <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-artforms/music/>, accessed 30 March 2012.

underground form of Free Improvisation, it leaves less space, if indeed any at all, for underground forms such as Extreme Metal or DIY. Of course, the Arts Council is far from the sole source of funding available to musicians and curators, as we will see with the cases of the Paul Hamlyn and Genesis Foundations below, but the point is that a traditional notion of which sorts of musical forms and practices are entitled to funding still obtains in 2012, and it is a notion that generally excludes forms operating outside canonical notions of ‘art’ or ‘folk’ or ‘theatre/dance’ music. ‘Commercial’ musics have also been historically excluded from state funding, but the situation of relatively recently emerged non-commercial and yet non-canonical forms, such as those of the underground, is especially parlous, since they would generally benefit most from such support.

The statistics for the Arts Council group bursaries for the four funding cycles falling between the years of 2011 and 2015 inclusive, tell of the stark funding situation that currently obtains in Britain.⁵

The largest single grant goes to the Royal Opera House in London, which receives in the region of £26.35 million per funding cycle. The next largest is the Southbank Centre, at approx £20 million per cycle, followed by the Royal National Theatre at between £18.2 and £18.4 million, English National Opera at between £17 and £18.5 million, and the Royal Shakespeare Company at approx £16.5 million. Opera North receives around £10 million per funding cycle, and Welsh National Opera at between £6 and £6.8 million. In addition, six separate orchestras (London Symphony and Philharmonic, the Philharmonia, Bournemouth and City of Birmingham Symphonies, and the Liverpool Philharmonic’s Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society), each receive between £2 and £3 million per cycle.

⁵ The full statistics are available in the following *Guardian* article: ‘Arts Council funding: Get the full decisions list’, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/mar/30/arts-council-funding-decisions-list>, accessed 4 April 2012.

By comparison, Sound and Music, the only organisation on the list with a substantial affiliation with ventures that might reasonably be described as ‘underground’ (the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, which has programmed works by such figures as John Butcher, receives between £0.18 and £0.25 million per cycle), even if most of its resources must be used to support notated music, saw its funding cut from £1.2 million in 2011/2012, to around £0.7 million in the following cycles.

The statistics convey the point that the traditional ‘high’ art forms (opera, theatre, classical music) are in receipt of by far the most substantial amount of funding from the Arts Council. This situation is not unexpected, and in some respects is entirely natural. One of the defining characteristics of the underground is its figurative distance from the paternalistic models of patronage just discussed. We would not expect an organisation designed to protect and support underground artists to exist in the first place (‘underground’ being not only an aesthetic, but also a cultural, designation), let alone to appear on the list.

And yet, some underground artists are not necessarily averse to receiving funding, as we will see in some of the case studies below. Indeed, some organisations operating within the experimental, marginal realms of the underground, such as Arika, actively seek and receive it, albeit in proportionately (considering the comparatively marginal level of interest such activity receives) smaller amounts. A political opposition to arts funding coming from the radical left, that is, not in opposition to the principle of governmental arts funding but rather in opposition to affiliation with neo-liberal governments in themselves, does not define the underground, only some sections of it. As such, a greater underground presence in such lists as these, whilst being antithetical to some, would be welcomed by many involved in

underground music culture. As the situation currently stands, such a presence is improbable due to funding bodies such as the Arts Council's favouring of canonical cultural forms.

The situation in terms of federal funding for the arts in the United States is even more parlous than it is in Europe, with the expected consequences for underground musicians. Consistent attacks from the political right on the issue of arts funding, and specifically on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) throughout the 1980s and 1990s, led to the NEA dropping individual grants for artists in the mid-1990s.⁶ More generally, the NEA's appropriations budget has fallen significantly since the early-1990s,⁷ with the total peaking at \$175,954,680 in 1992, falling to \$97,627,600 in 2000, and to \$146,020,992 in 2012, which, according to the Bureau of Labour Statistics inflation calculator, is equivalent to just under \$90,000,000 in 1992 (although, at approximately \$101,000,000 in 2000, the last twelve years have at least seen a moderate improvement).⁸ The most significant fall was clearly between 1992 and 2000, with the 2000 figure being equivalent to \$79,000,000 in 1992.

Additional to this general dearth in American funding for the arts is the fact that, as with the British Arts Council, the remit of the NEA does not seem amenable to underground music culture. From its own rubric, the NEA states that it,

recognizes and supports a wide range of music, from classical to contemporary to

⁶ Although a small amount of individual grants still exist, with for example just under 1% of the total appropriations in 2010 going to individual grants; <http://culturalstrategies.org/arent-they-happier-that-way-artists-and-the-nea/>, accessed 23 April 2012. In terms of the wider context of the decision to drop the individual grants and to limit funding to the arts more generally, this *Time* article by Robert Hughes gives details of the 1990s attacks: 'Pulling The Fuse On Culture', in *Time*, Vol. 146, 7 August 1995. This *New York Times* article by William H. Honan describes Ronald Reagan's 1980s' attempts to scrap federal funding for the arts altogether: 'Book Discloses That Reagan Planned to Kill National Endowment for Arts', in *The New York Times*, May 15 1988.

⁷ Cynthia Koch's article 'The Contest for American Culture: A Leadership Case Study on The NEA and NEH Funding Crisis', fleshes out the context of this decline up to the year 1999; <http://www.upenn.edu/pnc/ptkoch.html>, accessed 23 April 2012.

⁸ http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm, accessed 23 April 2012.

America's indigenous jazz. It supports both performing ensembles and music presenting institutions including chamber music ensembles, choruses, early music programs, jazz ensembles, music festivals, and symphony orchestras.⁹

I examine the prominent American festival No Fun Fest as a case study in Chapter Seven, where this lack of public funding for the arts has a direct effect. Limitations of space mean that more localised state funding policies in America cannot be considered here, but the general emphasis on private benefactors as opposed to public funding obtains at that level likewise. I should also acknowledge that profitable consideration *could* be made with countries such as France or Italy, where underground artists are in strong evidence, regardless of the generous (France) or meagre (Italy) cultural funding policies of their country's respective governments.¹⁰ The funding situation in Ireland, meanwhile, as might be expected considering the country's historical and current hardships, is growing increasingly parlous, with public sector funding falling by over 25% since 2008, and arts organisations turning either to crowd sourced funds¹¹ or the private sector for financial support.¹²

I must briefly pause to acknowledge individual awards, in contrast to the group bursaries of the Arts Council. Such awards are uncommon in the underground, being more frequent in the case of interstitial underground figures, such as composers heavily involved in improvisation, or sound artists. For instance, composer and ensemble leader Ed Bennett relies on a part time teaching salary from Birmingham Conservatoire, but in late-2011 was awarded a Philip Leverhulme Trust Prize in Performing and Visual Arts. Bennett's prize is worth £70,000 over two to three years, which will allow him, as he told me in an interview conducted for this

⁹ From the NEA's own site; 'Music', <http://www.nea.gov/grants/apply/Music.html>, accessed 23 April 2012.

¹⁰ A BBC article from 2010 gives an interesting comparative overview of the funding situation in America, India, Italy, and France: Various, 'How the arts are funded outside the UK', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-11569883>, accessed 25 September 2012.

¹¹ Recent prominent 'Fund it' campaigns have been launched by Crash Ensemble, Fractal, and Julie Feeney.

¹² An *Irish Times* article gives a broad account of the decline of state arts funding, and the increasing importance of private funds: Suzanne Lynch, 'Should art groups jump at private funds?', in *Irish Times*, 24 September 2012.

research, ‘to develop work with his ensembles outside the usual constraints of commissions’. The prize will facilitate, according to Bennett, ‘more performances and more recordings and more work with improvisers’. Bennett’s receipt of the award, as a composer whose work overlaps with the underground, contrasts with more purely underground figures, who rarely receive such rewards. As Steve Beresford told me, ‘you’re much more likely to find that kind of thing in places like the Netherlands’. And yet, whilst these awards *are* relatively uncommon in the underground, as I have said, I examine cases in which they have been given in each of the case studies below. Such examples will demonstrate the willingness of underground figures to accept such awards, and also the willingness of various foundations to recognise, albeit only in a relatively isolated manner, work being done in the area.

Category Four) Many underground artists do not rely on their musical practice for the majority of their income.¹³ However, it is the case that the ‘careers’ of some underground musicians do follow a familiar dynamic: they begin by supporting themselves through supplementary work or through social welfare or other state means, but end up being able either to rely exclusively on private and public funds and income derived from their performances and so on, or to rely on these things at least to a substantial degree.

For political reasons, some underground musicians, such as Philip Best, deliberately separate out what they do as artists from questions of income. Others, such as the members of Wooden Shjips, prefer to maintain a broad independence between their musical lives and their economic existence, welcoming the degree of artistic flexibility such an arrangement

¹³ This is not necessarily especially unique amongst underground musicians. Mary Ann Clawson’s article ‘When Women Play The Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music’, in *Gender & Society* 1999 Vo. 13 No. 2, pp. 193 – 210 (p. 197 in particular), contains details about a certain demographic of Boston-based ‘alternative rock’ musicians, none of whom supported themselves through performing or recording, despite many of the interviewees being well known locally and touring ‘extensively’ throughout the United States and Europe. Clawson’s respondents worked at ‘a variety of day jobs’. Those respondents’ early career status, however, means that they may ultimately have reached a position of earning a living from music, it should be noted.

allows.¹⁴ Many underground musicians, of course, are forced to take ‘day jobs’ in order to secure some sort of financial security. Carlos Giffoni has had to maintain salaried employment since his move to New York in 2002, despite running perhaps the most prominent underground festival in the world, No Fun Fest.¹⁵ Jojo Hiroshige and his colleague in Hijokaidan, Toshiji Mikawa, both maintain day jobs of varying kinds as a way of financing their activities as underground musicians. Mikawa and his partner in the group Incapacitants, Fumio Kosakai, have in fact been restricted in terms of touring abroad because of their jobs; Mikawa is a bank employee and Kosakai works in a government office.¹⁶ Jonny Mugwump of Exotic Pylon, discussed briefly in Chapter Three, works full-time (in a compacted four-day cycle), as he told me, in the Admissions Office of Goldsmith’s University, whilst also being employed one night a week in the university’s library. Mugwump uses these library earnings ‘specifically for the costs of the label’. Others who do not earn their living primarily from music rely on social welfare and other means for income.

Most underground musicians, according to my schema, are thus required to supplement their activities by engaging in secondary or tertiary artistic activities (category two); or to make use of grants and funding from public or private bodies (category three), although these resources are restricted by musical style; or simply to use ‘day jobs’ or social welfare to finance their artistic practice (category four). Still others, though only a very select few, support themselves solely through their musical practice (category one).

As a way of illustrating some of these points I will now turn to interviews conducted with the musicians John Butcher, Vicky Langan, Eddie Prévost, and Mattin. The case studies of

¹⁴ The members of Wooden Shjips discuss these matters in a profile article on the group by José Carlos Santos in *Rock-A-Rolla*, Issue 33, Aug/Sep 2011, pp. 24 – 29.

¹⁵ Shteamer, ‘In Full: No Fun Fest’s Carlos Giffoni’.

¹⁶ ‘Profile’, <http://www.japanimprov.com/incapa/profile.html>, accessed 21 March 2012.

Chapter Six and Seven likewise hone in on these themes. These interviews and studies bring out aspects of all four categories of my schema.

5.1.1 John Butcher

I will start with John Butcher, a prominent improvising saxophonist and sometime composer who performs at international venues and at experimental music festivals of various kinds, from Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival to Unsound in Poland, whilst engaging in a variety of one-off installation/performance pieces, such as his 2006 performance and recording at the Oberhausen Gazometer in Germany, or his performance in the same year inside the Hamilton Mausoleum in Scotland. Butcher engages in these activities whilst also maintaining a steady and consistent performance schedule in and around London, where he plays with regular collaborators such as Evan Parker, John Edwards, Chris Burn, Gino Robair, Phil Minton, Tony Marsh, Phil Durrant, and a wide variety of other musicians.

The progression of Butcher's career reflects, at various points, different parts of my schema. Since 2000, his activity would broadly fit into my first category, that of musicians who fund themselves exclusively through music:

Since 2000 I've earned all of my income from music - either improvised or closely related. 90% from playing concerts. The other 10% comes from radio/performance royalties, occasional lecture/workshops, and very occasional commissions - like Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival [which commissioned a piece from Butcher in 2008].

Although this sort of lifestyle is difficult, as according to Butcher it 'necessitates a lot of travelling to where there are possibilities, and playing with a lot of different people', it nevertheless allows him a certain independence, artistic or otherwise. However, before 2000

the situation was rather different:

From the early 1980s to 2000 I also taught part time. Without this it would have been impossible to survive, playing this music. I taught saxophone at home and physics and maths at an A-level crammer. So there were 30 years of ‘underground’ work before the PHF Award came along.

So Butcher, before 2000, would fall into category two, those who supplement their activity through secondary or tertiary artistic activities. And yet, running across both of these periods (i.e. pre- and post-2000) have been elements of category three, the use of funding from private or public bodies, as referenced at the end of the previous quotation. Reflecting on the general situation of independence of underground musicians and improvisers, Butcher outlines the ways in which such individuals in fact often obliquely receive institutional support:

Currently this activity survives (for UK musicians, most of the time) almost entirely without institutional support. The odd concert at King’s Place notwithstanding. That said - I benefit from cultural support given to numerous European organisations, in the sense of being invited to play funded festivals, clubs, universities etc. Also, from the mid-80s for about 10 years, the Arts Council was quite helpful with small funds that made all the difference. There was an ‘improvised touring scheme’ - where you set up the concerts yourself and got a subsidy.

This type of small, fragmented funding was crucial to Butcher’s activities at the time:

It was very important for me. Meant I could invite some European players over to tour - develop the music and some valuable projects/relationships. Also my label (ACTA) got a few Arts Council grants back then - which was also vital, in the expensive days before CDs. The touring scheme got devolved to Jazz Services and the subsidy became pointless. They sent the last one I applied for back. And the London Musicians’ Collective was a valuable organisation before it got cut.

Butcher’s career in its earlier stages, before he was able to pursue music without the need for income supplements, relied on a variety of funding supports (in addition to his activities as a teacher), from small grants for tours or recordings from the Arts Council to the backing of an umbrella organisation such as the London Musicians’ Collective. These types of income supplements, though small and not sufficient in themselves to support Butcher’s activities as

a performer, nevertheless proved vital in allowing Butcher to pursue the marginalised, minority, underground music (Free Improvisation) in which he was interested (much more on the Improv scene in the Prévost study below), and which represented, for him, an ‘ideological’, not ‘genre’, choice:

I started out in the very do-it-yourself mode. Playing in hired rooms above pubs for years - or places like the Workers Music Association. Not having to fit into standard performance modes – whether to do with commercial or institutional weight – was vital. And I’m of an age to have got involved when improvising was an ideological choice - not a genre choice. (On the non-aesthetic side – it’s also very satisfying when you earn your money just from when people pay to hear you.)

So, as noted, from the year 2000 Butcher has been able to make a living as a musician, without the need to engage in other sorts of paid work. As also noted, however, during that time, as with the pre-2000 period of his career, Butcher has relied on occasional funding support in the form of things like commissions from funded festival.

In addition to these varying sources of income, in 2011 Butcher’s achievements as a musician were recognised by an award of £45,000 from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, which, in its own words, ‘is one of the larger independent grant-making foundations in the UK’. The Foundation prefers ‘to support work which others may find hard to fund, perhaps because it breaks new ground, is too risky or is unpopular’,¹⁷ and as such its choice of Butcher seems understandable, even if its previous roster of recipients¹⁸ does not feature any other figures who might be described as belonging in some way to the underground. Butcher’s award, though not isolated, proves something like the exception that proves the rule that even in the context of private funding, underground musicians lie far behind other comparably commercially marginal cultural forms. The heading ‘About the Composer’, on

¹⁷ ‘The Foundation’, <http://www.phf.org.uk/page.asp?id=1021>, accessed 23 March 2012.

¹⁸ Many of whom are viewable at ‘Recent Grants’, <http://www.phf.org.uk/page.asp?id=751>, accessed 25 September 2012.

the page of the Hamlyn website detailing Butcher's award, is a dead giveaway in this regard.¹⁹

Reflecting on the Hamlyn award, Butcher points out its distinctive character:

The Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award is unusual in that it's given for doing what you do. To only exaggerate a little: there's too much of people dreaming up ideas just to fit funding schemes, creating a world of subsidised activity with no real need for existence.

Butcher also underlines how important the award will be to his activities as a musician:

Anyway - I meant it when I wrote for their site that, 'Such generous support will significantly help me to continue to explore, without making compromises, the music I have been developing for the past 25 years. Numerous, previously precarious ideas and projects now become possible, and I particularly look forward to the ones I haven't even thought of yet'. It comes in 3 yearly chunks - and the main fruit this year is getting some new saxes. I've been playing the same ones for 25 years, and the numerous accidents (not unconnected to this itinerant life) they've suffered had taken their toll.

These quotations point towards the fact that many awards of this type do not, in fact, encourage total independence of artistic creation (entailing as they do fidelity to some sort of agreed-upon criteria for assessment), and nor do they allow independence from the state in the way that a private Foundation such as this one does.

With Butcher, we therefore witness a musician whose career has seen him variously satisfy different elements of my schema, from categories one to three. He has relied throughout his career on institutional support, in the early stages on a small scale and more recently in a more substantial sense, whilst progressing in the year 2000 from a musician who supplemented his artistic practice with teaching work of different kinds and the

¹⁹ 'John Butcher', <http://www.phf.org.uk/artists/artist.asp?id=1500&sid=1>, accessed 25 September 2012.

aforementioned institutional support, to someone who was able to support himself primarily through performances, recordings, and commissions. With this case study we witness the importance of state funding to underground musicians, particularly in the early stages of their careers, whilst also glimpsing the possibilities of a rare, though obviously very welcome, award from a private foundation.

5.1.2 Vicky Langan and Black Sun

Vicky Langan is a Noise musician and performance artist based in County Cork in Ireland, who operates musically under the name Wölflinge, and who has collaborated with Paul Hegarty under the name La Société des Amis du Crime and also with artists such as United Bible Studies and Maximilian Le Cain. As a curator, Langan runs the Black Sun ‘outer limits/weirdo music and experimental film’²⁰ events at Triskel Arts Centre in Cork, an ongoing series since 2009 which has seen artists such as John Weise, Blood Stereo, members of Smegma, and Steve McCaffery, amongst many others, performing in Cork. Additionally, since 2011 Langan has been the co-curator, alongside founder Fergal Gaynor, of The Avant, an annual festival of experimental and progressive arts, which began in 2009 following a suggestion from UbuWeb founder Kenneth Goldsmith to Gaynor that he combine two previous festivals, the Quiet Music Festival and SoundEye. Langan’s diverse underground activities have also seen her spend time (2003 – 2007) as a DJ on web-based underground stations Freak FM and CCRfm.

Langan’s prolific activities as a musician, curator, and DJ have been accomplished without substantial supplement from other work, artistic or otherwise, or through the support of arts

²⁰ ‘Black Sun’, <http://www.vickylangan.com/black-sun/>., accessed 30 March 2012.

grants or bursaries. She therefore falls into my fourth category, those musicians for whom artistic and musical practices do not represent the primary source of income.

Langan began performing as a Noise artist under her own name in 2004, whilst studying towards a BMus degree from University College Cork. Langan was unable to complete the degree due to financial problems, although around this time, in 2007, she expanded the range of her activities as a performing musician, adopting the Wölflinge name in 2008, and playing twenty-four concerts in 2009, following a previous annual peak of thirteen concerts in 2005.²¹ 2009, as stated, was also the year in which Black Sun was instigated. Both Black Sun and The Avant are ongoing concerns as of August 2012, whilst Langan's fairly busy performance schedule shows no signs of abatement; Langan performed seven concerts between March and May 2012 inclusive, for example, including a support slot with Lydia Lunch.²²

Throughout the period since she dropped out of university, Langan has been raising a child. Although she derives some financial recompense from her musical activities, much of her income comes from personal resources and social welfare. As noted, Langan thus fits into my fourth category of musicians, those who do not rely on arts funding or revenue from their musical and artistic practice. Langan, for her part, relies on a degree of state support in the form of social welfare. Additionally, as we will see below, *some* of Langan's activities as a musician and curator now enjoy a degree of state funding.

In a less personal sense, Langan described to me the process of putting together Black Sun events, touching on their lack of institutional support, and on the financial hardships that

²¹ 'Performance History', <http://www.vickylangan.com/performance-history/>, accessed 30 March 2012.

²² Ibid.

esoteric and marginal²³ events such as Black Sun must face:

We get no funding at all. I book the flights on my partners' credit card and push and push and push with PR in the hopes of convincing 60+ people that coming to the show will shake their minds.

Langan expands on the point, emphasising the personal costs of putting on the concerts:

It's such a struggle. If we break even then I can afford to throw Max [Le Cain] money for obtaining the rights to screen the experimental films. I end up paying for cabs, food and hospitality out of my own money. It's so unsustainable that it's impossible to continue like this. That's why I'm not doing shows at the moment.²⁴ There's so much I want to programme but I can't even afford to buy my kid a new coat!

Langan also told me about not being able to buy new cables or equipment since '2007' due to financial constraints. Additionally, although small commissions and paid performances of various kinds are regular for an artist of her repute, they rarely pay more than what Langan describes as 'transport, food and accommodation costs'. She cited examples of commissions from Drogheda Arts Festival and Galway Arts Centre in this regard. Whilst a 2011 commission for a performance art sound piece from the National Sculpture Factory brought in a degree of financial recompense in the form of what Langan describes as a 'proper' fee, this has been, unfortunately, the exception.

Although the Black Sun events were successful in the sense of putting on concerts from vitally interesting artists who would otherwise likely not have performed in Ireland, they clearly take their toll financially on Langan. With her move into co-curation of the Avant, however, Langan has begun to be able to reap some sort of financial reward, at least in the

²³ I describe the event as 'esoteric' and 'marginal' because of the aesthetically extreme nature of the music and films it programmes, but it should also be noted that Black Sun has received much attention in Ireland's cultural presses, even gaining national exposure in a number of articles either on the Cork underground scene, or in which mention is made of Langan and the event: for example, <http://corkindependent.com/stories/item/8206/2012-13/Black-Sun-rises-again>, accessed 30 March 2012; Aoife Barry, 'Cork Unplugged' in *The Irish Times*, 10 October 2010.

²⁴ The interview was conducted in September 2011, during which time Black Sun was undergoing a lull in activity. It happily re-commenced in March 2012.

sense of being able to work within a funded context.

I'm just emerging from a DIY place to a place where arts festivals are giving me a budget to programme for them, so I'm moving towards funding through my own hard work. I'm lucky that funded people have asked me to piggyback their fests because they like what I do. Black Sun was always about driving towards being a funded annual festival. I just wanted to build a track record on my own terms first!

In this progression from minor, independent, financially insolvent activity, into part-funded curation, Langan's career reflects that of Butcher, who, similarly, moved from independence to some degree of state cultural support. Langan's relative lack of financial gain, in terms of her musical practices, still places her comfortably into category four, however. And it is not necessarily a category in which she wants to stay, lamenting to me as she did the many interesting creative projects in which she would engage if she had the means. Currently, although she is moving in her curatorial practice towards some model of funding support, Langan still clearly finds it profoundly difficult to put on such interesting and challenging (in every sense of the term) events as Black Sun, without much in the way of financial reward accruing to her or the event. Such privation corresponds directly with the pressure within a context of real subsumption to 'marketise' one's practice (something which underground musicians are clearly ill-equipped to do), whilst more fundamentally highlighting the burden of the 'precarious' living of post-Fordist capitalism, a precarity that is unfortunately endemic in cultures such as that of the marginal underground.

This indeed has been a constant complaint from musicians to whom I have spoken as part of this research. Many are happy putting on festivals and concerts, as long as those events break even and thus possibly generate the possibility of further events of their kind – substantial profit is usually both in short supply and also not necessarily the point in this context, the underground after all being one of the last place artists 'go' to make money – but the struggle

against mainstream demands for artistic compliance and easily digested culture is rarely enjoyed by artists and curators who believe that what they do merits a wider audience.

I spoke in Chapter Four about the ‘aesthetic’ allure and appeal of the marginal character of the underground, and this point holds, but within this marginality the cultivation of small but sufficient audiences is still obviously very important, both for the sense of constructing an actual scene of some sort, and also for the rather more basic practical fact of introducing a degree of ‘capital’ into those scenes, which would facilitate their continued existence. A point worth mentioning in this regard, before I move on, is the fact that Langan, like Butcher, sees no contradiction in securing some degree of public or private support for her musical and curatorial activities. As with many others in the underground, explicit political concern for creative and economic independence is less important here than is the search for a degree of *artistic* integrity, over and above questions of political economy. Butcher and Langan thus do not perceive a tension between receiving private or public funding on the one hand, and their activity as underground musicians on the other. The following case studies provide interesting contrasts to this attitude, without necessarily rejecting it wholesale.

5.1.3.1 Eddie Prévost: Free Improvisation and AMM

This third case study relates to my first, John Butcher, in terms of musical style, but significantly differs from him in scope of activity, length of career, and intensity of engagement with theory and politics. The differences between my subject, percussionist and drummer Eddie Prévost, and young Noise musician and curator Langan are both more numerous and more obvious. It is hoped that the differences and the symmetries between each of my case studies will support my goal for this section, which is as stated to build up a

wide-ranging sense of the political economy and political contexts of underground musicians' lives.

Whilst the subject in this first part of this case study (which is divided in two) is to a large degree Prévost, I also want to expand the frame of the Butcher and Langan examples to incorporate some discussion of Prévost's and others' musical practice as improvisers. This is done due to the fact the politics of Free Improvisation are writ as large *in the music itself* as they are in the structures that exist around it, particularly so with regards to a politically-conscious performer as Prévost. So, material is also included in the first part from my interviews with Steve Beresford and Jennifer Walshe, as a way of fleshing out Prévost's politically-informed accounts of the Improv scene, and as a way of giving an account of that scene and that music's political underpinnings. This is done, as I have said, due to the fact that Improv's political underpinning is a central factor playing into the way that musicians earn money on the one hand, and conceptualise the structures in which their practice is embedded on the other.

Prévost is a founding (and the only surviving original) member of the influential improvised music group AMM, and theorist of the political and social dimensions of improvised music, in books and publications such as *No Sound is Innocent*²⁵ and *The First Concert — An Adaptive Appraisal of a Meta Music*.²⁶ Prévost owns the Improv label Matchless Recordings, and has remained active as a performer both as a member of AMM, and in regular collaboration with such significant underground musicians as Mattin, Jim O'Rourke, Evan Parker, John Edwards, Max Eastley, and many others.

²⁵ Eddie Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, London, Copula, 1996.

²⁶ Eddie Prévost, *The First Concert — An Adaptive Appraisal of a Meta Music*, London, Copula, 2011.

Prévost has a deep investment in improvised music as a form uniquely placed to facilitate the formation of new musicalities, socialities, and communities, both through the material relations of the scene itself – through its apparent egalitarian and democratic nature, and its location in informal and cheaply accessed venues – and in the significances of improvised sounds themselves, significances which arise from the audience’s awareness and thus perception of the music as being formally undetermined and non-hierarchically distributed.

These impressions of Free Improvisation as orbiting centrally around a notion of inclusive, democratic principles, enacted through sound or the self-organising communities of performers and players (or both), is a commonly held one. As Jennifer Walshe, whom I interviewed for this research, told me when speaking on the sense of small-scene, DIY, self-organised community practices dominant on the Free Improv scene,

This is why I love improvisation - the entire community is built around a practice of getting together and playing. It's about finding the sound, and I've seen a level of dedication from free improvisers that is outstanding. The improvisers I work most closely with at the moment – Tony Conrad, Panos Ghikas, also Tomomi Adachi – the way we play evolved out of hours and hours of playing together in each other’s houses. There was no funding, no grant applications, no commissions. It was just musicians getting in a room every week to play.

Steve Beresford, similarly, spoke warmly about the supportive mutual relations of the London scene, in particular drawing attention to the range of tiny and incongruous venues that undergird the scene, the former including rooms above pubs with ‘mildly supportive landlords’, and the latter, for example, Old Chomeley’s Boys’ Club, where the caretaker ‘would always half forget who you were’. Beresford also spoke favourably about Café Oto and the (now closed, due to the vicissitude of selling to a disinterested businessman) Red Rose, where he and other prominent Improv players performed ‘for over twenty years’.

Beresford’s emphasis through all of this was the ease and cheapness of access to the venues,

and the ‘democratic’ nature of how they were run. For Beresford, this emphasis on democracy and equality (although he suggested that, for him, the political programme of Improv would be more ‘implicit’ than explicit), as opposed to commerce and single personalities, relates to a modeling of the same in the music itself. For Beresford, Improv, at its best, ‘should be organised along democratic lines’, with ‘a democratisation of the roles of the instruments’, for example, where ‘a hi-hat and a piano can be on an equal footing’.

Eddie Prévost widely endorses these community-based, self-organised aspects of Improv, whilst also developing the point in more theoretical dimensions pertaining to the organisations of the sounds themselves. In *No Sound is Innocent*, Prévost discusses Improvisation as a form in which new musical and, by homologous correspondence, social relations are both proposed and experienced. He remarks in his introduction that ‘in art we make the world’, speaking of improvisation as being like making music for the first time, without specific goals or objectives:

An improvisation has no perfect form to which it can aspire. If a commensurate sense of perfection exists for a free improv, then it is in the clarity of musical perception and execution...for the musician it is like being in the eye of a storm, a subtle stillness within a maelstrom- an assured presence of mind at the point of playing.²⁷

These kinds of sentiments, again, were echoed by Beresford, who admiringly cited John Stevens’ idea that Improvisation is ‘another little life’. Prévost more generally asserts in *No Sound* that improvised music should represent an experiential instance of self-invention where the potential marketability of the music is irrelevant, and where the intensity of players engaging with each other in-the-moment, as it were, is paramount. Such ideas around music as being about more than just sound were expressed again in Prévost’s 2011 publication *The First Concert — An Adaptive Appraisal of a Meta Music*, in which Prévost reflects on

²⁷ Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, pp. 1 -3.

music's capacity to drive cognitive and cultural evolution. Similarly, Prévost states in the introduction to his workshop series of improvisations, that within the workshop performances the musicians involved are 'urged to try and search without specific objectives and even without hope or expectation of finding anything'.²⁸ Musical performance is here conceived as a spontaneous site of creation and self-personification, in which musicians' expressive capacities should not be trammled by market dictates or by overly-burdensome musical expectations or conventions. Musical decisions are understood by Prévost to be significant of wider claims around identity, politics, and sociality.

But it is not just in the realm of abstract theory that Prévost's endorsements of a notion of improvisation as political allegory and as a form of political practice can be felt; Prévost has been exploring these same tensions between sound and significance in his musical practice for almost fifty years.

AMM began in 1965 as a quintet featuring Prévost, Keith Rowe, Lawrence Sheaff, and Lou Gare, with such experimental music figures as Christopher Hoobs, Cornelius Cardew, and Christian Wolff joining them for temporary spells in subsequent years; Wolff joined for a year in 1968, Cardew performed with the group between 1966 and 1973, and Hobbs did the same between 1968 and 1971. John Tilbury joined the group in 1980, and is currently the sole core member alongside Prévost.

AMM questioned through their music various boundaries, from that between music and noise, to that between art and life, to that between Jazz and Free Improvisation. Such exploratory playing can be heard throughout their album *Ammmusic*²⁹ from 1966. The album

²⁸ Prévost, <http://workshopseries.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 6 April 2012.

²⁹ AMM, *AMMMusic 1966* (1989), ReR Megacorp, ReR AMMMCD.

displays a radical openness to the noise of metallic scraping and contact mics, to the uniqueness of the undetermined and emergent musical form, and to the melding or erasure of individual personalities. In this ‘erasure’ of individual personalities by a subsuming musical texture, AMM’s exploration of ‘laminar’ Improv, as opposed to the jagged, gestural, ‘atomic’ playing of Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, and others, is exemplified. This ‘laminar’ approach was taken up and developed in what I would call the ‘post-laminar’ approach of the recent Japanese Onkyo improvisers, groups such as Polwechsel, and musicians such as Rhodri Davies and John Butcher, where we find, alongside the timbral and performative extensions of AMM, a new openness to technological resources, a wider range of musical reference points, discreet, even tranquil performances, and almost ambient textures.

The melding or erasure mentioned above results both from the volatile fluctuations in form and gesture in AMM’s music – fluctuations that render attempts to personify the sound in terms of discrete competing personalities extremely difficult – and also from the musicians’ denaturing of their instruments’ ‘natural’ sonic palettes through the use of contact mics and other unorthodox techniques of sound production. Such denaturing makes it hard, again, to tie sounds to particular instruments and thus to particular musicians – I would call this effect of laminar Improv a ‘blurring focalisation’,³⁰ out of dereference to its Austen-like subversion of normal ways of ‘tagging’ speech, and its consequent undermining of the ordering of discourse in a personified and discrete, hierarchised manner. The emphasis in this laminar (as with the post-laminar examples) music is therefore less on individual artistic expression either as a compositional pre-arbiter or as a dominant ‘voice’ within the sound, and more on mutually co-operative sonic communalities which model egalitarian, albeit dialectically egalitarian, social relations.

³⁰ In Gérard Genette’s literary theory, ‘focalisation’ is the articulation of the different perspectives (for example, internal or external; an omniscient narrator equates to zero focalisation) through which a narrative is presented: ‘4’, *Mood*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, pp. 161 - 211.

The openness of AMM's music to these various liberatory signifiers reflects Prévost's personal advocacy of communal collaboration and 'emergent' (i.e. non pre-determined) musical forms. That advocacy is likewise reflected in Prévost's aforementioned weekly improvisation workshops, which he has run in London since the year 1999.³¹ The workshops invariably involve a range of between six and twenty amateur and professional players, who meet to discuss improvisation theory under the guidance of Prévost, or, if he is absent, under that of another experienced participant, such as Ross Lambert. The players collaborate in a series of small group performances, before joining for a climactic group performance. The workshops have been complemented since February 2009 by a monthly concert event at Café Oto, entitled 'The Workshop Series'.

For Prévost, then, music, particularly the performance event, which he privileges as a unique site within musical discourse, is a place of contention where identities are fought over, territories gained or recovered, and politics of one kind or another are immanent. That sense of politics as saturating musical discourse, as being apparent both in the significance(s) for the audience of the notes themselves as much as it is in the material relations of capital and bodies and spaces and instruments which precede, make possible, and accompany those notes, means that Prévost is an ideal case study in this context. His theoretical sense of the political as a fundamental, inalienable force within musical culture intersects well with my own concern to articulate that same sense as regards underground music specifically.

³¹ Writer John Eyles gives an account of a 2010 workshop in the following piece: <http://letsdanceaboutarchitecture.blogspot.co.uk/2010/04/eddie-prevosts-workshop-part-2-modus.html>, accessed 5 April 2012. Prévost himself writes about the theory underlying the workshops, and about their history, in the following: <http://workshopseries.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 6 April 2012.

5.1.3.2 Eddie Prévost: Political Economy and Mattin

The rest of this case study covers similar thematic areas as the preceding two, namely, the subject's economic status and the political aspects of that status. However, considering Prévost's theoretical sensibility and political convictions, I spend more time in this part of the study on cultural and political contexts and theories, just I did on musical discussion in the first part, than I did in the preceding two studies.

The second part of this study, accordingly, overlaps with the fourth case study, which focuses on the Noise musician Mattin. Mattin is a Basque artist working in Noise and Improvisation, who performs solo, in collaboration with a range of underground artists, from Matthew Bower to Philip Best to Junko from Hijokaidan, and as part of the politically-driven hardcore punk group Billy Bao. His work, in his own words, 'seeks to address the social and economic structures of experimental music production through live performance, recordings and writing'.³² I include material concerning Mattin which is drawn both from my own interview with him and also from his own published writings. Mattin is a figure with comparable but diverging political sensitivities and convictions to Prévost, and as such Mattin's reflections on the political economy of underground music are adjudged to be highly pertinent to Prévost's perspective on similar topics, and will thus be introduced within the remaining sections of the Prévost case study. I move into the Mattin study more discretely following these synthesising passages.

Much of the context for the rest of my questions to Prévost was the following quotation from Mattin, a quotation which is especially pertinent here, since it alludes to the former AMM

³² 'Biography', <http://www.mattin.org/recordings/biography.html>, accessed 23 April 2012.

bandmate of Prévost's, Rowe: 'In conversations with Keith Rowe (ex-AMM) and Philip Best (ex-Whitehouse, Consumer Electronics), they agree that one should not make a living out of making this kind of music because the music is compromised if you do'.³³

In our interview Prévost expanded on this point, particularly with regards to his own political convictions and to how he sees his activities as a musician supporting or undermining those convictions:

I do not see the logic of the assertion that making a living from playing improvised music 'necessarily' compromises the music. If the commissioner of work (e.g. concert organiser, curator etc.) finds that improvised music meets the appropriate criteria, then there is some kind of aesthetic match.

For Prévost, then, in contradistinction to Rowe, Mattin, and Best, remuneration does not 'necessarily' involve artistic compromise. If the goals of the promoter and of the musician are in alignment, then Prévost does not detect any contradiction or ethical/artistic compromise in accepting payment for performance. Beresford, too, takes this line, saying that he 'doesn't see the problem' in earning money or receiving public or private funding, although he was also quick to emphasise that such funding is rare in the scene (whilst applauding the sums received by John Butcher, Café Oto's Hamish Dunbar [see Chapter Seven], and also the success of Christian Marclay), suggesting that 'it's more likely to happen in other countries than in the UK'. As noted, Beresford mentioned the Netherlands in this regard. In fact, he drew attention to the infighting that an influx of money caused on the experimental and Improv scenes there, where 'half of the musicians wanted to kill the other half'. With the advance of a right-leaning government in that country, in any case, such money has largely disappeared, as Beresford pointed out.

³³ Mattin, 'Anti-Copyright', from *Noise and Capitalism*, but also available from Mattin's website: <http://mattin.org/essays/Mattin-ANTI-COPYRIGHT.html>, accessed 25 April 2012.

Whilst Prévost rejects the idea that getting paid or receiving funding is automatically compromised, he was also keen to point out that the amenability of such an arrangement is vulnerable to compromise, vulnerable to the commercial imperative and to the profit-motive:

The problems arise for an improvising musician when the commissioner/market place decides it wants something else which excludes the artistic output of such musicians. This is why (surely?) improvised music has over the years resorted to self-promotion and co-operative ventures. These are the only secure ways to maintain an (albeit limited) public platform. As important, these initiatives provide space sympathetic to the kind of discourse the improvising community wishes to engage. Of course, if the improvising musician has acquired a taste for (or has become materially dependent upon) the 'better paid' gigs and higher cultural status of state/business subsidised events, then they almost inevitably will have to tailor their output to meet the changing whims and fashion of the art market place. Or, keep quiet about their ideological hopes.

The pervasiveness of compromises between art and commerce, in Prévost's eyes, has meant that it has been necessary for the ideological ambitions of what he describes as the 'improvising community' to be realised within frameworks of self-promotion and co-operation. Improvisers have avoided the risks of compromise inherent in accepting outside funding, in favour of community-run performing spaces and ventures. Such self-promoting and co-operative frameworks are visible in London, for example, in the highly localised, self- or independently-run performance spaces of Prévost's workshops, the monthly improvisation night Boat'ting, and the jazz and improvised music venue The Vortex – in addition to the venues mentioned above by Beresford. These venues/events' relative independence from subsidy or corporate influence – the Vortex, for example, is volunteer-led and not-for-profit, and is 'not in receipt of any regular source of public funding', surviving 'by keeping its costs as low as possible and sourcing individual grants and donations where available'³⁴ – makes them potential exemplars of just the kind of uncontaminated-by-the-fashions-of-the-marketplace ideological paradigm that Prévost asserts on behalf of the improvising musician.

³⁴ 'The Vortex Jazz Club', <http://www.vortexjazz.co.uk/about-the-vortex.html>, accessed 25 September 2012.

Mattin has likewise addressed notions of DIY performance spaces and small, self-organised networks. He relates the danger of artistic compromise to the idea that the end goal of the distribution of underground music is not profit, but rather the fundamental questioning of the parameters of action. The music does not aim for profit, according to Mattin, both for the sorts of ideological reasons just discussed, and also, more pointedly, as a result of the more straightforward fact that the music is simply too marginal a commercial entity ever to be able to generate much in the way of profit in the first place:

The distribution of this kind of music is not based in getting profit out of it. Whilst there might be a few people making some money out of it, I would say that most of the musicians, labels and concert organisers' interest behind what they do is to get the work across in small, self-organised and informal networks...Improvisation and noise usually try to question the parameters in which one can act, using instruments in unconventional ways, finding venues for playing in strange and difficult spaces, adapting to these particularities, and finding different methods of distribution...it creates exactly the kind of network that Kleiner's critique [of the separation between those who own and make money out of the means of production, and those who generate capital for the owners through the making of artistic, or otherwise, 'material'] does not apply to,³⁵ it is just too small.³⁶

When I asked him in our interview to expand on the notion of there being a compromise in making a living out of this kind of music, Mattin clarified his point by questioning the basis of the definition of 'work' and 'play':

A question arises. Should we see what we do as work? I would suggest that the making of improvised music has more to do with situationist notions of play (ludic desire and instability) than it does work (which is more fixed in its productivity).

Mattin thus reframes the question of a compromise by suggesting that the contradiction does not lie in making a living out of the music, but rather in defining the music as 'work'. Mattin

³⁵ Mattin goes on in *Anti-Copyright* to clarify the point: 'Kleiner's argument does not work for the kind of music that we are talking about it. This music has only very small repercussions in the mainstream media and few companies or corporations are making any profit out of it'.

³⁶ Mattin, 'Anti-Copyright'.

addressed the contradiction more directly at another point in our interview:

I don't have much of a problem in getting paid for concerts or workshops, especially if one is asked to do things or to discuss things that you would not be asked to do if you were cleaning dishes or working in a factory. (By no means do I want to say that there is something more radical or politically effective in what one does in a concert situation or in a workshop, than in what one might do in a factory; in fact the urgency from a factory might be much more powerful than whatever we might be talking about.) Every situation requires certain forms of compromise; these might be physical, social, economic... You cannot just break away from everything out of the blue. We are embedded under certain conditions, and you try to push these conditions a bit further.

Mattin's apparent endorsement of Best and Rowe's notion of a contradiction must therefore be seen as partial at best; Mattin does not detect a contradiction, necessarily, in being paid for performing or leading a workshop, but he believes at the same time in the merit of re-defining, or at least questioning, the idea of such activity as constituting a form of work.

Mattin also raises the pragmatic point that compromise will always be a necessary part of any programme of political resistance, simply because 'you cannot just break away from everything out of the blue'. Ultimately, Mattin ends up advocating the kind of 'co-determining' of capital ('you try to push these conditions a bit further') discussed in Chapter Seven with reference to Mute Publishing Company.

I asked Mattin to expand on these ideas of the relation between Improvisation and Noise, resistance, and remuneration. His answer highlights the variegation of underground activity, taking in as it does paying festivals and free basement concerts, whilst also questioning how critical practices might be related to workers' struggles, a relation which for him is crucial, if difficult to forge:

In regards to remuneration for what I do, I would not say that I am less ethically responsible for getting paid for a festival than if I was in a basement doing it for free. I often do both, but the structures that make me in the need of money are not going to be severely shaken by my doing 100 concerts for free. Such 'shaking' would require some serious form of organisation, which might not need to resemble the party strategies, but

for sure it will need to involve workers that produce material goods. How to create links with them from the music that we are doing is an extremely difficult question.

Despite his acknowledgement of the unavailability and tolerability of compromise in commercial artistic pursuits, however, Mattin, like Prévost, is keen to point out that in many such situations of receiving income or funding, a serious contradiction may arise between the desire of the musician to promote either a radical ideology or simply no ideology at all, and the neoliberal ideology those musicians end up supporting through the receipt of such funds.

Another issue has to do with instrumentalisation and the way culture is used in order to promote a certain ideology. In this time of crisis where the funding for culture and arts is being dismantled and diminished very heavily, we can see how neoliberal ideology is infiltrating everywhere. Certainly in the arts, just to have the possibility to do something seems already enough to lure artists into tacit support of the ideology.

The pressure to submit oneself to neoliberal ideology, and by this to submit your art to a performative contradiction, is thus a very real one for Mattin. However, notwithstanding the real dangers of becoming affected by such contradictions, Mattin acknowledges the possibility of repurposing, or, as noted, ‘co-determining’ public, neoliberal-derived funds, simply through questioning the conditions of the receipt of the funds in the deployment of those funds:

Before I used to think that if [underground music] had any critical potential then it should be able to be corrosive in regards to the structures that it is part of. So I think it would be ok to accept any conditions because this practice might question in some form or another those conditions or our relation to them.

To return to Prévost, and, particularly, to more personal matters of income. In our interview, Prévost reflected on the various ways in which he has maintained his lifestyle and his activities as a musician, without having recourse to salaried labour:

At the moment I am in the happy position of being in receipt of the basic old age

pension: A valued resource to which I owe thanks to the struggle of earlier generations of political activists. This together with the receipts from (modest) royalties from CD and book sales and the occasional 'paid for' article. This plus the (slightly) more respectable fees paid for (mainly overseas) concerts accorded to someone of my experience and antiquity mean that my modestly fashioned lifestyle can be afforded. Paying off the mortgage was a great moment in securing some kind of respite from an economy which has no space for limited consumption.

Betraying the political intensity of his perspective, Prévost here points out his current independence from capitalist strictures and cultural pressures in one respect, that of securing independent ownership of his home, but also acknowledges his dependence on the state for his pension, a resource for which he owes thanks, as he remarks, to the political struggles of earlier generations. Prévost also outlines the sporadic flows of income he receives from books, articles, recording sales, and concerts, flows which mean that he has been able to afford a 'modest' lifestyle, both currently and going back to earlier in his career, when he supplemented his musical performances with similar secondary and tertiary artistic activities, also including 'sporadic' lecturing and teaching.

Turning back to my earlier schema, Prévost's mix of incomes, from musical activity, to tertiary activity (writing), to state-derived funds, means that he also embodies elements from more than one of my categories; precisely, from categories two (supplementing income with tertiary artistic activity in the form of articles and books) and four (the receipt of non music- or culture-related public funds, in the case represented by Prévost's state pension). The fragmented, multiple nature of Prévost's income, which relates to similar fragmentation in the previous two case studies, reflects the more general financial precarity and poverty of underground culture, which customarily has drawn on various sources, from public to private, from musical to salaried income, in carving out an economic framework in which it can subsist.

Prévost reflects on the specific details and hardships of the relative financial poverty of underground culture, and more precisely of underground musicians such as himself, pointing out as Langan had before the significance of having a financially (and emotionally) supportive partner:

The key is reducing your overheads and material expectations. These things impact upon your family. What is missing, so far, from this list of economic supports is my partner and mother of my children. I note that many of my contemporaries had (have) strong support from their partners, economically as well as morally. I count myself fortunate not to have been driven to finding paid employment outside of my own work for many years. I have been lucky and careful.

Although Prévost's political convictions were hardly veiled in the foregoing discussion, I asked him to speak more directly to the relationship between his musical practice, and his political ideology, particularly in terms of the question of state subsidy and artistic/political independence:

I believe that state and business support for the arts is ultimately dependant upon ideological compliance. Improvised music has only ever gotten a few fallen crumbs from the feasting table. It seems to me the real message of most of the music under this category inevitably fails to be read. It does not 'need' to be read. Musicians too may not need anyone to read their work – beyond its status of the imaginative and novelty. They often prefer if it is not read! If you offer an amalgam of material and social responsibility – as I believe can be read into some improvising work – then the best you will receive is condescending pity. The 'end of history' ideologues (even though they may not recognise this description) are currently in charge of our cultural destiny. For them there is no viable alternative; although they might want to shuffle the bits around so as to make it look like development.

Prévost's answer strikes pessimistic notes, asserting as it does the inalienable ideological compromise entailed by state and business support for the arts, whilst also insisting that the amalgam of 'material and social responsibility' detectable in some improvised music has effectively fallen on deaf ears (as it were), with the result being that improvised music, as I have suggested is also the case with other forms of underground music, has only gotten, in Prévost's words, 'a few fallen crumbs from the feasting table'.

Prévost concluded by reflecting more specifically on the possible contradictions entailed by underground musicians with radical agendas accepting state funding for musical and artistic projects. For Prévost, who in our interview had already suggested that he saw no contradiction in making a living from performing improvised music, the question of whether a contradiction is evident in accepting state funds (notwithstanding 'ideological compliance') depends on the precise source of the improvised musicians' funding:

It depends upon your perception of the term 'state'. If it is completely wed to the promotion and delivery of the liberal/capitalist dream, then it would be dangerous and pointless to engage with its funding policy.

Prévost thus believes that at the most basic, mainstream level, state funding from capitalist/liberal governments might be seen to present a danger to the radical improvising musician. But he also points out that such monolithic notions of 'state' and 'government' rarely hold in practice:

Things are rarely that straightforward. Mavericks lurk in corners. Politics is (hopefully) always a bit fluid. Dreamers (like myself!) can always hope things will change.

The question of a necessary compromise in the case of a radical musician accepting state funding is thus sidestepped by Prévost, who underlines what he sees as the more fragmented and fragile political reality of such questions; governments are not monoliths and states are not omniscient. Local resistances and narrow but potent possibilities for political change will always be present, even within such an oppressive political atmosphere as is currently in play in the West in 2012.

Prévost went on, finally, to discuss the dominance of types of resistances that work *within*

systems as undermining agents, rather than outside those systems as radical but possibly unattainable alternatives:

Most political programmes from the left during my life time have been mostly concerned with gaining political influence. In this respect agit-prop was always more important than programmes which reflected and practised activities which might legitimately be seen as signifiers of a different ideology. For example, the idea of engaging in dialogue as a collective creative mechanism is not the subject of any significant art programmes – as far as I am aware. Although, I note that from time to time that something like these things has become useful (if fashionable and temporary) rhetoric.

Prévost is here observing that the type of collective creative mechanism represented by improvised music has rarely proved fashionable or useful to mainstream left-leaning political activists, who have preferred more straightforward agit-prop modes of expression and activism. For Prévost, as he told me, such efforts are doomed to ‘failure and compromise’, since they do not offer an ideology that is significantly distinct in principle from the ideology being propagated by the state.

The Prévost case study has demonstrated that a sustained career within the underground and with political convictions intact is possible, even if one must be ‘lucky and careful’, and accept financial hardship and meagre cultural recognition likewise. Although Prévost has ended up relying on public social provisions, his long career has largely been self-financed, with support from his partner, deriving income from royalties and from his performing activities as a musician, in addition to his articles, books, and lectures. Such a piecemeal, precarious existence is emblematic of underground musicians in the age of flexible accumulation, as was demonstrated in the cases of both Langan and Butcher likewise.

5.1.4 Mattin

Mattin's perspective, as we have seen, is as radically orientated as Prévost's, with comparable left-leaning sympathies driving Mattin's musical practice, which he likewise sees in terms of political and social allegory and experiential metaphor. In specific terms, Mattin outlined his own personal political history in our interview, connecting this to his perspective on Improvisation, which he links both to communism and neoliberalism:

My political views since I was young were more directed towards anarchism, but lately I have been less and less interested in the emphasis on individual subjectivity, and so I am turning more towards communism. I find the notions of communisation, which describes communisation as communism in action, as a simultaneous getting rid of the labour theory of value, property, wage-labour, and gender division by all the people involved without the need of a party agenda, very inspiring. In fact, one could see some similitude with communisation and improvisation in the sense of not having a programme and actively trying to deal with the situation at hand but from a radical perspective. However contemporary improvisation could also be seen as an ultimate expression of liberal subjectivity: let me be free as long as I can express my freedom.

Mattin expands on this notion of a correspondence between the contemporary Free Improv idiom, and the neoliberal ideology of personal freedom at all costs:

If we look closely at the unsaid rules of improvisation, we can see how people allow other players to do whatever they want as long as they don't interrupt their 'creative' process with their instruments. People are actually not that open if one tries to generate a different type of response that would be more intersubjective, where people would have to subject their individual virtuous qualities to a group experimentation.

These radical ideas around the fundamental capacities of Improv have seen Mattin seek to transcend conventional notions of what an improvisation is constituted of. I would note the divergence here from Prévost's more canonical descriptions of Improv's modeling of sociality, and Mattin's antagonistic perspective, which sees in the idiom of Improv a homologisation of both neoliberal and communist ideals.

More generally, Mattin calls in his writings and his musical practice for a profound rethinking of the conventional limits of Improvised and Noise music. In his own words, Mattin ‘aims to question the nature and parameters of improvisation, specifically the relationship between the idea of “freedom” and constant innovation that it traditionally implies, and the established conventions of improvisation as a genre’.³⁷ Mattin, again in his own words, ‘considers improvisation not only as an interaction between musicians and instruments, but as a situation involving all the elements that constitute a concert’...He ‘tries to expose the stereotypical relation between active performer and passive audience, producing a sense of strangeness and alienation that disturbs this relationship’.³⁸ Mattin thus seeks to move Improv on from what he sees as its neoliberal focus on subjectivity, in to a kind of inter-subjectivity that would seek to refashion both musical *and* social relations within the improvisation. These radical music-political convictions are reflected in Mattin’s practical activities, as for example with his anti-copyright stance; Mattin’s label WMO/R releases a wide range of music by prominent underground artists such as Radu Malfatti and Maurizio Bianchi on CD and CD-R, whilst simultaneously making this music available free of charge on its website. Mattin likewise released the book *Noise and Capitalism* free of charge in 2009.

I address a Mattin performance at the Instal festival in 2010 in the Arika case study in Chapter Seven, in which Mattin did not once touch a musical instrument or sing, preferring to organise the ‘improvisation’ as a strange, somewhat hostile (in that the nature of the experience was not flagged up, and thus felt initially uncomfortable), but ultimately joyous group manifestation. In a profile in *The Wire* in February 2010,³⁹ Mattin describes another

³⁷ ‘Biography’.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ David Keenan, ‘Agent Provocateur’, in *The Wire*, February 2010, pp. 30 – 33.

performance in which his theories were practically applied. The show took place in Galicia in 2009 with Keith Rowe of AMM. For the performance, Mattin made the decision that his contribution would be to ask the person in charge of recording and monitoring the sound of the concert simply to press stop on the recording at the first applause, and then play the concert back again. Because of Rowe and AMM's insistence on 'open' improvisation, Rowe and Mattin did not discuss how the concert would go before it happened. Rowe played very minimally, before packing up his instrument 'performatively' at roughly 80 minutes in. The 'concert' went on for another twenty minutes, finally (seemingly) concluding at 108 minutes, with the first round of applause. These 108 minutes were then played back in full to the presumably dumbfounded audience (Mattin himself admits that it was 'the hardest performance of my life'). These two examples illustrate well how Mattin's expansions of the parameters of Improvisation and Noise to incorporate social relationships and extra-musical materials reflect the ideological commitments of someone like Prévost, whilst re-orientating those commitments to a more explicitly expansive anarchist and communalist, and trans-'musical', programme. The political dimensions of this programme hardly need to be underlined.

I will now move back from these considerations of Mattin's politics more generally conceived, to specific issues of political economy. I have already addressed Mattin's ideas as regards notions of artistic compromise and the lack of a profit-motive in underground music. To be more specific about how he funds his lifestyle, I asked Mattin how he squares away his rejection of 'intellectual property' (even if he had earlier admitted not to see a necessary issue with earning money from concerts), with the necessity to feed himself and his family, and to pay the household bills, and so on:

I am currently teaching at the Dutch Art Institute in Holland and doing some concerts, performances, lectures and workshops, but this is not enough for living in Stockholm.

My partner has a stable job, which at the moment pays for the flat. I am looking for paid PhDs, but no luck so far. I will therefore probably have to look for a day job.

Mattin is a highly prominent figure in the underground, appearing regularly across Europe and the United States in concerts and at festivals such as Instal and No Fun Fest, collaborating with many prominent musicians (some of whom I listed above), and gaining a certain degree of notoriety and attention through publications such as the aforementioned *Noise and Capitalism* book.⁴⁰ And yet, as stated, Mattin's anti-copyright stance has led him to make recordings available for free through his record label, WMO/R, just as the book was made available as a free PDF download. His prominence leads to many performance and speaking engagements, but these, even with the addition of money from his teaching appointment at the Dutch Art Institute, are not enough to support day-to-day living, as seen in the above quotation. This situation attests to the marginal status of the underground, where one of its most prominent ideologues and performers can fail to make enough money for subsistence.

At the same time, and as with Butcher and Prévost, the range of Mattin's activities, which incorporate musical performance, writing, and teaching, reflect the often fragmented and fundamentally precarious working lives of underground figures. Like Langan and Prévost, meanwhile, Mattin similarly relies on his partner for financial support. In terms of my schema, then, Mattin would fit into category two. He derives income from musical activity, whilst supplementing that income through secondary and tertiary artistic activities, in this case writing, lecturing, and leading workshops. As Mattin himself points out, though, he may soon find it necessary to take on a day job. In the case of such a possibility coming to pass, Mattin would then of course fit in to category four of my schema. The key point is that his position, as with most other underground figures, is fragile and open to change, reliant as he

⁴⁰ Available at www.arteleku.net/audiolab/noise_capitalism.pdf, accessed 25 September 2012.

is on various precarious sources of income, and keen, in this case, as he is to maintain his radical anti-copyright and anti-intellectual property stance.

When speaking earlier about the small, self-organised networks of Noise and improvised music, Mattin flagged up the positive aspects of their relative commercial insignificance. These underground networks, for Mattin, can be seen largely to escape co-optation and absorption into the participatory media and real subsumption context discussed in Chapter Four, simply through their tiny size. They would be less models of resistance, in this understanding, as somewhat powerless, although socially potent, nooks in which like-minded souls can gather to enjoy their lives relatively as they wish. They might co-determine capital's resources, or alternatively, simply largely circumvent capitalism by being so tiny.

And yet, contrariwise, Mattin has emphasised the difficulty and thus problems of real subsumption, of ever escaping from corporate influence and ownership completely, which he takes to be a desirable goal for underground musicians. Writing in 2008, Mattin asserted that,

More and more we have the possibility to do our distribution without the need of big record companies. A good (or bad example) of this could be MySpace. One can produce a song and upload it to the internet straight away, without the need of a label, then send the information about it to a great number of people. There is no doubt that the original idea is good and it helps to create many new connections and contacts. But at what cost? First giving publicity to the company itself. Many contemporary artists use the MySpace website as their prime website; even before your name there is already a brand with a very clear ideology behind it. Whatever progressive music you make you will have tattooed upon your forehead the name of a company which has very close alliances with conservative ideology.⁴¹

So, in similar terms to Jodi Dean, Mattin underlines the fact that even though underground musicians operate in marginal contexts (as with the left activists discussed by Dean), the tools they are deploying depend on capitalist, oppressive structures and ideologies. Mattin also

⁴¹ Mattin, 'Anti-Copyright'.

discusses the specific deficiencies of the MySpace service, which correspond to the idea that musicians' affective labour (their creativity) is simply and without financial reward co-opted⁴² by the site's parent company (which in 2008 was Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation). In this, Mattin once again echoes Dean:

In terms of use, at least partly due to the interface of the website, there is rarely anything more than simple self-promotion and a great lack of discussion. The Myspace system also uses proprietary software (as opposed to free software). Myspace websites are often very heavy for the computer, and they usually use very poor compression of the audio tracks they host. It has some similarities with a big record label but with the difference that the big company is in the end without any need to bother listening to see whether what you are doing is good or bad, it just takes advantage of your need for promotion: your creativity is their publicity with the added possibility of being exposed to their censorship.⁴³

In 2012 the platforms for such possibly exploitative frameworks have shifted from MySpace to such sites as BandCamp and SoundCloud, where music can be streamed at higher bitrates, sold or streamed in multiple formats, and managed with a greater degree of artist control over presentation and distribution (with artists being able to host their music on their own sites with SoundCloud, for example). Unlike MySpace, too, as of August 2012, SoundCloud and BandCamp remain independent, if wealthy, companies. Thus, some of the issues Mattin pointed out with respect to MySpace are resolved with BandCamp and SoundCloud, even if the flow of capital facilitated by these platforms largely ends up in the same place it started, with the wealthy. Nevertheless, the positive aspects of sites such as BandCamp and SoundCloud, and others, such as Nimbit and CD Baby, where even destitute musicians are able to host and sell their music free of charge (excepting BandCamp's 15% commission charge on music sales, which drops to 10% at the threshold of \$5,000 sales, and 10% on merchandise), should not be gainsaid.

⁴² Mattin quotes MySpace rubric in the 'Anti-Copyright' essay: 'Myspace.com reserves the right, in its sole discretion, to reject, refuse to post or remove any posting (including private messages) by you, or to restrict, suspend, or terminate your access to all or any part of the Myspace Services at any time, for any or no reason, with or without prior notice, and without liability'.

⁴³ Ibid.

I asked Mattin to discuss the ways in which the situation may have changed since 2008, and to reflect specifically on the idea of real subsumption, digital music platforms such as SoundCloud, and underground culture. In his answer, Mattin identified the problem not so much as residing in the possibility of tracing musicians' use of promotional tools back to big business,⁴⁴ but more in the assumption of a neoliberal and capitalist mode of aspirational subjectivity that is reflected in the use of these digital tools and platforms, and even in the assumption of an artistic-authorial persona in the first place:

The idea of neoliberal instrumentalisation would also relate to these issues regarding SoundCloud and BandCamp. But after writing the 'Anti-Copyright' text, what I thought was the crucial issue was: how do we identify ourselves as authors, as creative individuals who can produce something out of nothing? How do we market ourselves and the way that we need to constantly promote what we do?

The problem is not so much how we frame our activities under capitalist technologies, but to what extent we shape our subjectivity through capitalist ideologies. So at the moment my rudimentary strategy is not to take for granted what I am as a musician or as an artist, but instead try to treat it as material for possible experimentation. I still get invited to do concerts as Mattin and still do want to do concerts, but that does not mean that what Mattin means or represents is something clear, or stable or simply material for improvisation and contestation. Surely this Mattin persona is very questionable, and rather I would undermine its own logic than trying to generate a coherent artistic career or practice out of it.

Mattin, a politically-engaged, radically left-leaning underground musician, thus wants to question not only the parameters of every performing situation in which he finds himself, but even the very parameters of his persona as an artist. Such questioning relates directly to Prévost's and, as we will see, Arika's similarly politically-engaged conceptualisation of his and their own practice, whilst contrasting with Bereford's 'implicit' politics, and with Butcher's, Langan's, and, as we will also see, Amanda Brown's, Carlos Giffoni's and Colour out of Space's seeming favouring of aesthetic concerns over political ones. Mattin sees the

⁴⁴ His slight hedging of bets here when pushed on a possible point of contradiction corresponds earlier with his retrenchment on the point of whether it is actually a 'contradiction' to earn a living from this music.

problem of being subsumed by capital, according to my interview, less in terms of a straight fiscal subsumption, and more in terms of interpellation, where neoliberalism and post-Fordism set the boundaries of our very selves, forcing a commodifiable bounded identity on what Mattin sees as dynamic artistic personae.

The shifting of focus in this respect of self-examination from political economy to politics more generally should not disguise Mattin's considerable criticisms of the financial and ownership dimensions of capitalism, which manifest in his anti-copyright stance, and his desire to refigure underground artistic activity not as 'work', and hence as something to be submitted to market principles, but rather as play and as experiment. This last case study of Chapter Five thus stands out from the previous three in its theoretical and conceptual expansiveness, and yet should nevertheless be seen to connect directly to the same issues of politics and political economy considered previously, both in Mattin's attempts to earn money and in his discussions of the DIY, marginal, and hence trans-capitalist contexts of underground music, and in the more theoretical, and expansive, political ideas just discussed.

Concluding Thoughts

Through the various case studies of this chapter, underground artists have revealed themselves as being variously politically-engaged, or not. Such political engagement has not proved to be an indispensable fact of underground practice, as one *might* infer from the seeming aesthetic radicalism of the music, but is instead an elective, though admittedly fairly prevalent, dimension of the artists' perspectives and practices.

What *is* common across all of the case studies, as I sought to show in the schema outlined at the beginning, which, as with the typology of musical style in Chapter One represents my

interpretation of data gathered throughout the course of my research, is that underground artists are entangled in the political contexts of post-Fordist flexible accumulation and precarity, and digital age real subsumption, as much as more mainstream cultural practitioners are. These entanglements have real material impacts on the underground musicians' working and personal lives, many of which, as we saw, are financially piecemeal and fragmented, relying as they do on either secondary or tertiary artistic activities such as teaching or writing, on social welfare benefits, or on the goodwill of their personal partners. *Some* fortunate underground musicians are conversely able to support themselves solely through musical activity, but even there public or private funding support, as with the case of John Butcher, along with a degree of experience and scene respect (as with Prévost and Beresford), is crucial. Meanwhile, the habitual funding policy prejudices of cultural and public institutions and private foundations, although showing some signs of transformation (as with Butcher), and indeed being somewhat tangential to the happily self-organised and politically independent (which sidestep subsumption through size) contexts and communities of Free Improv, for example, have a long way to go before they award experimental music more generally, let alone the underground specifically, funding commensurate with its artistic worth.

I continue my investigations of politics and political economy in the next chapter by analysing the issue of digital piracy, first, and then underground record labels, festivals, and venues, in turn. The primary research-led, hermeneutic, and intertextual methodology deployed here, is maintained into the next chapter.

Chapter Six, The Politics and Culture of Underground Music:

Digital Economy and Labels

The digital age has produced a range of material effects in the music industry, some clearly positive, some negative, and many others that are open to interpretation. In the underground as elsewhere the emergence of free digital tools of production, promotion, and dissemination has proved transformative. Music is no longer trapped the way it once was in physical channels of market-controlled commodity exchange. Although in the underground the digital age transformation is less destructive of industrial capitalist paradigms as it has been in more mainstream music, since the underground has been historically characterised by trans-capitalist, self-organised, micro-independent and unintermediated networks of production and consumption, it has nevertheless been fundamentally altered; already marginal cultural activities have in many cases been completely liberated from capitalist theories of value, such that much underground material is freely available, at the click of a button, on the web.

Some on the scene welcome this liberation from the wage-labour relation as an emancipatory process which leads to less contaminated art, whilst others decry its undermining of whatever meagre potential underground musicians had of earning money from their work in the first place. Others still argue that the liberation of 'content' in ETEWAF culture leads to a devaluing of cultural experience to the extent that engagement with underground culture – which had once been the prized result of much toil on the part of the audience member – might have become superficial and passive, as was mentioned in Chapters One and Three. This Chapter seeks to draw out some of these tensions and debates, subjecting them to critical analysis within a wide-ranging cultural and theoretical framework. I begin by examining the issue of digital piracy broadly considered, before moving on to record labels, an example of a

‘front line’ where these sorts of issues are having material impacts.

This first case study is a little different from the other one within this chapter and from the case studies of Chapter Five and Chapter Seven, in that it draws extensively on data from previously published writings; this is the case at least for the first part of the discussion. It is also different in that it does not, at least initially, seek to develop an account of an empirical phenomenon in the world (such as the political economy of a music festival), although it obviously emerges out of one – the digital age economy of widely available free music just discussed. Rather, I am seeking here to present, to adjudicate between, and to develop, with the use of pertinent secondary sources, different perspectives from within the underground on the subject of the impact of the digital age culture on the underground. Following from this, as noted, I exemplify and consider some of the issues through case studies of three record labels that have been directly affected by digital culture. My focus here is on labels whose activity makes manifest the double bind of underground culture, where resistance to what many see as an exploitative digital culture results in an emphasis being placed on physical releases, with sales and publicity nevertheless being necessarily channeled through the web.

6.1 The Digital Economy¹

As just indicated, perspectives on the issue of the impact of digital age culture range from appraisals that emphasise its liberatory, communalistic potential on the one hand, to articulations of critical, avant-conservative,² anti-digital culture diatribes on the other. The sources of much of the conflict are the political commitments of many of the scene’s

¹ This is a term that deliberately yokes political economy to the digital age, drawing focus to the economic aspects of digital culture.

² In the sense that this critique usually comes from a radical, extra-mainstream position, which seeks at the same time to return to older notions of value and exchange.

practitioners, which are commonly concerned with advancing a radical anti-capital and anti-corporate agenda.³ And yet this broadly shared political base splinters into a range of responses to the specific issue of the digital economy. Some cleave to the notion that free music is inherently exploitative for artists seeking to make money from their work. Others celebrate the liberation from object fetishisation and from the formerly ‘natural’ limitations of physical isolation and distance which global digital culture facilitates. These responses also call back to many of the debates and positions I articulated in Chapter Four, particularly to Jodi Dean’s and Mattin’s worries of being co-opted by big business through the use of digital tools, to the ‘real subsumption’ of all aspects of social existence, and to anti-capitalist notions of self-organisation and marginal economies.

Strident voices from what I am calling the ‘avant-conservative’ side of the debate have come from critics and writers such as Mark Fisher, David Keenan, and Simon Reynolds, musician Chris Cutler, and label head and musician Amanda Brown (whose *Not Not Fun* I investigate below). For these figures, the digital age has occasioned a cheapening of the potential richness of culture through the facilitation of a superficial, trouble-free, consumer-focused model of cultural exchange and experience. The former struggle to source obscure music, to make contact with obscure musicians and obscure audiences, has been replaced with instant gratification. This dimension of the anti-digital age position was mentioned with respect to Reynolds, particularly, in Chapter Three.

David Keenan, in a longer version of the quotation I used to introduce these issues in footnote thirty-two of Chapter One, reflects on the situation as he sees it:

³ Radical political convictions are held by such underground musicians as Eddie Prévost, Mattin, John Maus, Derek Bailey, Philip Best, SPK (see Chapter Seven). These radically left-leaning positions contrast with the more aesthetically-inclined focus of Vicky Langan, John Butcher, and others. Articulations of a centrist or right/far right position are much less common amongst underground artists, although such positions are in evidence in the case of certain Extreme Metal artists, as I explore in Chapter Eight.

Digital downloads – not to say Wikipedia entries, music blogs and even sites like UbuWeb – encourage a superficial engagement with culture. The quality and depth of interaction between an individual and a piece of art is no longer paramount. It's all about how much you're packing. The internet is a great, dull leveller, throwing out Cecil Taylor bootlegs and scans of rare mimeo zines as indiscriminately as virals for underarm deodorant. The idea of the quest, the concept of an encounter with art that happens in the context of your own life, is rapidly being replaced by an endless series of simulacra.⁴

Amanda Brown makes a similar point, drawing attention not only to the possible reduction in attention span that digital culture has brought about, but also to the consequent frivolity of our engagements with music:

The climate of indiscriminate cultural channel-surfing seems to be having an effect on our collective attention spans, too. Albums are ditched in favour of one or two key tracks; we even fast-forward through YouTube clips. When music has been reduced to the status of junk mail, and groups' entire discographies are skimmed and dismissed in half an hour, what depth of understanding or appreciation for these creations can we have? How do we remember what we've eaten if it's been swallowed, not chewed?⁵

Mark Fisher outlined a similar sense of what he describes as the 'digital communication malaise', in a talk entitled 'No Time' at Virtual Futures 2011, a conference held at Warwick University. Fisher drew attention to the revolutions in distribution and consumption of the digital age, whilst insisting on the lack of a concomitant revolution in content:

[iPods] seem to have changed everything, but only at the level of consumption and distribution, not content or culture... The more things change at the level of consumption, the less they change at the level of production. So what I want to draw attention to is two different speeds: the ever-increasing speed of communicative capitalism and the slowing, retarded time of culture.⁶

Fisher is drawing here on Dean's notion of communicative capitalism, in which participatory media such as Facebook are serving to reconfigure the cultural landscape of our everyday

⁴ David Keenan, 'Collateral Damage', in *The Wire*, July 2011, p.18.

⁵ Amanda Brown, 'Collateral Damage', in *The Wire*, September 2011, p. 14.

⁶ Mark Fisher, 'No Time', reproduced at <http://virtualfutures.co.uk/2011/08/15/markfisher/>, accessed 25 April 2012.

lives and to bring them in direct alignment with technological advances, whilst at the same time relating this to a notion of cultural retardation, where ‘there’s a sense that everything has changed but nothing’s really happened’, and where ‘technological upgrades have taken the place of a kind of cultural development’.⁷

In addition to this sense of an increasingly superficial, frivolous culture in which technological growth is not matched by a corresponding evolution in content, the avant-conservatives draw attention to what they see as the parlous and exploitative realities of the digital economy. Brown, for example, detects a squeeze taking place, where underground musicians are being forced either to take day jobs or to try and crossover into the mainstream in order to generate enough income to subsist, in the absence of the ‘self-sustaining feedback loop’ between ‘creators and appreciators’.⁸ Chris Cutler, guitarist with Henry Cow and solo improviser and performer in his own right, echoes Brown, drawing attention to the amount of ‘musical projects [that] never leave the notebook because of problems with the pocket book’, and drawing an emotive comparison between the wage-labour relation in the normal contexts, such as those of a ‘plumber’ doing his/her job and then getting paid for that job, and the breakdown of such a relation in musical culture.⁹ For Cutler, this breakdown will lead to the closure of many independent labels (such as his own ReR), and thus to the production of profoundly less experimental, contestatory music.

The positions critical of the digital age thus derive from two closely related areas, that of the exploitative digital economy (and its effects on the already marginalised underground), and that of the ‘superficial’, trouble-free, access all areas model of cultural engagement which the digital age has facilitated. The opposing positions derive from similar areas. Countering the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Amanda Brown, ‘Collateral Damage’.

⁹ Chris Cutler, ‘Collateral Damage’, in *The Wire*, June 2011, p. 14.

critical voices is a range of figures, from musicians John Maus and Robin Rimbaud, to sound and film artist Vicki Bennett, to UbuWeb founder Kenneth Goldsmith, to writer Marcus Boon. These figures speak, as had Keenan *et al*, about the impact of digital culture on the nature of people's engagement with underground culture, and on the economy of artists' lives. However, their take on these matters diverges greatly from those mentioned above.

Hypnagogic Pop musician John Maus rejects outright the sort of object fetishisation that is implicit in Brown and Keenan's accounts. In a Pitchfork interview, Maus outlines his delight at the demise of record shops, the removal of the social 'exchange' implied by the setting, the expense of 'physical' music, and the growth of free digital culture:

You don't know how happy it makes me that the days of the record store are coming to an end. \$20 for an LP? Do you remember going to the record store and not getting what you want because there was no other place to get it? Now we can get it all for free, and I think that's wonderful. There was always something really depressing to me about record stores and music equipment stores. There's something oppressive about them, like the guy who looks you up and down and looks at what you're buying. You're bound up in exchange with the snobby clerk. So I'm glad they all have little 'closed' signs on their doors now.¹⁰

Vicki Bennett likewise eulogises the liberating potential of digital culture. Bennett's collage film and music work as *People Like Us* clearly benefits greatly from having access to a wide variety of sources, a benefit that Bennett relates directly to the freedoms enabled by the emergence of broadband. For Bennett, 'the shift in 1999/2000 to digital and broadband was probably the breakthrough moment for me'.¹¹ Broadband 'changed [Bennett's] life', no less, allowing her access to previously inaccessible 'raw material':

Since 2000, albums I've made with Ergo Phizmiz and Wobbly were created remotely,

¹⁰ 'Guest Lists: John Maus', <http://pitchfork.com/features/guest-lists/8003-john-maus/>, accessed 25 April 2012.

¹¹ 'People Like Us', <http://www.citysonic.be/2012/2012/09/25/people-like-us-vicki-bennett-interview-city-sonic-a-voir-au-vermissage-de-sonic-cinema-ce-jeudi-27-septembre-a-galeries-bruxelles/>, accessed 26 September 2012.

as a result of being in different parts of the world, through ftping multitracks. Many are surprised to hear that such methods could be successful, but working alone on site, and in collaboration online, can be a winning combination. Once completed, it can be shared online. If you work with the right people you'll reach thousands of listeners. In turn, some of those listeners will be working in areas where they can offer concerts, commissions, or play you on their radio show. This is called the Gift Economy.¹²

Where Cutler, Brown, Fisher, and Keenan detected only destructive tendencies in this phenomenon of content liberation, Bennett instead sees the liberation more in positive, productive terms. She outlines the richness of online musical experience, drawing attention to 'thousands of dedicated, knowledgeable music blogs', which share 'out-of-print material, with tags linking to related areas', and 'links to 25 other websites and radio stations with similar interests'.¹³ Bennett's views are not wholly positive, however; in an interview with *Abject*, Bennett echoes Keenan and Reynolds in drawing attention to the some of the pitfalls of ETEWAF culture, saying that 'It's taken years for people to get used to this culture...It takes a lot of discipline and self-enforced limitations to actually do something good with all that data'.¹⁴

In a similar vein to Bennett's praising of the liberatory aspects of the digital age, Robin Rimbaud discusses the digital closure of the traditional distance between collaborators and between listener and producer, highlighting what he sees as the profound *social* implications of these new closures, or, better, these new *connections*, which are as easily achieved as sending an e-mail.¹⁵ Marcus Boon's book *In Praise of Copying*, meanwhile, draws attention to the ubiquity of copying and mimesis in human culture, and highlights the constructed, agenda-filled concepts of property and ownership.¹⁶ For Boon, some of the arguments against the digital culture of copying orbit around a proscriptive notion of the market, which is

¹² Vicki Bennett, 'Collateral Damage', in *The Wire*, March 2012, p. 14.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <http://abject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/VickiBennettInterviewFull.mp3>, accessed 26 September 2012.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 4 – 6.

undermined in the new framework of liberated content:

If you're a Marxist you could just say that so much of what happens today is driven by an economic structure and what it allows and what it doesn't allow. For example, there are laws around intellectual property which serve to allow certain types of commerce to continue and those laws are part of a structure that tries to make its way, historically tries to make its way. . . and then in the digital environment this thing happens which renders those old structures problematic...it just opens up all these contradictions.¹⁷

Boon ultimately perceives the potential of a 'utopian' aspect in digital culture, discussing the 'utopia of an infinite amount of stuff, all to be had...for free'. For him, the ability to access any piece of music, anywhere and anytime, is a deeply positive development.¹⁸ The task now is to find ways to expand that freedom into other domains, such as, as he suggests, those of the economic and the political.

Finally, in the interview with Marcus Boon just cited, Kenneth Goldsmith echoes the sentiments of Mattin regarding the notion that the anintermediated marginal status of the underground might lead to its escape from subsumption to a large degree. Goldsmith points out that the kind of culture in which his site is interested simply falls outside 'legitimate economies', even ending up unreleased as a result. UbuWeb is intended to offer something of a corrective to this inaccessibility.

Well, it's a way of flaunting all the rules, somewhat safely. I've actually found a major loophole in copyright culture, literary culture, in distributive culture...it's really got no commercial value whatsoever. It has great historical and intellectual value, but people lose money when they try to release this stuff so most of it goes unreleased. So it's been this, kind of, really beautiful grey area where it's all out in the open and it's all in front but you get a pass on it in a way that legitimate economies don't give you that latitude.¹⁹

¹⁷ 'Kenneth Goldsmith', in *Bomb*, <http://bombsite.com/issues/117/articles/6071>, accessed 27 September 2012.

¹⁸ Marcus Boon, 'Digital Mana', in eds. Kembrew McLeod, Rudolf Kuenzli, *Cutting Across Media*, Duke University Press, 2011, p. 24.

¹⁹ In Boon, 'Kenneth Goldsmith'.

Maus, Bennett, Boon, Goldsmith, and Rimbaud thus perceive a liberation of creative and social potential in the digital age. These figures have less to say on the issue of the digital economy, but theirs is not a disavowal or a denial of the potential deprivations and exploitations of digital culture. They largely reframe the debate in terms of creativity and potential, as opposed to the destitution of their antagonists. That being said, for Bennett at least, the new digital culture is rich with economic possibility; web exposure and widespread digital dissemination have for her led only to more work, more art, and more music.

Conclusions to the Digital Economy

In the case studies of Chapter Five it was evidenced through the examples of Butcher, Beresford, and Prévost that artists' existences within the underground have been precarious for decades, and have often required recourse to secondary and tertiary activities or to state subsidy (in various forms) to support or generate income. It is unclear, in the absence of extensive empirical evidence, whether the digital economy of free, liberated content and communication has ultimately impacted positively or negatively on the financial well-being of artists. Vicki Bennett and Amanda Brown speak anecdotally for both sides on this matter.

Similarly, the question of the so-called superficial engagement with culture is difficult to resolve. The superficiality asserted by Reynolds and Keenan is simply not recognised by Bennett *et al*, who see the new permeable and accessible frameworks opened up by the digital platforms as something like cultural emancipation. Whilst not enough solid empirical scholarly work has as yet been done on these matters, particularly with respect to the normalisation of digital habits that has taken place over the past two to three years, there is a body of evidence which suggests, again, merit on both sides of the argument.

A British Music Rights and University of Hertfordshire study from 2008²⁰ and an Australian Online Journal of Arts Education paper from 2006,²¹ each attest both to the variety of young people's listening habits and to the depth of their engagement with music. This sort of material obviously tends to undermine the arguments of Reynolds and Keenan. However, a 2006 study led by Adrian North of the University of Leicester contradicts these findings, suggesting, through the monitoring of 346 people's listening habits over the course of two weeks, that, according to North in the Press Release accompanying the publication, the 'accessibility of music has meant that it is taken for granted and does not require a deep emotional commitment once associated with music appreciation'. North goes on, 'people now actively use music in everyday listening contexts to a much greater extent than hitherto...However the degree of accessibility and choice has arguably led to a rather passive attitude towards music heard in everyday life'.²² These findings would, clearly, support Reynolds' hypothesis. The prevalence of downloading²³ discussed by all is little disputed, of course, but one of its consequences, the so-called 'Library Music Effect', has led, according to data compiled by Broadcast Music Inc., to 'the substantial diversification of the music that listeners hear'.²⁴ Whether that diverse range of music is listened to at a superficial or an engaged level, however, remains something of a moot point.

²⁰ British Music Rights. "Music experience and behaviour in young people, Spring 2008: main findings and conclusions", <http://www.musicbank.co.uk/reports/music-experience-and-behaviour-in-youngpeople/>, accessed 25 April 2012; British Music Rights. "What does the 'MySpace' generation really want?", <http://www.herts.ac.uk/news-and-events/latestnews/>, accessed 25 April 2012.

²¹ Peter A. de Vries, 'The digital generation: The influence of portable music listening habits of first year pre-service education students on their future practice as primary school teachers,' in *Australian Online Journal of Arts Education* Volume 2 (2006), <http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/education/teach-research/arts-ed/aojae/2-2.pdf>, accessed 25 April 2012.

²² North, as quoted in 'Press Release', <http://www2.le.ac.uk/ebulletin/news/press-releases/2000-2009/2006/01/nparticle-wxc-b9c-7hd>, accessed 26 September 2012.

²³ The inaugural Digital Music Index, for example, shows that more than 43 million albums and singles were downloaded via BitTorrent in the UK alone in the first half of 2012: 'Musicmetric Digital Music Index', <http://www.musicmetric.com/dmi/>, accessed 26 September 2012.

²⁴ 'The "Library Effect": Digital Age Brings Increased Use of BMI Music Catalog', http://www.bmi.com/news/entry/the_library_effect_digital_age_brings_increased_use_of_bmi_music_catal, accessed 26 September 2012.

Of course we are dealing with a special case here with respect to the underground, in that its audience might be expected, as a result of the elective nature of the scene (an electivity that is no different to that which underlies, say, being a Little Monster, the name for avid Lady Gaga fans), to listen more intently, less passively, than the average listener being analysed in these studies. The pervasive cultural transformations of the digital age of course impact that underground audience, hence my citing of generalised studies above, but the electivity of the scene at least suggest proportional levels of higher engagement with the music. And yet, still, considering the general paucity of evidence on this issue of the effects of digital culture on listening habits, underground or otherwise, and, too, on the question of the genuine economic consequences for the underground of the digital emancipation of content, conclusive arguments for either side of the digital debate are elusive. It is simply unclear whether the digital age has had demonstrable and generalisable negative financial effects on the underground, just as it is as yet hard to endorse either side of the superficial listening/enrichment through liberated content and communication argument. It is hoped, at least, that the material presented above at least gives a sense of the issues in play, and of various key figures' perspectives thereon.

6.2 Record Labels

What *are* accessible to discussion are the practical responses to digital culture. As such, I will now move on to a discussion of various record labels' operations in the digital age context. As noted above, my focus here is on labels that have chosen to emphasise physical products, whilst using the internet to sell those products at the same time. This focus is intended to highlight key digital age tensions, particularly as these manifest within the context of the

particular aesthetic sensibilities and marginal economies of the underground. I look in detail at three labels – Trensmat, Fort Evil Fruit, and Not Not Fun – whilst making reference to others by way of building context.

6.2.1 Trensmat²⁵

Trensmat Records is, in its own words, an ‘independent record label who specialise in transmitting oscillations & grooves’.²⁶ Trensmat has been active since 2005, with a break in activity occurring between mid-2009 and early-2011. The label is run by Stephen & Barry (who prefer to keep their surnames anonymous); I spoke to the former as part of this research. As Stephen told me, the duo running the label ‘also operates as the band Whirling Hall Of Knives and separately as Magnetize and The Last Sound respectively’.

Stephen describes the label’s focus as being comprised of ‘a blend of hypnotic rock/electronics/drone with very frayed and dirty edges’. He suggests that ‘there is definitely a Trensmat sonic style, but it’s hard to put into words’. Trensmat have released music by such prominent underground artists as Astral Social Club, the Telescopes, Mugstar, Bardo Pond, Black to Comm, Mudhoney, and Acid Mothers Temple. The label has a particular affinity with British artists orbiting the A Band/Vibracathedral Orchestra axis of improvising Noise and Drone musicians. The label has released three 7”s from the Telescopes, for instance, a group that started out playing Jesus and Mary Chain-influenced shoegaze, but now, with the Vibracathedral Orchestra’s Bridget Hayden partnering founder member Stephen Lawrie, make vibrant and chaotic drone dirges. Trensmat thus participate in the wider global underground, whilst supporting and even producing local scenic iterations concentrated in

²⁵ The research material I am using for this and the following case study (of Fort Evil Fruit) was generated, in part, through interviews I conducted for the magazine the *Journal of Music*. I conducted follow up interviews specifically for this research with both label heads.

²⁶ ‘Index’, <http://www.trensmat.com/index1.html>, accessed 25 April 2012.

Britain.

Trensmat's release schedule is taken up entirely by physical releases, and almost exclusively with 7" records. As of September 2012, Trensmat has released thirty-two 7" records, five of which were split releases between two artists, and one CD, a 2009 compilation of the best of label's releases to that point.²⁷ Tlaotlon's *Squirt Image Flex*, the label's first full length album, was released through mail order in February 2012. And whilst its catalogue is exclusively physical, with specific sleeve designs and notes being tailored for each release, Trensmat conducts almost all of its business through its website, at least in terms of customers' placing of orders and so on. The records or CD are delivered via mail order, echoing earlier underground practices. Additionally, Trensmat offer samples of each release (usually the first minute or so of each track) through embedded SoundCloud files on their site.

When I asked Stephen about the label's decision to focus on physical media, he discussed his and Barry's background, outlining their decision to reject what he sees as the 'background element of digital', an observation that obviously echoes claims made by Keenan, Reynolds, Brown, and others:

The label was started in 2005. We had variously been involved in a few labels since the mid 1990's but by 2004 things had started to turn more & more towards digital & CDs/CDRs. We preferred vinyl for its sound, tactile element and the active event of listening to it as opposed to the background element of digital.

Stephen went on to discuss Trensmat's particular affection for the 7" record, sketching the background to the duo's decision to focus on that medium:

²⁷ Trensmat's full catalogue is available to view on its home page: <http://www.trensmat.com/>, accessed 25 April 2012.

The 7" was the purest vision of this [physical media] in our opinion. We had been in touch with Stephen Lawrie of The Telescopes and had been blown away by their then current LP "#4", while also being fans of their stuff since they started. We wanted to release some of the music he had sent us which was amazing. So the first release on Trensmat was two of those tracks – the "Night Terrors" 7".

Stephen expanded on the particular appeal of the 7", invoking once again the (assumed) opposition of digital culture as unengaged and analogue as a multi-faceted experience whilst noting, in this case, the distinctive cultural resonances that the medium has for him:

The 7" is the perfect musical statement as far as we're concerned - an active experience in these days of music as background playlists. This is why it's very important for us to provide good artwork...occasionally coloured vinyl...but of course the primary concern is that the two tracks are firstly great and secondly work together with the sleeve, etc. as a package. As a child of the late 70s/early 80s the 7" has a real cultural resonance for me too.

The duo running the label have a slightly wider range of activity than might have been suggested thus far. As Stephen told me, they

have a sub-label called Nute which releases albums on cassette & CD. This has a more relaxed policy, with some very contrasting styles – the clean, moody electronica of Being sitting alongside the joke-filled, lo-fi scuzz of Mark Prindle reflects this.

It is interesting to note, whilst acknowledging this more relaxed framework, that even here Stephen and Barry maintain their adherence to physical media. Nute, after all, releases albums on 'cassette and CD'. Trensmat's preference for physical media is thus all-encompassing. With this preference, Trensmat clearly seeks to displace the hustle and speed of digital culture with the 'older' sense of time and cultural experience discussed by Reynolds, where the 'particular kinds of affect' of the 'analogue system' have a 'particular kind of temporality'.²⁸

²⁸ Reynolds, 'Retromania' in *The Wire*, June 2011, pp. 32 - 33.

Again, this impression of a distinctive ‘analogue time’ is largely based on unexamined assumptions about digital culture. When I asked Stephen to clarify his views on the opposition of analogue and digital culture, his response did little more than re-phrase these assumptions. This is not to criticise the perspective, which after all never claims in this context to be anything other than a personal preference, it is merely to point out its shaky basis. So, whilst Trensmat’s business is, as Stephen observed, ‘unavoidably’ conducted through the web in the first instance, the label is nevertheless assiduous in its cleaving to what it sees as the richness of the ‘active’ experiences that physical media facilitates.

6.2.2 Fort Evil Fruit

Fort Evil Fruit (FEF) is a Dublin-based label set up by Paul Condon, of Irish experimental folk group United Bible Studies, mentioned in Chapter Three. The label’s focus is, as Condon told me in our interview, on an ‘eclectic selection of underground music’, which includes everything from Sound Art, to Doom Metal, to organ improvisations. The first eight releases on the label came from a range of European and American artists: United Bible Studies, Raising Holy Sparks, Woven Skull, Áine O’Dwyer, Wreck of the Hesperus, an album of Jandek covers by Naythen Wilson, Korperschwache, and Lingua Fungi. A forthcoming release is scheduled from Vicky Langan’s Wölflinge.

Condon’s aim in establishing Fort Evil Fruit, as he told me, ‘is to provide an outlet for underground music, both from Ireland and abroad, that (he is) passionate about’. As with the example of Trensmat, FEF’s exclusive focus is on physical releases. In the case of FEF, the preferred medium of release is the cassette, with limited runs of approximately 100 copies per release. And whilst each run is limited in size, Condon also expresses the hope that ‘the

releases might have a life beyond their small editions, and be brought to the attention of people who might not otherwise be aware of them’.

However, in contrast to Trensmat, FEF sells its music both through the web, where mail order is possible for all of the cassettes in the catalogue, *and* in physical locations, with four record shops in Ireland and one in the UK currently keeping stock from the label. In further contrast to Trensmat, FEF make extensive use of digital platforms such as SoundCloud, streaming albums in full or in part as a way of building publicity for their release. Raising Holy Sparks’ *Beyond the Unnamed Bay*, for example, is available to stream in full on SoundCloud.²⁹ Furthermore, each cassette will come with a download code; digital culture thus serves as facilitator and sometime support for the front line physicality of FEF’s releases.

Whilst FEF’s operating procedures and favoured musical medium contrast with those of Trensmat, its label head’s reasons for persevering with physical media in a digital age strike similar biographical-cultural notes to those of Trensmat’s Stephen:

Like many children of the analogue era, I appreciate the benefits of recent music technology, but ultimately think of albums as (two-sided) physical entities.

Condon outlines the reasons behind his choice of cassette as FEF’s preferred medium:

Producing vinyl is prohibitively expensive and CDs often feel like landfill nowadays. The cassette format is a low-cost means of presenting albums as beautiful physical artefacts when they might otherwise only exist as downloads.

In keeping with Condon’s desire to produce ‘beautiful physical artefacts’, FEF has cultivated a house style for its art work, with design and layout by Danielle Smith and front cover art usually provided by the artist being released. This approach lends the label a visual integrity

²⁹ <http://soundcloud.com/raisingholysparks/sets/the-depths-of-bailey-point/>, accessed 25 April 2012.

which obviously enhances the allure of the physical musical objects it releases.

I asked Condon to reflect further on the decision to release music exclusively (notwithstanding ancillary digital downloads made available to customers of the physical product) in physical form. His answer, unsurprisingly, called up notions of digital superficiality, an attitude reflected by the artists he has chosen to release:

I think all the music I've agreed to release so far is absolutely outstanding (and I intend to maintain this high standard), and deserves a fate greater than being downloaded and half-listened to before being left to lie forgotten on a hard drive. This has found favour with the artists - all those I've approached have been enthusiastic and agreed to a release. That said, the cassettes will generally come with a download code.

Condon openly acknowledged to me the subjective nature of his attitude to digital culture, stating that his impression of that culture is not authoritative or complete. His own acceptance of digital culture is in fact reflected in his label's use of digital platforms such as SoundCloud and other MP3 hosting sites, and indeed the label's own website, platforms which were utilised only to some extent by Trensmat. FEF favour physical media, whilst making extensive use at the same time of the possibilities for promotion and dissemination opened up by digital culture.

FEF's persistence with physical musical media is characteristic of many labels working within underground culture. Even more characteristic is labels deploying a mixed release schedule of physical and digital releases. The online independent music retailer Boomkat, which carries music from a range of the more prominent underground and alternative labels of music from Extreme Metal to Sound Art to Dance, such as Southern Lord, Raster Noton, Hyperdub, Room 40, Mego, and so on, is emblematic in its distribution of music in multiple formats, from vinyl to CD to MP3 and lossless FLAC. This sort of mixed release schedule is

self-evidently followed by the aforementioned labels, and many more besides, who seek to satisfy audiences' demands for physical products on the one hand, and their desire for digital speed and effortlessness on the other.

Thus in the spectrum of underground labels, we would have labels focusing exclusively on physical releases such as FEF and Trensmat on one side, with mixed media labels such as those just mentioned somewhere around the middle, and then download only labels on the other side. Examples of the latter are not especially common in musical scenes such as the one under examination, where fetishisation of the physical object as a signifier of marginalised, outsider 'authenticity', and enjoyment of the physical object as a resource for rich musical experiences is so common, but examples do exist.

Year Zero Records is a not-for-profit music label, dedicated to 'the distribution of "Interesting" musicks'.³⁰ The label is home to such artists as Scouts Of Uzbekistan, Thee Mark Chapman Experience, Flipart, and Thee Outsider. Year Zero makes all of its music available for free, exclusively as downloads, with the option to donate through PayPal 'left up to the discretion of the consumer'.³¹ In its rubric the label states, 'If you enjoy the musick please support the people who put time and effort into creating it'. This is, evidently, an endorsement of the kind of 'Gift Economy' discussed by Bennett. And whilst Year Zero does not subscribe to any obvious political ideology, its free download service parallels that of Mattin's WMO/R, whose anti-copyright stance, as mentioned, leads the label to make all of their physical releases available for free as MP3 downloads. Much more common than such download-only labels as Year Zero, however, are mixed media and exclusively physical media labels.

³⁰ <http://yearzerorecords.blogspot.co.uk/>, accessed 25 April 2012.

³¹ Ibid.

6.2.3 *Not Not Fun*

The practice of Britt and Amanda Brown's Not Not Fun offers a direct exemplification of Amanda's perspective on digital culture and the digital economy – ideas shared by her partner Britt – thus giving us an opportunity to investigate precisely how these ideas influence and have been influenced by Brown's activities as a label head and a musician. The label is also a germane case study, in view of the fact that it represents a range of key American underground artists, many of them operating within the Hypnagogic Pop scene, such as LA Vampires and Pocolhaunted (both of which bands counted [Pocolhaunted split up in 2010] and count Amanda Brown as a member), Sun Araw, Magic Lantern, Dylan Ettinger, Dolphins into the Future, and more besides.³²

Not Not Fun started in 2004 as a joint venture between Amanda and Britt Brown, with small run releases (in editions of 'anywhere between '32 and 300'³³) of cassettes, CD-Rs and vinyl from local LA bands such as My Sexual Dad, Foot Village, and the Browns' own group Weirdo/Begeirdo.³⁴ These releases were each presented in artisanal, handcrafted packaging.

Britt gives a short history of the label's development in an interview with Samantha Cornwell:

It started in 2004. I had known Amanda about a year at that point, and she had talked about doing a label. We had started making music together, and I was in another band, and we had some other friends who were in bands. She decided that it would be fun if we made a two-song-per-band compilation cassette, and sell them for \$3 to people we

³² A full catalogue is available on Discogs: <http://www.discogs.com/label/Not%20Not%20Fun%20Records>, accessed 26 April 2012.

³³ Simon Reynolds, 'Not Not Fun', in *The Wire*, May 2011, p. 36.

³⁴ See <http://www.discogs.com/label/Not%20Not%20Fun%20Records>, accessed 26 April 2012.

knew. We decided that as long as we were making a mixtape, we might as well act like we were a record label and call it something. The way we operate the label has changed tremendously since then. Now it's our full-time job that we both do 6 or 7 days a week, and we ship records all over the planet.³⁵

As Britt indicates, the label has grown into a substantial enough endeavour that it is now represents a full time occupation for both Amanda and him. Amanda outlines the development of the label from a small run concern into a business, where factory pressings of vinyl releases have become the norm:

When we first started out, we were absolutely insistent that everything have a sort of handmade feel to it. As we got a little more popular, and as the bands got a little more popular, we had to start manufacturing, which is fine. We're absolutely happy with it now, but we still insist that artists really think about the way they're coming across.³⁶

And yet, despite this expansion, Not Not Fun has maintained its early affinity for bespoke packaging, fixation on the physical object, and a rejection of what, as we have seen, Amanda perceives as the superficiality of digital culture. Although the vast majority of the label's current and recent physical releases are pressed and packaged in factories, the Browns still occasionally 'silkscreen a tape or a 7"'.³⁷ Moreover, even though the label's expansion has necessitated that it move into the digital market, which it has done – Not Not Fun releases are available as digital downloads from Boomkat, eMusic, and Revolver – the Browns were particularly reluctant to do so, and still maintain a preference for analogue, physical media, even whilst acknowledging the potential for wide dissemination that digital media holds:

MP3s are anathema to NNF. 'We don't listen to any digital music, we don't own iPods', says Amanda. 'When things started to turn toward everything-digital that was such a struggle for us. We try not to be Luddites but we are a bit like, "I can't believe you don't want to hold this thing in your hand! What's wrong with you?!"' But Britt says that they believe in the music too much to keep it limited edition. 'I feel it's our

³⁵ Samantha Cornwell, 'Label Profile: Not Not Fun', <http://alteredzones.com/posts/503/label-profile-not-not-fun/>, accessed 26 April 2012.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Reynolds, 'Not Not Fun', p. 38.

duty to make it available. If we did an edition-of-50 tape and it sold out in two hours, that's frustrating to me because clearly the demand is there. And if I was a fan of the band, I'd be like, 'Do you actually want me to just listen to it as a shared MP3 on the internet?'³⁸

Amanda goes on in the same Simon Reynolds interview to outline more about her attitude to digital music culture:

I would say we're part of the resistance to things that almost don't exist... It feels like the music doesn't exist. To some people, I know, this doesn't lessen the quality of it. But it actually does to me. We all have certain ages of our life where we stop growing. And there are certain tenets I had aged 14 that I still have now I'm 29. I remember how hard it was to get stuff. There was this one PJ Harvey import CD and I'm still getting chills at the thought of how difficult it was to acquire.³⁹

In Marxian terms, Amanda Brown here seems to value the commodity over the experience, or at least to render (reify?) the commodity *as* the experience. For others, the experience of the musical sound itself, although its mediation in various textual contexts and respects is unavoidable, is where the richness of the experience lies. However, the kind of emphasis Brown places on the act of consumption is hardly restricted to digital avant-conservatives, reflecting as it does Kenneth Goldsmith's point about digital culture and its myriad paradigm shifts, where he points out that 'What we've experienced is an inversion of consumption, one in which we've come to prefer the acts of acquisition over that which we are acquiring'.⁴⁰ It appears that the frantic changes the digital age have wrought have left us all in a peculiar position as cultural archaeologists and historians, seeking out strange new or old ways of consuming culture.

In any case, whilst the Browns maintain their scepticism over certain aspects of digital culture, as with other label heads, they are keenly aware of what Simon Reynolds describes

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ In Boon, 'Kenneth Goldsmith'.

as the ‘productive tension’ of being ‘digi-phobes dependent on the net’,⁴¹ where, echoing Robin Rimbaud, the internet is seen to open up new possibilities of communication and connection. Reynolds goes on,

Not Not Fun resist some aspects of digi-culture but embrace others: the liberating lines of communication opened up by high bandwidth networks, which enable the aggregation of dispersed fans into a viable market, and, more importantly, connect them with artistic like-minds.⁴²

With the net, therefore, scenes are no longer physically parochial, but are rather ‘parochial in sensibility’.⁴³ Reynolds spurs Britt into a consideration of what this trans-local digital framework means for contemporary conceptions of the underground:

So what defines ‘underground’, then, if not opposition to the commercial overground? ‘It’s more to do with an operational procedure’, says Britt. ‘Booking your own shows, playing somewhat non-traditional venues. You’re ‘underground’ if you’re putting out your own records, or if whoever is putting out your records is not that much above you’. It’s not about avoiding professionalism (NNF obviously take immense care over what they do) but about not having too many levels of intermediation between yourself and the listener: agents, managers, levels of business hierarchy.⁴⁴

This point about the underground in the digital age residing in notions of cultural intimacy and a lack of intermediation reflects my earlier observations about the ‘anintermediation’ of underground culture. The practice of Not Not Fun, where mail order and direct e-mail contact with the label heads facilitates close communications between audience and practitioners, mirrors such intimacy. And it is perhaps in this sense of intimacy where we can anchor a sympathetic interpretation of the Browns’ fascination with physical media: in pursuing direct contact with an object, physical proximity to practitioners via the commodity, and even shared personal interactions that are digitally mediated or not, the Browns rebuff digital

⁴¹ Reynolds, ‘Not Not Fun’, p. 39.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 40.

culture's insistence on anonymity and isolation, and in doing so offer an illustration of the potential richness and value of analogue models of cultural experience, which are not even in this necessarily in opposition to those of digital culture. Their practice, meanwhile, offers an excellent illustration of how local physical scenes remain pivotal in the underground, even if these local scenes are configured in trans-local terms through their vital mediation on the web.

Concluding Thoughts

As previously noted, the arguments in support of the opposition of digital-as-frivolous and analogue-as-deep (and as 'authentic', I might add) lack much in the way of empirical proof or rationalisation. No evidence, beyond the anecdotal, has been assembled on their behalf. The arguments often derive their power from the cultural authority of those making them and from the imperious tone in which they are often delivered. However, in a more basic sense, the arguments seem convincing through their appeal to one of our most basic notions of authority, where that which is old, fusty, and physical, equates to a hazy notion of authenticity and value.

The tenuousness of my own perspective here, though, corresponds to the similarly tenuous, personally-motivated tenor of much of the arguments that I have presented around digital culture and the digital economy; both sides within this debate stress the value they have derived from and detect in digital culture, whilst ignoring aspects of the opposing side's arguments. The avant-conservatives downplay some of the positive potential of social media and digital platforms, and reduce engagements with digital culture to superficial parlour games based on greed and frivolity. The opposing side downplays the potentially detrimental effects of the digital economy on musicians' livelihoods. The issue is a complex and often

perplexing one without any easy or clear solution, whether we consider it in terms of political economy, cultural experience, or otherwise. What is clear is that these tensions have concrete impacts on the underground, as shown above in the approaches of various record labels, which universally make use of the web (in varying degrees) as a promotional device and even as a central tool of sales, whilst persevering with analogue forms of physical media, and thus with (remodelled) analogue models of distribution and consumption.

The digital age has thus immanently transformed the underground. Though it was always ‘anintermediated’, the digital age has shifted the character of that anintermediation from physical ‘zines and mail order music, to easily maintained digital web platforms through which music, and discussion about music, is made available. The web has also facilitated the proliferation of a huge glut of what is now freely available and easily accessible underground culture, which people like Vicki Bennett celebrate, whilst also enabling communication and connection across formerly non-traversable distances of space and circumstance. Artists now form relationships as a direct result of the web, which would not only have been much more difficult to maintain in a pre-digital age, but would never have been possible, simply because the web *creates* the links through which these artists make contact. As seen above, figures such as Robin Rimbaud praise such changes.

These positive developments notwithstanding, of course, it is also the case that the digital age has made even more fragile the financial situation of the underground, whilst also intensifying wealth concentration even as it expedites the discursive deconcentration and liberation of ‘content’ and the tools used to make it (as discussed with relation to Krims in Chapter Four). These tensions of cultural and discursive liberation on the one hand, and increasing financial constriction and subsumption on the other, are a hallmark of post-Fordist

digitalism. As we have seen, such tensions are indexed directly in the various divergent underground responses to the situation.

In the next chapter I continue my investigations of the political and cultural contexts and characteristics of the underground, moving away from these issues of digital age piracy and 'free culture', into a more direct discussion of political economy as this is manifest in the contrasting approaches to funding and income of a number of key underground festivals and venues.

Chapter Seven, The Politics and Culture of Underground Music:

Festivals (and Venues)

In this chapter I examine three festivals and one music venue from the standpoint of political economy. One of these ‘festivals’, I should note, is actually the Scottish arts organisation Arika, which runs various festivals of underground music and art, although the main point of focus here is their Instal festival. The other two are No Fun, of New York, and Colour Out of Space, of Brighton, England. I have conducted interviews with the head of Arika and with the organisers of Colour Out of Space, and use existing literature on No Fun. I also look at the London venue Café Oto. I examine the economic situation of these case studies, whilst considering both the political implications of the way that these marginal underground ventures are run in a context of real subsumption, and, particularly in the case of the Arika festivals, the political attitudes of the organisers. Although an extended examination of venues would throw up interesting issues in itself, many of the major points around funding and artistic independence that I want to draw out emerge naturally from my discussions of festivals. In the interests of concision, I have therefore chosen to concentrate on the latter.

7.1 Arika

My first case study focuses on Arika, a Scottish-based organisation that runs events and festivals giving a platform to practices that, in their own words, ‘could variously be described as DIY, experimental, underground or autonomous’.¹ Their two primary festivals, until 2011, were Instal and Kill Your Timid Notion. Arika also ran Music Lover’s Field Companion from 2004 to 2007 inclusive, and many one-off tours, such as the 2006 Resonant Spaces

¹ ‘About Arika’, <http://arika.org.uk/about-us>, accessed 31 March 2012.

programme of John Butcher and Akio Suzuki concerts. Arika's two primary festivals have as of late-2011 been subsumed into a wider thematic-based programme, which saw Arika stage three 'Episodes' between January and March 2012, featuring music, philosophy, film, and art all orbiting certain themes. The theme for the second episode, for example, was the question of 'how do ideas of nihilism, darkness, subjectivity and abjection play out in experimental music, performance art, supernatural horror; in neuroscience or philosophy?'² Arika's events are usually staged in Glasgow, most commonly at venues such as Tramway and the Arches, although they also organise concerts and other events elsewhere; 'A Survey is a Process of Listening', for example, took place at the Whitney Museum in New York, in May 2012.

Arika are a particularly interesting case study in this context, because their programming of underground music is accompanied by a correspondingly radical or 'underground' set of political convictions. The contradictions between radical politics and state/capitalist affiliation or dependence, discussed previously with reference to various underground artists, were directly addressed by David Keenan (in a thinly-veiled attack on Instal, which he attended every year and indeed sold merchandise at) in his provocation-question, 'Is there anything more contradictory and hypocritical than a 'radical' music festival that's essentially government sponsored?'³ Such contradictions are directly acknowledged by Arika:

We talk about, support and undertake this kind of work, whilst paying for this through public funding. We've decided to do this so that we can be involved in things that maybe make a bigger impact, without having to rely on any commercial income. We are not-for-profit.⁴

² 'A Special Form of Darkness', <http://arika.org.uk/events/episode-2-special-form-darkness>, accessed 1 April 2012.

³ Keenan's fuller statement is: 'So arts funding has been slashed? Good. Is there anything more contradictory and hypocritical than a 'radical' music festival that's essentially government sponsored? The future for the underground lies in refusing these narcotic compromises while daring to create its own economy.' David Keenan, 'Collateral Damage', in *The Wire*, July 2011, p.18.

⁴ 'About Arika'.

This sense of ‘impact’, for Arika, coheres around the idea that music, particularly music and performances that explicitly address the political dimensions of aesthetics and theatre are fundamentally not just a ‘sounding’ form somehow reducible to notes-on-a-page or sounds-in-the-ear. From the Programme Note to Instal 2010:

In organising INSTAL, we have asked ourselves: isn’t music about more than just music? In fact, music is never just about music: it is always the product of its wider situation[1]. Some musics reinforce the status quo[2]. Other musics try to affect the collective conditions of existence. We’re interested in the latter: not once radical, now stagnant scenes, but musics that continue to develop useful ways of acting and thinking outside dominant ideologies; musics as part of that wider situation, with something to say about and offer back to it. Through performance and discussion, INSTAL 10 will attempt to address itself to these and consecutive matters.

[1] Isn’t music always produced through interacting social, cultural, philosophical and ideological factors. (Is it cowardly/reckless/naïve to abstract away from these?)

[2] Don’t you find that most music (incl. most experimental music) simply fortifies false notions of freedom and possessive individualism, of art as lifestyle choice lacking the will/ ability to say anything other than the simply musical?⁵

Thus, the performance of experimental and radical music can open up for Arika a potent allegorical and affective space outside the status quo, where social, cultural, philosophical, and ideological questions can be invoked and tackled, thereby calling into questions ‘dominant ideologies’. At Instal 2010⁶ attendees were indeed exposed to such situations consistently throughout the three day programme, sometimes with revelatory results.

Mattin gave an unbilled Friday evening performance to a crowd of approximately two hundred and fifty people. The performance consisted of Mattin standing in the middle of the space, planted squarely about fifteen yards from each side of the U-shaped audience. That was it, apart from the additional, but crucial, factor of a microphone channeling the sounds of the space back through the PA. These sounds were looped according to pre-programmed parameters (in, roughly, two and three minute cumulative loops), with minimal signal

⁵ Esson, ‘Programme Note’, <http://www.gsa.ac.uk/life/gsa-events/events/barry-esson/>, accessed 3 April 2012.

⁶ I attended Instal 2009, 2010, and ‘A Special Form of Darkenss’.

processing or additional effects. The realisation slowly dawned on the crowd that the situation as such *was* the performance. We grew into the assumption of our liberated roles, slowly moving about the space, emitting strange sounds, communing with strangers and with Mattin, setting up a feedback loop with the PA. By the close, no one was left in the seats; instead, composite repeating patterns of various groups of people moving about in circles and dancing mirrored the aquatic, though looping, sounds.

These are hardly new ideas, but they were executed with such directness that they led to a situation of real surprise, and of intense social richness. Another ‘performance’, later in the weekend, saw attendees moving about the performance space quite freely, circulating pieces of paper with instructions from artist and writer Brandon La Belle written on them, which guided or ‘suggested’ how the crowd might conduct itself. Many other performances throughout the festival invoked and involved the crowd likewise. A workshop entitled ‘The Great Learning’, following Cardew and Confucius, ran throughout the festival. The workshop allowed philosophers, musicians, and members of the audience to discuss the events and themes of the festival, and to plan a realisation and perhaps resolution of some of these themes. The final night of the festival was given over to the results of this workshop, which saw bands of unskilled performers, intimate and strange theatrical presentations, discussion groups, and so on, take place.⁷ Again, these are hardly novel ideas. However, given the distinct social context of the twenty-first century (as compared to, say, the 1960s), and the lack of cynicism with which they were realised, they achieved a real potency.

It is of course easy to be cynical about such openly aspirational ideas and practices as these. However, if one holds to some idea of art and music as being transformative phenomena

⁷ The following piece gives a good overview of the festival, particularly of the events of the final night: Richard Pinnell, ‘Instal’, <http://www.thewatchfulear.com/?p=4228>, accessed 2 April 2012.

capable of affecting the social body in some interesting or enlivening way – even if that transformation might bring up further contradictions or irresolutions in turn – then Arika’s approach as exemplified here in Instal 2010 can at least be credited for the boldness of its ambition and the wholeheartedness of its execution.

In any case, the radical, communitarian political framework suggested by the events of Instal 2010, all of which, as indicated by the festival’s programme,⁸ sought to explore a notion of collective artistic experience, well represents the sorts of themes and aspirations regularly posited on behalf of, and within, Arika’s festivals and concerts.

My interview with Barry Esson, director of Arika, orbited around such notions of social change and radical practice, as well as the concomitant ideas of funding and political paradox. Arika receives funding from the Arts Council of Scotland and Glasgow Life. In my questions to Esson I was interested in getting a sense of the importance of this institutional funding on the simple level of economic viability, particularly in terms of its proportional relation to ticket sales and other commercial revenue generators, such as advertising. I asked Esson to define how crucial a role this institutional funding plays in enabling Arika to exist and put on its festivals, and to discuss what he has found the attitude of those funding bodies to be towards the kind of work Arika does:

Arika has been putting on events since 2001. We started out working as freelance ‘curators’ I guess, which meant that all of the money went through partner venues, who also did a lot of the admin. The first INSTAL cost about £5k, half of which was box office income, and the other half was put in by the venue. Out of that £5k though, nobody organising the event got paid, and the Arches had to do a lot of admin for no cost.

Thus, the first Instal, which took place in 2001, relied on no external funding beyond what

⁸ Esson, ‘Instal 2010’, <http://arika.org.uk/instal/2010/about.php>, accessed 3 April 2012.

the partner venue, The Arches, contributed, and it generated half of its (relatively tiny) running costs from ticket sales. Typically, the festival proved to be anything but lucrative, with none of the organisers being paid, and the venue itself even having to cover some of the administration gratis. Such is the natural precarity and fragility of the underground.

Arika's approach radically evolved through the subsequent festivals, both as a result of Arika and its events becoming recognised at an institutional and a public level, and as a result of the increasing importance to Arika of a distinctive set of political and artistic convictions, which mean that it has both sought to commission new work and to pay as much for that work as possible:

Over the years we built up our events and the level at which we deliver them. This has required more money. We've also moved to be more independent, and not rely on venues to do all the admin work, as with that comes a level of control that they seek to exert on what we are interested in doing. This has meant that Arika has had to find the money to pay staff, accountant, etc and so on...so that we can manage what we do. Similarly, we want to pay artists as much as we can, and to do more than just book what is going on, but commission people to make new work, which takes time and effort which it is good to pay for.

Arika thus moved from a comparatively amateur approach to organisation, towards a more professional, pro-active, and disciplined style. Along with this shift in policy and growth in size from the first Instal in 2001 to the more recent Arika events came a concomitant increase in costs, which, in the absence of substantial commercial revenues, or even the desire to exploit this music commercially, necessitated reaching out to the public sector for funding support (as detailed above):

The last INSTAL cost almost £60k. The box office income was about the same as for the first ever INSTAL - £3k. The first Instal I think was £15/day, the last one much cheaper than that. We're not interested in making money, and we're not interested in exploiting experimental music commercially – we have taken the decision that it is of much greater use to get more people interested in or at least able to see experimental music or film than it is to make an extra few quid out of them, so we have tried all kinds of ticket prices (from free upwards) at our events, to see how best to get people

along.

Arika's very clear imperative is therefore that the building of artistic communities and the fostering of experimental forms of artistic expression takes fundamental precedence over commercial interests, to the point where profit seems to be of little or no concern to the organisers. This attitude is typical of underground promoters and venues, as we saw above with Vicky Langan and Black Sun, and as we will see below with No Fun, Colour Out of Space (COOS), and Café Oto. I should underline, however, that the absence of a profit-motive in underground music is not always directly allied with a political agenda, as it is with Arika. Sometimes, as with Langan and COOS, profit is unimportant simply because it is necessarily unattainable in the context of such an esoteric and marginal cultural form. Underground music certainly boasts plenty of idealists for whom profit is a contaminate, but it also boasts many for whom profit is simply an unattainable luxury.

Esson expands on the costs of recent Instals, in the context of other festivals featuring comparably experimental forms of music:

In terms of that £60k, it's in keeping with what for example Le Weekend [another Scottish festival, which was curate by David Keenan] used to cost (£40-£55k, I think I was told when it was on). It's more than what for example Colour Out of Space costs, (which I'd guess costs about £20k, given that they get £13k from ACE[see below]). We probably pay musicians more than COOS does (that's not a criticism of them). Festivals like Transmediale in Berlin or even UNSOUND in Krakow have much bigger budgets and state funding. At the other end of the spectrum Subcurrents when it happened at the Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA) last year probably did not have public funding and worked off door money (is my guess), but the first few years it was done (before the previous director at the CCA left) it had a significant publicly funded budget larger certainly than COOS and closer to £30k/£40k.

Esson raises an interesting point about state funding; in contrast to the small British underground festivals (COOS, Instal, Subcurrents, Le Weekend, to which we could add the 2012 festival Counterflows) in receipt of a small amount of state funding, European festivals

such as Transmediale and UNSOUND are able to put together much more extensive programmes, in larger venues and with larger teams. Transmediale, for example, is run by a central team of 30 people, alongside adjunct web staff and others.⁹ This is a direct result of the fact that their state funding, from the Federal Cultural Foundation in the case of Transmediale, and through the not-for-profit Tone Foundation For Music & New Art Forms for UNSOUND, is so ample. In further contrast to this, as we will see below, is the American No Fun festival, which is arguably the most prominent of all underground music festivals, and which receives precisely no state funding, or external funding of any kind.

Esson discusses the details of Arika's funding at length:

We are Flexible Funded by the Scottish Arts Council (now Creative Scotland). That is the middle tier of funding in Scotland (for now). It is the level that all production companies are on, if they are any good (in the SAC's eyes). We get just about the average of all those 60 production companies. This funding pays for us to have 2 full time staff and a part time administrator, plus putting money towards an office, an accountant, and all the other stuff that we choose to do ourselves rather than rely on venues. Without arts council money our events would not be doable in the way that they are now. We don't generate any 'commercial' revenue.

So: about 75% of our funding comes from the arts council, 20% from other trusts and funds like the city council, PRS Foundation for New Music, international funders if you're bringing say a German or a Japanese musician over and probably less than 5% from box office income, which we choose not to exploit.

So, as noted above, Arika's evolution over the past eleven years has necessitated their courting of public funding, primarily derived from the Scottish Arts Council, without which their events would 'not be doable in the way they are now'. Similarly, ticket sales, which are deliberately low (£25 for the weekend at Instal 2010, for example), amount to only 5% of the organisation's revenue, compared to 75% from the Scottish Arts Council.

⁹ 'About', <http://www.transmediale.de/about>, accessed 4 April 2012.

Since Arika's events rely on a certain degree of co-operation and support from venues, I asked Esson to reflect further on the importance of those venues.

Our events would not have happened and would not continue to happen without significant support from venues...Certainly we would not be doing what we're doing now if it was not for the support of key people at Tramway, Dundee Contemporary Arts, CCA etc. over the years. If the Tramway were to charge us commercial rates for all the stuff they do for cheap or give us for free, then we'd be looking at a bill of maybe £15k. They do charge that kind of figure to some people (visiting big theatre companies for example), so it's worth pointing out that even though we're talking about large sums of money to stage INSTAL for example, it's nothing compared to other art forms who have much larger budgets for the same audience numbers. So I'd say that, although not directly supportive of experimental music, these venues are supportive of the kind of things we want to do, can see the value of it, and want to see it happen in their venue rather than someone else's.

Arika have therefore not only relied upon state support through Arts Council grants and to a lesser extent on support from local authorities and private foundations, they have also benefited from cheap or gratis rates at the venues at which they have held concerts and festivals. In this sense, not only do they co-determine public funds, they also derive crucial support from the private sphere. Underground culture, here, creatively accepts the context of real subsumption and precarity, seeking to mitigate its own limited resources with those of more sizable economic formations.

Thus, in the case of Arika, it is reasonable to assert that its own ambitious and extensive programmes of underground music and film would simply not happen without state and private subsidy; the audience for underground music is simply too small, and the revenues it generates too tiny, for it to be able to subsist in the context of larger festival programmes and for its musicians to be able to travel internationally for shows without some form of subsidy.

Underground festivals are a key meeting place for underground audiences and musicians, one in which the often web-mediated trans-local underground scenes become concretised as a set

of real, embodied relations, physically bounded by a city, a venue, and a time. These festivals, in contrast to the unfunded, singular underground musicians operating across the world, from Hijokaidan in Japan to Smegma in America to Langan in Ireland, not only facilitate such concrete connections, but they also therefore, for the most part, serve to connect the underground to forms of state and institutional support.

But does this reliance on subsidy in a supposedly radical artistic field generate paradox of the sort discussed by Keenan?

What I would say is that we have taken the decision not to exploit music commercially, where others have. We have tried to find ways that we can raise money so as to further our art forms, and to pay people for their efforts. We pay everybody who works on our events the same sum (the UK national average annual salary, as a day rate, for the number of days they attend the festival, plus one day preparation). As a rule of thumb, we pay out total artists fees annually in excess of what we spend on Arika salaries (and we work all year). These are political decisions.

So, as already discussed, Arika are conscious of the political dimensions of salaries and of music as a commodity form. They act accordingly, seeking not to exploit music commercially, and to pay artists and workers on the festivals at a rate commensurate with general standards of pay and remuneration. Specifically, on the idea that radical artistic practices are interpellated within capitalism through the acceptance of state subsidies, Esson says the following:

Just as we would maybe argue for a maximum demand that goes beyond the current horizon of (at best) social democracy, we are not stupid enough not to have minimum demands also. This is basic activist politics. Many people would argue for forms of social relations that are not mediated by a capitalist state, but that does not mean that we do not fight to save the small gains already made in state provision (the NHS, State Schools, the EMA), which hope to exclude areas of our lives from commercial exploitation. We would rather work with the contradictions of dealing with 'arm's length' state funding (which is supposed to be non-political, although of course it rarely is that) than with having to commercially exploit an art form. In doing so we can actually put more money in musicians' hands, give them time to create new work, support their work at a level we could not otherwise.

Esson thus draws a careful distinction between a politics of ideals ('maximum demands') and a politics of actually existing reality ('minimum demands'). Under the terms of the latter, Arika is prepared to engage with 'arm's length' state funding, which allows them to channel capital into underground music and underground musicians, thereby creating new work out of resources that may otherwise have been used for less worthwhile ends as Arika see them. On this point, Esson states that Arika are 'basically interested in raising the level of critical discourse in our art form so that we can frankly work up some tools and perspectives that allow us to ask whether what we're doing is of any use, what role it can have in society'. In order to do so, Arika are willing to make use of state funds.

This sort of strategy is echoed by other organisations operative in analogous forms of culture, such as those at Mute Publishing Company, a politically-engaged print and online magazine 'dedicated to exploring culture and politics after the net'.¹⁰ Mute state the following about their own reliance on state funding, which came to an end as of 31 March 2012:¹¹

Our state funding makes Mute one of many European cultural organisations which discuss, profile or support autonomous practices while receiving their own financial support from the state. There are those who feel this generates unacceptable contradictions. Others regard the situation as merely a delicious irony. Mute conceives of its present grant dependence as an opportunity to codetermine the purpose of such monies as well as use the investment to develop a model of self-sustainability. If the state has earmarked funds to keep alive its conceptions of citizenship and the public sphere, then there is scope for organisations to redirect these towards emergent alternatives. Rather than functioning as instruments to an authoritarian agenda of 'social inclusion', at this juncture it seems imperative for us intermediaries to invite structural redefinition through public participation.

Mute, like Arika, reject the notion put forward by Keenan (who would prefer the

¹⁰ 'About us', <http://www.metamute.org/about-us>, accessed 4 April 2012.

¹¹ Mute's website (ibid) states the following: 'After running on a mixed economy of barter, grant and private monies since its inception in 1994, Mute started receiving revenue funding from the Arts Council of England in 1999, which ends on 31st March 2012. Our last 'Regularly Funded Organisation' grant was set at £68,912 (for the year 2011/12), going towards the core costs of staff, premises and production'.

development of alternative, independent economies not reliant on state subsidy) that the pursuit of autonomous practices is fatally contaminated by institutional backing. They also refuse to disavow the political dimensions of the issue of funding, as those who see the situation in terms of a 'delicious irony' might be seen to. Instead, Mute frames its reliance on grants as an opportunity, as they put it, to 'co-determine' state funds.

Mute, like Arika, seek to develop alternative notions of culture which might be seen to enhance the 'public sphere' that is delimited by the very existence of cultural funding in the first place. The two organisations, and many others like them, seek, in Mute's words, to attempt to 'structurally redefine' the social-cultural body through public participation, participation which in the case of Arika is expressed in its staging of public festivals and concerts of experimental underground practices, practices which are designed to contribute to the cultural richness and diversity of the public sphere. The political efficacy of such co-determinations is up for debate, of course, but the policy has widespread advocates in the underground, as we saw with Prévost, Beresford, Langan, and even Mattin to an extent, and, in the end, it seems one of the only viable options to take when engaged in the practice of cultural programming of marginal art, which yet seeks a degree of exposure and professionalism.

Before moving on to a discussion of Colour Out of Space, let me briefly address the question of professional lives within underground cultures. Esson stated the following on the subject of his own financial situation:

For the first 7 years of doing events, Bryony [McIntyre, Esson's partner in Arika] and I both worked in other jobs. Bryony worked full time and I did part time. I worked in architecture, and actually put a lot of my own money into our events. Our Scottish Arts Council funding now covers (modest) salaries for us, and we pay artists more.

With Esson and McIntyre we thus see yet more examples of participants in underground culture living on meagre salaries, derived in whole or in part from the state. Whatever its stated aims or principles, the underground would not exist in the way it does without some degree of governmental paternalism. Esson makes similar points as regards underground musicians and their own financially precarious existences, particularly as regards the prevalence of ‘day jobs’, especially in the early stages of musicians’ careers:

A close friend who I’d consider one of the great saxophonists in the world and who has a high profile probably gets by on £12-£15k a year, and hardly any of that is from selling CD’s. It’s all from gigs. Most people in certain scenes have day jobs, and it’s only when you get to a certain age and profile that people can make a modest living off gig money. People who do make money or get by just from music often tend to be the people with shops, distro or labels, I find. Hijokaidan, for instance, is made up of two bankers, a shop worker, and japons leading baseball card expert, who appears regularly on Japan’s version of *Antiques Road Show*!

7.2 Colour Out of Space

Colour Out of Space is a Brighton-based, three day ‘festival of experimental music and film’.¹² It has taken place annually since 2006 (although it did not run in 2010 and 2012, as detailed below), and has played host in that time to a wide variety of underground musician and sound artists, from Henri Chopin, to Part Wild Horses Mane on Both Sides, to Joseph Hammer, to Aaron Dilloway, to Morphogenesis, and more besides. COOS is run by Open Music, which is a not-for-profit Brighton arts group based in Brighton. It is coordinated by Dylan Nyoukis and Karen Constance, Noise artists and members of the groups Blood Stereo and Prick Decay, and Michael Sippings. COOS takes place across a variety of venues, the most prominent of which is the Sallis Benney Theatre.

¹² ‘Colour Out of Space’, <http://www.colouroutofspace.org/html/info2011.html>, accessed 4 April 2012.

COOS is a relatively small festival, with attendance each night averaging approximately 150-250 people. Venue costs and artist fees are obviously substantial, and with such small amounts of revenue being generated from tickets (the price of a full festival pass in 2011 was only £30, with day tickets at £12), the organisers utilise alternative forms of funding. As already indicated, COOS relies on state funding to the degree of a grant from Arts Council England, derived from the National Lottery fund administered by the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, which in 2011 equated to £13,690.¹³ The extent of the festival's reliance on this public sector support was demonstrated this year, when, due to unexpected funding cuts from the Arts Council, the 2012 edition had to be cancelled.¹⁴

Michael Sippings, whom I interviewed for the purposes of this research, told me about the precarious financial situation of COOS, and the festival's reliance on state funding:

It wouldn't be possible to run the festival in its present form without funding. Even if the artists were willing to pay their own travel and accommodation I still think we'd be unable to break anywhere near even without a huge hike in ticket prices. Venues alone last year (2011) were over £6000.

In contrast to Arika, Mute, and others, the organisers of COOS do not see any contradiction in accepting state funding in order to subsidise a festival of radical art and music. For Sippings, the cultural aspects of festivals such as COOS are separable from questions of politics and political economy. These cultural aspects can in actual fact for Sippings be seen to emerge naturally out of a marginal and esoteric musical scene, a scene which has little to do with activist politics, even if for Esson, Prévost, and others the two seem inseparable:

Everyone involved in COOS has been putting on small scale experimental music/film

¹³ As detailed at 'Hove', <http://www.lottery.culture.gov.uk/SearchResults.aspx?C=Hove>., accessed 27 September 2012.

¹⁴ Emily Kawasaki, 'Colour Out of Space goes on hiatus', <http://www.thewire.co.uk/articles/9544/>, accessed 27 September 2012.

events for years, and the festival is very much an extension of that scene. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with things outside that scene. I don't see any contradiction in what we do regarding state funding - we fulfil Arts Council criteria through the promotion of experimental approaches to music and film.

Sippings expresses gratitude for the state support his festival receives, but at the same time underlines the precarity of that very support in outlining how COOS 'applies yearly, and it's by no means certain that we'll ever be funded again'. My interview with Sippings was obviously conducted before the very recent (August 2012) announcement of the festival's cancellation for 2012.

Sippings emphasises the distance, as he perceives it, between the kind of radical *artistic* practices that he, Constance, and Nyoukis are assiduous in supporting and cultivating with COOS, and any questions of political economy that those practices might point toward:

We don't consider ourselves politically radical or anti-corporate. That kind of sentiment has never been expressed on any of our programmes or in any of our agendas; we're simply a festival playing music and films.

Whilst this sort of disavowal of the political dimension of public funding might be anathema to Arika, and might also leave COOS open to accusations of wilful ignorance, Sippings' position is obviously a perfectly valid one. For him, music is expressly *not* about 'more than just music'. Instead, it is possible to exist in the world as a festival playing music and films, according to Sippings, without considering the wider conditions that make that existence possible.

This is of course a very real and present perspective within underground music culture, where radical aesthetics do not equate to radical politics, and it should not be ignored in the collation of underground music's politics. Sippings' position is especially interesting in that it seems to deny the homology that often exists between radical aesthetics and radical politics.

The two, however, do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, as demonstrated by Sippings' refutation of the political aspects of public funding and experimental art. This is a point that indeed reminds us of the ascriptive quality of so many political discussions, particularly as these intersect with discussions of musical cultures. A distinctive quality of politics and ideology is after all that these amount to *events* that can easily become naturalised and *fixed* as embedded facts impervious to struggle, when in reality they are immanent and dynamic processes in turbulence, a turbulence that is always up for grabs and to-be-determined. Mute and Arika hold to a conception of politics that coheres with the latter understanding, whilst Sippings and COOS see politics as being 'out there', separable from culture.

In any case, this notwithstanding, the example of COOS nevertheless demonstrates once again the underground's direct reliance on capital and the public sector, whilst also providing an interesting, broadly apolitical contrast to the radical investments of Arika and others.

7.3 No Fun Fest (and Café Oto)

No Fun Fest is a festival of Noise music run by Venezuelan musician Carlos Giffoni. No Fun has taken place six times annually in New York from its first edition in 2004,¹⁵ though it is currently on hiatus. The festival runs across three days and until 2009 generally took place across two stages, although in 2007 the schedule was extended to four days to accommodate the fact that the secondary performance space was temporarily closed. The inaugural edition took place in Northsix, a small venue in Williamsburg, whilst the following three events all happened at The Hook, which, as with every other No Fun venue,¹⁶ is located in Brooklyn.

The 2008 No Fun was housed in the Knitting Factory, whilst the largest event so far, the 2009

¹⁵ An archive containing details of venues, line-ups, and links to reviews and articles can be found at the No Fun web site: 'No Fun Fest', <http://www.nofunfest.com/>, accessed 19 April 2012.

¹⁶ Although at the time of the 2008 festival the Knitting Factory, which has since moved to Brooklyn, was located in Manhattan.

festival, took place in the Music Hall of Williamsburg.

The festival quickly became one of, if not the, leading international Noise and underground music events. No Fun has seen headlining sets from such prominent underground musicians as Merzbow, Wolf Eyes, Smegma, Cluster, Borbetomagus, and The Haters; attendance has been sold out every year, with the 600-capacity Music Hall of Williamsburg being easily filled each night of the 2009 festival; articles about and reviews of the festival have appeared in a range of publications, from the *New York Times* to *Spin Magazine* to *Village Voice* to *New York Press* to *Pitchfork* to *ArtForum*;¹⁷ whilst the 2009 event featured headlining appearances from well-known Noise Rock acts Bardo Pond and Sonic Youth.

Since 2005 Giffoni has also run No Fun Productions, a label which puts out his own music alongside releases from acts such as John Wiese, Burning Star Core, Pita, and Prurient, all of whom appeared at the festival, in addition to a number of live and DVD recordings of sets from the festival.¹⁸ In 2009 No Fun Fest Sweden took place in Stockholm, an event Giffoni curated alongside Joachim Nordwall of Ideal Records. No Fun Fest Sweden saw a range of American and British Noise acts, from Prurient to Hair Police to Emeralds, perform alongside Swedish musicians such as Sten Ove and Toft Mats Lindstrom & Soren Runolf. No Fun also organises many one off events and tours, such as Oneohtrix Point Never's European tour of 2010, and the one day No Fun Fest which took place in Montreal in June 2010.

Since 2010 No Fun Fest has been on temporary hiatus, as mentioned, for reasons intimately

¹⁷ Links to all of these articles can be found on the festival's web site. Examples are the 2007 *New York Times* review by Nate Chinen, 'Tough Territory in the World of Experimental Music', <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/21/arts/music/21nois.html>, accessed 19 April 2012, and the 2009 *New York Press* article by Chris O'Connell, 'No Fun Fest Goes Pop', <http://nypress.com/no-fun-fest-goes-pop/>, accessed 19 April 2012.

¹⁸ No Fun Production's complete catalogue is contained on the following web page: <http://www.discogs.com/label/No%20Fun%20Productions>, accessed 19 April 2012.

connected with its principles and circumstances of organisation. No Fun is a one man, non-state affiliated or externally funded event. Giffoni is responsible for booking all the acts, paying their travel expenses, booking venues, monitoring the running of the festival itself, and organising promotion. Giffoni describes himself on the festival's web site as 'Director/Organizer/Curator/Godfather/Travel Agent/ Catering/ backline/webmaster/driver/host/Musician/Synth Magician/etc'.¹⁹ Thus, the festival is both economically and curatorially independent.

In these respects of unilateral organisation and non-receipt of private or public funding or subsidy, the festival has the character of an *echt* DIY event, comparable to smaller events such as Black Sun, and also to small, self-run, and only minimally financially supported venues such as London's Café Oto, Brussels' Recyclart, or Dublin's Boom Boom Room.

In order to contrast and compare the organisational and economic situation of No Fun with a similarly prominent and internationally important underground music venue, I'll digress for a moment to discuss the case of Café Oto. By way of establishing that prominence and importance, let me cite a passage from The PRS for Music Foundation's website:

Café Oto opened in April 2008, with little money, in what was an old, disused warehouse in Hackney. Since then it has built up an international reputation for presenting experimental music and sound art seven nights a week, and has had a great impact on the UK music scene. It is the only venue in the UK programming this sort of music and runs a year round schedule of live performances, talks and salons, with an average of 290 events a year and over 23,000 people attending.²⁰

Café Oto is an independently run, not-for-profit experimental and underground music (or, in

¹⁹ Giffoni, 'No Fun', <http://www.nofunfest.com/2010.html>, accessed 19 April 2012.

²⁰ 'Hamish Dunbar', <http://www.prsformusicfoundation.com/About-Us/Guest-of-the-Month/April-2012-Hamish-Dunbar>, accessed 21 April 2012.

its own words, ‘creative new music that exists outside the mainstream’²¹) space. Formerly a disused warehouse, Café Oto opened its doors in April 2008. It is located in Dalston, London, has a capacity of approximately 80 - 120 people, and offers a cover charge that is rarely above £10.²² Bar and door staff are minimal (‘Café Oto is run by a *very* small team of people’²³), whilst the director, Hamish Dunbar, and his senior staff, including concert manager John Chantler, can usually be found assisting with these tasks in addition to their more general and specialised duties. The venue operates as a café during the day, before turning into a performance space in the evening.

Oto specialises in themed mini-festivals and residencies; past residents have included Fred Frith, Peter Brotzmann, Kath Bloom, Matthew Shipp, Joe McPhee, and Sun Ra Arkestra. Oto also specialises in concerts by Japanese musicians, a specialism that is flagged up both by its name (‘oto’ meaning sound in Japanese), and also by the fact that Hamish’s co-owner is his Japanese partner Keiko Yamamoto. In this respect, Otomo Yoshihide, Kan Mikami, Sachiko M, and Toshimaru Nakamura are all examples of prominent visiting Japanese underground musicians.

I spoke to John Chantler for this research, but neither he nor Hamish, who did not respond to my inquiries, was willing to divulge precise financial details of their situation. The venue, the brand of which the duo have recently extended to incorporate a record label entitled Oto Roku, does receive support from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the Arts Council, and the PRS for Music Foundation, with project support coming also from the British Council, Sound and

²¹ ‘About’, <http://www.cafeoto.co.uk/about.shtml>, accessed 23 April 2012.

²² The venue’s home page gives details of ticket prices: ‘Programme’, <http://www.cafeoto.co.uk/programme.shtml>, accessed 19 April 2012.

²³ ‘Contact’, <http://www.cafeoto.co.uk/contact.shtml>, accessed 23 April 2012.

Music, and the Goethe Institut.²⁴ In addition to this continuous and bespoke support, Hamish Dunbar was the inaugural winner of the £25,000 Genesis Prize, an award from the Genesis Foundation that recognises ‘outstanding mentors of young artistic talent covering all art forms’.²⁵ The prize citation described Café Oto as ‘an innovative space that has created a new audience for avant-garde music’.²⁶

Café Oto thus receives a wide range of financial support from public and private sources, whilst also gaining a great deal of recognition as a noteworthy music venue. Chantler told me, however, that ‘whatever funding/income there is’, it is simply ‘not enough’, and that the team ‘are constantly looking for more, from any and all sources’. He also remarked that, even in spite of their various sources of support and their success in filling the venue most evenings, the Oto team ‘are always struggling to keep afloat’ and ‘to maintain the standard of the line-ups’, whilst invariably being ‘really pushed for time’. As with Arika earlier, although the team behind Oto has done enough to secure both state and private subsidy, because of the marginal character of the projects and the music with which they are engaged, the support they receive is proportionately minor. Similarly, due to the necessarily small revenues it derives from ticket and bar sales, Oto consistently struggles to maintain solvency.

Such financial struggles are commonplace across the underground. Esoteric, obscure music naturally corresponds to comparatively tiny financial subsidy. Such a situation connects less with explicit political issues – although clearly a political dimension underlies the cultural framework that largely clings to its habitual support of ‘elite’ art forms such as opera, and thus denies financial placation to the more marginal pursuits such as those being engaged at

²⁴ ‘Oto Projects’, <http://www.cafeoto.co.uk/otoprojects.shtml>, accessed 23 April 2012.

²⁵ ‘Genesis Prize’, <http://www.genesisfoundation.org.uk/content/hamish-dunbar-caf%C3%A9-oto-awarded-inaugural-%C2%A325000-genesis-prize>, accessed 23 April 2012.

²⁶ Ibid.

Café Oto – and more with the ‘natural’ state of affairs of underground music as a marginal pursuit. It defines itself somewhat outside mainstream culture, and thus its limited enjoyment of cultural support – even in cases such as Café Oto where financial support is forthcoming, if piecemeal and somewhat precarious – is of a piece with the character of the scene more generally.

Such a situation of ‘local’ success struggling against the natural limits of that ‘locality’ obtains in the case of No Fun Festival. The festival always sells out, consistently achieving extensive coverage and exposure; and yet, invariably, it struggles to break even. Before reflecting further on this issue, it will be worthwhile to outline further details about the festival.

In keeping with the aesthetic abrasiveness of the vast majority of acts included on No Fun’s bills, the independent principles and circumstances of organisation of the festival seem to signify its marginal, underground credentials. However, a number of factors serve to counter that judgement of marginalia. The first is the levels of success and exposure that the festival has achieved, levels that are at odds with events of comparable aesthetic profile. The basis of such exposure brings us to a second factor, which concerns Giffoni’s preference for professionalism over the accrual of ideological DIY credibility through the exploitation of low ticket prices and cheap, knockoff alcohol (for example). Giffoni has sought with No Fun to place Noise music into a professional, non-DIY, well-run performing context akin to the same efforts of Arika:

It has always very much been a super-important part of the festival to use proper venues, with proper staff, with a proper sound person and sound system, bar/security, everything legal and properly done. That is a big reason why the fest is still going after five years. I am a musician myself so I know what a big difference it makes to have

these things and the importance of other small details.²⁷

Whilst acknowledging the benefits of DIY underground presentations, Giffoni points out their many pitfalls:

When you do things DIY, there is a lot of room for problems, last-minute circumstances, legal situations, etc. And people are more willing to come to a venue they have heard of before than to a field in the middle of nowhere. Of course, there is a lot of merit to DIY venues and I love playing in them, but then that would be a very different fest, not No Fun.²⁸

This emphasis on professionalism has been the case whilst Giffoni has been attempting to derive No Fun's considerable running costs, which he places at anywhere between \$10,000 and \$25,000 each year, from ticket sales alone.²⁹ The festival enjoys no external funding, as mentioned (and here we can recall the comparably austere situation of federal/state funding for the arts that exists in the United States). In Giffoni's words, it 'receive(s) no arts funding; all the money to fly people and pay acts and all expenses come from ticket sales'.³⁰ And whilst No Fun 'has sold out every year', with 'audiences between 400 and 600 every night of the fest',³¹ the festival still represents a grave financial risk to Giffoni:

If you want to know the amount of risk, basically we are talking about potentially losing between \$10,000 and \$25,000 if things were to go wrong. It's pretty much the same every year. For me, that's a huge risk; I don't have a trust fund, or a rich family or anything like that. I am on my own, and already have plenty of debts to take care of.

³²

Giffoni expanded elsewhere on the precise breakdown of his risks, and of how he funds the festival:

²⁷ Carlos Giffoni in Steve Underwood, 'No Fun', in *As Loud As Possible*, Issue One, Fall 2010, p. 73.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 72 - 74.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 72.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, pp. 73 - 74.

That's the million-dollar question, like how did I make it work financially. I have to say that I took a giant risk, especially on the first year, with all the costs, where for some reason, credit-card companies really like me. I have these credit cards with a really high spending limit... So the reality of it is that I always have one or two credit cards where I put all the cost and then I pay it back with the ticket sales, and that's how it's worked. I did kind of like a sponsorship from a beer company at one of the fests that the venue worked out so we had something to work with up front. But it just basically pays for itself with ticket sales and there's been like a few years where I lost some money... It's just me and my credit cards, man; it's not easy.³³

In order to alleviate the risk involved, the festival has charged in the range of \$50 to \$60 for weekend tickets. This approach contrasts slightly with the grant-offset ticket prices of British Festivals such as Colour Out of Space and Instal, both of which limit entry to around £20 to £25, whilst contrasting considerably with similarly independently-run events such as Supersonic in Birmingham (equivalent of €86 in 2011) or Roadburn in Holland (€177.50 in 2011).³⁴ The key point, though, is that in the context of DIY *Noise* events in the US, the cover charge is sizeable.³⁵ No Fun's utilisation of advertisers, even if for only one year, likewise affirms that contrast. Since No Fun is a Noise festival, and since that musical form has grown out of a prideful ideological emphasis on DIY concerts and non-commercial sounds and release aesthetics, the dissonance between content and cover charge has led to complaints from some quarters. As journalist Steve Underwood observed,

When the first festival was announced in 2003, praise and jeers rained down in equal measure. While many fanatics bit their lip in anticipation of seeing Wolf Eyes... Hair Police... and others in one location over one three-day weekend, others bristled. Some were irked by the door price, feeling that noise was best served with close friends, an under-\$5 cover charge, and complimentary pancakes.³⁶

However, Giffoni's clear vision for the festival involved, as noted, a professional emphasis

³³ Carlos Giffoni in Hank Shteamer, <http://darkforcesswing.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/in-full-no-fun-fests-carlos-giffoni.html>, accessed 23 April 2012.

³⁴ Whilst being independently run and featuring substantial crossover with No Fun in terms of their musical programmes, these festivals describe themselves, broadly speaking, as festivals of Metal, and as such their relative commercial appeal is somewhat in proportion to the relative proportion of ticket price.

³⁵ By way of contrast, most concerts at Glasslands Gallery in Brooklyn, a DIY, 'community art and music space', have a \$10 cover charge (<http://glasslands.blogspot.co.uk/>, accessed 3 April 2012). Smaller, off-radar DIY shows in the city, from my own past experience, rarely charge more than a complimentary fee for entry.

³⁶ Giffoni in Underwood, p. 72.

that would have been impossible to achieve if ticket prices had been kept to a minimum, as is the case with funded British and European festivals such as Instal, COOS, Kraak in Belgium, Transmediale in Berlin, and many others. Such funding is simply unavailable to No Fun, due both to the comparatively impoverished cultural support structure in place in the United States, and also to the abrasive and foreign character of the festival's music, which places it outside the usual frameworks of viable cultural sources both for the types of federal funding surveyed earlier, and the private benefactors who subsidise American orchestras so heavily, for example. The only alternatives lie in the commercial realm of ticket prices and advertisement.

Two things arise out of the case of No Fun. The first is that, as suggested earlier, its financial independence, its ad hoc organisational nature, and its lack of aesthetic compromise mean that it links directly to fundamental and often ideologically-configured underground notions of DIY communitarianism, marginal aesthetics, and independence from the state and large institutions. In this respect, it sidesteps capital as an anintermediated and nested micro-economy, avoiding the strictures of real subsumption due to its tiny, self-organising size. These kinds of structures are vital in underground culture, and their manifestation in such a comparatively successful event as No Fun demonstrates the festival's performance of some of the codes of (non-)commerciality and communitarian scenic ideology discussed with reference to the underground in Chapter One, even as No Fun seeks to move the scene into standards of professionalism infrequently matched elsewhere. Giffoni himself reflects on these aspects of the festival:

There's no state funding like there is for festivals in Europe. So I think that part of the charm of the festival is that it's personal; it's more of a community-driven type of thing, at the promotion level, the booking level, everything that's done for it. And the volunteers that help me, at least half of them are friends that really want to help me out

and who want to be there.³⁷

The second point is that, even acknowledging the ‘traditionally’ underground aspects of No Fun, the festival represents a limit case for the underground. This is music without mass appeal and without much potential for mass appeal in the future. I have been writing about notions of the aesthetic appeal of outsider mentalities and scenes/subcultures, and of the potential accessibility of such subcultures in Castells’ information age and ETEWAF culture. In these respects, the possibility of the underground attaining some degree of recognition as a fashionable, although albeit marginally fashionable, scene, is more ripe today than it has ever been before. However, I would suggest that with the mainstream coverage that No Fun receives, and with bands such as Sonic Youth appearing on its line-ups, the festival represents possibly the furthest imaginable encroachment of this music into public acceptance. It is simply not in its nature to have mass appeal (without being essentialist about this, the underground category itself definitionally proscribes this, both in my framing interpretation as elsewhere). As Giffoni himself states,

I think that as far as getting super popular, I don't think it'll ever happen. I think that when we talk about popular music, we have to talk about something that can be liked by at least half the population of the world. And I feel like that's not really for experimental music to succeed in that way, just because there's no giant machines that are behind it, promoting and making things happen and exposing it to a number of people in the world that it becomes pop music...with noise and experimental music, it's always going to be underground.³⁸

Some sort of limit is reached with No Fun. Without the music shifting into something else entirely, it is difficult to envisage an event of larger size taking place anywhere in the world.

Giffoni recognises the transitional state in which the festival finds itself, prone at the point of further expansion, an expansion that would likely necessitate a shift away from its aesthetic

³⁷ Giffoni in Shteamer.

³⁸ Ibid.

and cultural roots as an independent, relatively small festival of extreme music. Giffoni has chosen, indeed, to take an extended break throughout 2010 and 2011. Both on the financial and personal levels, No Fun seems to have come up against some sort of natural breaking point in 2009, a point through which Giffoni has yet to decide whether to venture:

The fest has been successful and grown beyond my wildest dreams. But it's also at the point where the level of success it has reached has been putting a heavy demand on myself and put me at a crossroads point where I have to either grow it further as a 'business' or take a step back and refocus it. I have chosen the latter.³⁹

No Fun's breaking point seems to reflect the natural commercial and practical breaking point of the underground more generally, at least in terms of music-cultural mores as they exist in 2012. Considering the relative vibrancy and wealth of New York culture more generally, it is probably also the case that there are few other locations where even No Fun's level of commercial successes could be achieved. Festivals of underground experimental music in Britain, such as Instal and Colour Out of Space, enjoy a degree of public and private subsidy. And yet these subsidies are given in recognition of the innate commercial limitations of these ventures, and are in any case modest when compared to those of more traditionally state-supported arts such as opera or classical music. Without even these modest subsidies, however, it takes a lot of personal risk and private capital (probably derived from big business, as Giffoni's has been) to stage an underground festival on anything like a sustainable basis. Even if such risk were to be engaged and such capital mobilised, though, the potential commercial success of the festival would be naturally limited; the biggest edition of No Fun, with Sonic Youth (albeit in their Noise guise), only sold 600 tickets. As Giffoni points out, for No Fun to grow any larger, it would be necessary to abandon its DIY business model altogether and seek corporate or federal funding of one kind or another. It remains to be seen if the aesthetic aspects of Noise and other underground musics would

³⁹ Giffoni, 'No Fun'.

support such an expansion. But the case of No Fun certainly suggests that their DIY commercial aspects would not.

Concluding Thoughts

The foregoing three chapters have outline a variety of perspectives and data on the political and economic situation of musicians, festivals and venues, and record labels, whilst also considering political issues more widely conceived as these pertain to underground music culture. What emerges from the discussion is a notion of underground artists as leading fragmented and precarious professional lives of the kind described in Chapter Five. What is also clear is that those professional lives are so fragmented and so fragile, and festivals and venues' existences are likewise so fragile, due to the marginal and obscure nature of the underground.

It has been observed, too, that the underground is most visible in capitalist economies where public arts provisions help in some cases to support thriving artistic communities, but where, more commonly, a degree of wealth circulating in the economy, and a concentration of people and resources, enables the formation and cultivation of underground activities. The most visible underground scenes inarguably appear in affluent, most often western, contexts. And yet, it is not that the underground thrives solely *because* of capitalism, though the increased mobilisation of resources, capital, and free digital tools that it has occasioned have been crucial, but rather that it happens *within* and *around* capitalism, benefitting hugely from its resources in many cases, and existing significantly outside its parameters in others (though even in those cases some line of financial correspondence can usually be drawn between the two, even if it is just in the form of an artist's social welfare payments). The underground commonly seeks, in the first place, to offer a critical and reflexive co-determination of those

resources, whether it is in its exploration or re-articulation of material cultural relations or in its cognitive mappings of the same in its sonic dimensions. These explorations may only result in small gains, but they are attempted nonetheless. In the second, its local and trans-local scenes equate to micro-economies, offering an alternative to capitalist subsumption and flexible accumulation, even if the very size that guarantees their independence ends up reproducing the precarity and fragility (albeit now as a choice) inflicted by post-Fordist capitalism in the first place.

It will be noted, in keeping with the three propositions proposed in Chapter Four, that the vast majority of my discussions have focussed on *ascribing* political content to facets of underground culture that exist primarily *around* the music, such as how musicians and venues generate money whilst cleaving or not to independence from the state, or how labels have negotiated the digital economy. Some discussion has taken place as to how the organisation of musical sound in itself might be seen to contain a politics, primarily in the passages on Mattin, Steve Beresford, and Eddie Prévost (more of this in subsequent chapters), but for the most part my political discussions have stressed supra-musical phenomena.

The vigorous, often radical political convictions of many of the scene's figures are noteworthy, whether those politics be the anti-state, cottage industry promotions of David Keenan, the militant anti-copyright efforts of Mattin, the anti-capitalist theories of Dean, the communitarian, liberatory politics of Prévost, the anti-digital culture criticisms of Fisher *et al*, or the co-determinations of state funds for radical ends of Mute and Arika. These varying positions speak to the importance of a notion of politics, and more specifically to the importance of a notion of the stakes and values of culture as playing a role in discursive formations of politics within the underground. This primacy of politics will be observed

likewise in the coming chapters, even if it is dispersed into the wider aesthetic agendas of the various underground genres being considered.

As stated previously, the primary research-led methodology deployed periodically throughout Chapters Three to Seven is abandoned from this point, in favour of the kind of hermeneutic, intertextual, monological and sometimes lyrical, music-anchored discussions of ‘pertinent’ matters outlined in Chapter Two.

Part III –

Listening to the

Underground

Chapter Eight: Noise

The goal of this chapter and the one following it is to develop an account of how the underground genre of Noise music might be seen to function in musical, political, and cultural terms. The genre of Noise¹ is musically characterised by severe volumes; extremity and saturation of the frequency spectrum (tending to white noise); distorted, overdriven, and fuzzy timbres; and a certain quality of anti-refinement in form, gesture, and technique. Words are usually present only in the form of titles and band/artist names, or as slogan-like mottos shouted by the musicians. The use of electronic instruments, both analogue and digital, is common, as are guitars with distortion pedals. In recent years, sophisticated digital audio workstation platforms have become common in Noise, although many proponents of the genre cleave to older methods of sonic distortion and processing, such as cheap fuzz, delay, and echo effects pedals; contact microphones used with everyday objects, with musical instruments, and with the body; and very loud amplifiers.

The Noise music scene has its origins in the 1970s, though of course the use of noise in music stretches back much further. Noise is perhaps the most extensive of underground genres; it might reasonably be understood to incorporate everything from Power Electronics, to Dark Ambient, to Industrial, to Extreme Metal, to some forms of Free music, to post-Noise genres such as Hauntology and Hypnagogic Pop, to DIY, to Avant-Rock,² and so on. Noise more simply understood as a metaphor for political action or as an itinerant musical technique could in fact be placed at the centre of all underground activity, so heavily influenced as this activity is by resistance, radicalism, and sonic experiment.

¹ I do not engage in extensive debate over nomenclature here; I am using the term 'genre' simply to denote the uncontroversial and basically canonical notion of Noise music as a form which gained distinction and cohesion in the 1970s.

² These subgeneric terms are, again, simply adopted from what I take to be the uncontroversial canonical discourse of this music.

Yet it is important to distinguish between the relatively integrated, if broad, genre of Noise music (which incorporates subgenres like Harsh Wall Noise and Lo-fi, and derivations such as Industrial) on the one hand, and, on the other, underground musical approaches that might be seen to contain and play with Noise techniques, such as post-Noise, Dark Ambient, or Improv, but which, for general reasons of stylistic allegiance, are better considered as separate generic phenomena. It is the broad genre of Noise music, whose parameters will become clear below, that is the subject here.

The Noise genre, along with the conceptual and cultural relation of noise to music, is perhaps amongst the underground's most examined of subjects. Paul Hegarty's book *Noise/Music A History*³ provides an account of the noise/music relation considered in a broad music-generic and music-theoretical sense. Hegarty, interviewed in Chapter Three in my case study of the Irish underground scene, situates his theoretical discussions in, amongst other things, case studies of underground musicians such as the Japanese artists Merzbow and Boredoms, and Throbbing Gristle, and also includes discussion of a broad range of artists, from John Coltrane to Public Enemy to Pauline Oliveros. Edited by Anthony Iles and Mattin, the provocative and aforementioned anthology *Noise and Capitalism*⁴ variably argues for a conception of noise as being something that lies beyond capital's reach, both in the networks established in support of it and also in its sonic force. Nick Cain provides a succinct and useful 'Primer' (a relatively short study of style and the recorded 'canon' of important artists) on the subject of Noise in *The Wire*'s collection of Primers.⁵ To these we could add the

³ Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History*, New York/London: Continuum, 2008.

⁴ Anthony Iles/Mattin eds. *Noise and Capitalism*, Arteleku Audiolab (viewable at http://www.arteleku.net/audiolab/noise_capitalism.pdf).

⁵ Nick Cain, 'Noise', in Rob Young ed., *The Wire Primers*, London/New York: Verso, 2009, pp. 29 - 36.

extensive range of ‘zines and blogs that exist⁶ in the Noise scene.

Considering this comparatively extensive range of writing, it is necessary to define the place of this research amongst the noise/Noise literary repertoire. Whilst an historical account of Noise is given, this is not the main focus of these two chapters. That focus, put simply, is to arrogate Noise into my own theoretical framework (introduced here) of ambiguous dissimulation and subliminal modality; Rancière-influenced reconfigurations of the sensible and profanation; accidental audition and comfort noise; and the performative everyday, whilst also developing an account of the cultural-economic processes of Noise. This theoretical framework is developed in this chapter and in Chapter Nine, whilst also being applicable in some respects both to the music examined in Chapter Ten, and to underground music more generally considered as a singular configuration. The sorts of dissimulating and profaning processes discussed with respect to Noise, Lo-fi, and post-Noise in these two current chapters, and developed in the context of the ‘productive nihilism’ and *jouissance* of the Extreme Metal of Chapter Ten, should be taken as exemplary underground modes of aesthetic poesis and affectivity.

In terms of my key conceptual framing of scenes – local, trans-local, and global – and neotribes, the Noise scene is argued to be constituted globally under the ‘federal’ banner of Noise, whilst being comprised locally and trans-locally of generic and subgeneric formations related to, for example, Power Electronics and Harsh Noise in Europe, or post-Noise genres in American and the UK, or Harsh Wall Noise in Japan and America, or Industrial in the UK, and so on. As with the underground more generally, these local scenes are maintained

⁶ Out of many examples, the ‘zines *Blastitude* (www.blastitude.com) and *As Loud As Possible* (www.asloudaspossible.org) are worth mentioning, likewise the blogs Terror Noise Audio (<http://terrornoiseaudio.blogspot.co.uk/>), Idwal Fisher (<http://idwalfisher.blogspot.co.uk/>), and the forum Noise Guide (<http://forum.noiseguide.com/>).

through ‘native’ discursive practices and codes, and physical and trans-local ‘locations’ (such as venues, festivals, or fan forums and web sites). They also draw on the wider scenic discourses and practices of Noise more generally considered, such as widely disseminated publications like *The Wire* or *As Loud As Possible*, and larger festivals (such as No Fun Fest or Never Say When) taking place in bigger cities with concentrations of resources.

These larger scenic media and events, which bring local audiences into contact with subgeneric figures and facilitate widespread promotion and proliferation of the critical discourses circling around the music, would simply not be possible in the context of the relatively meagre resources of the local scenes. In this way, the Noise scene, considered globally and locally, displays the common underground dynamic of symbiotic, communal pooling of resources in a global-to-local and trans-local to-global fashion, where ‘global’ networks are personified in local iterations, and web mediation channels back in to the global scenic character. I considered describing the Noise scene in neotribal terms due to its members’ quite distinctive exploration of the transgressive, polemical sensibility expounded throughout this chapter. It was ultimately decided, however, that, unlike the Extreme Metal neotribe, the global Noise scene is fragmented along these lines to such an extent that the framework of the scene would serve as an adequate framing device.

In order to realise the wide-ranging interdisciplinary critique discussed at the beginning of this chapter, where pertinent musical and extra-musical textual dimensions and tensions are considered in a dynamic scenic framework, I move in the next two chapters between hermeneutical musical discussions and more general syntheses of secondary material. I engage in case studies throughout, notably of the Los Angeles Free Music Society, of the group SPK, and of the Lo-fi subgenre. The politics of Noise (in the sense outlined in the

opening paragraphs), adduced allegorically through the sonics and directly through the lyrics, titles, and imagery used on releases and in live concerts, will also be important. I engage in close readings of examples of Noise music throughout, both to embed my theoretical and political discussions in musical discourse, but also to cultivate an account of Noise ‘purely’, or as functionally close to ‘purely’ as is reasonably possible, in terms of its aesthetics. This latter focus comes to the fore particularly in Chapter Nine.

A complimentary pursuit to the more general investigation of Noise is the consideration of the *concept* of noise. As such, and in deference to the importance of noise as a metaphorical cultural phenomenon concerning disturbance and the interruption of signals, a metaphorical procedure that is continuous with the way the phenomenon of noise is generally conceived in negative relation to music and as a musical genre (the concept and the genre-in-discourse overlap), I will begin with some speculations on this relation in section 8.1. Following this, I move into more straightforward accounts, in sequence, of the history (8.2), scene (8.3) politics (8.4), and, in the following chapter, Lo-fi and post-Noise music. These accounts are exemplified in each case both through a broad survey on the one hand and a range of more in depth case studies on the other.

8.1 Noise as Concept

In the beginning was the noise.⁷

Think of another noise: the chain is broken again and everything vanishes in the bewildered flight. The noise temporarily stops the system, makes it oscillate indefinitely. To eliminate the noise, a non-stop signal would be necessary; then the signal would no longer be a signal and everything would start again, more briskly than usual. Theorem: noise gives way to a new system, an order that is more complex than the simple chain. This parasite interrupts at first glance, consolidates when you look again.⁸

⁷ Michel Serres, Trans. Lawrence R. Schehr, *The Parasite*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 13.

⁸ *Ibid* p. 14.

In these Michel Serres quotations we are provided with a vision of noise – of static, according to the French original of ‘parasite’, the title of the book from which these quotations come – as an interference that yet constitutes the (radical) origin of all systems, the disorder that creates tension, instability, and, ultimately, development. Serres asks earlier in the same text, in deference to the notion that things ‘work because they do not work’:⁹ ‘Can we rewrite a system...not in the key of pre-established harmony but in what (Leibniz) called seventh chords? Not with the equilibrium he loved to mention in mind but with the waves and shock on line in mind?’¹⁰ In this broadly figurative conception ‘noise’ is aligned with, even equated to, the disorder at the heart of all intellectual and biological existence; noise here functions as a metaphor for the non-symmetry that governs the universe.¹¹ Noise stands in simply on the one hand as the antinomy of desired communication or arrangement, and complexly on the other as systematic interruption or the interruption of systems.

Yet it is more than that, because even if noise ‘stops the system’ by making an interruption, then in that interruption, in that moment of open possibility or active negation, the opportunity for change arises, and things can be set on a new course. Noise, for Serres, represents an invigorating interruption, an opening for reform or revolt, even reform or revolt themselves (‘noise gives way to a new system’). Serres is not addressing Noise music directly, of course, but there is no reason why his speculations might not serve as structuring metaphors for my own conceptualisations of the noise of Noise.

In his twelve part *Theses on Noise*,¹² Mattin seeks to hold on to the ‘undifferentiated’ and

⁹ Ibid p. 13

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Compare the second law of thermodynamics, which roughly states that all order tends to disorder.

¹² ‘Theses on Noise’, http://www.mattin.org/essays/THESES_ON_NOISE.html, accessed 29 May 2010.

unpredictable conceptual force of noise, as opposed to its specific iterations in musical discourse as a genre synecdoche or signifier, though he also emphasis its sensual qualities:

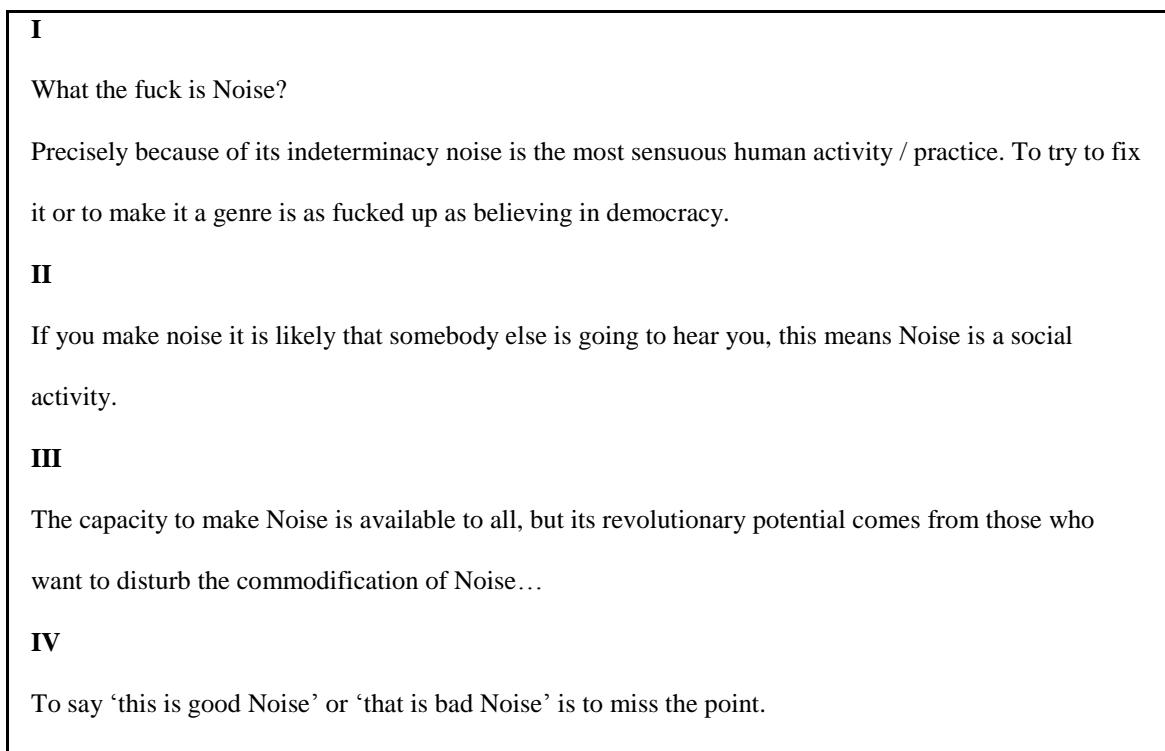


Fig 1. The first four of Mattin's theses on Noise.

Dominick Fernow, the person behind such Noise acts as Prurient and Vatican Shadow, echoes Mattin in identifying an extra-generic dimension to Noise, where it seen less as a specific set of sounds and sonic techniques, and more as an existential or moral category (echoing Butcher's separation of Improv into 'ideology' and 'genre' – these types of distinctions are typical of the ways that politics sometimes plays out in the underground on a discursive level):

The way I define noise is the freedom to pursue personal obsession, outside of genre and audience. I think that's largely been lost; in a scene that's supposed to be approaching some kind of freedom, it's sad to me how conservative and conformist it's become. I think there's a problem now where noise for many people simply means distortion, and to me that might be noise *sound* but the ideology of it is really just total selfishness and self-exploration...My involvement and interest in noise is entirely anti-musical; it's all concept.¹³

¹³ Fernow in Kiran Sande, 'Interview with Dominic Fernow', <http://www.factmag.com/2012/04/01/prurient-and-still-wanting/>, accessed 21 August 2012.

The philosopher Ray Brassier, meanwhile, in contradistinction to Fernow and Mattin, seems to conflate noise-as-concept and Noise-as-genre:

What I consider interesting about noise is its dis-organising potency: the incompressibility of a signal interfering with the redundancy in the structure of the receiver. Not transduction but schizduction: Noise scrambles the capacity for self-organisation.¹⁴

Regardless of whether noise is being explicitly conceived in musical terms or not, these are all moral and politically-scored readings. And political potency of a general kind drives the Noise genre itself, being manifest across its various lexical (as slogans, as imagery), physical (riots, confrontational and/or violent performance approaches), and sonic (harmonic density and dynamic extremity) levels.

For Paul Hegarty,

Noise is a negativity (it can never be positively, definitively and timelessly located), a resistance, but also defined by what society resists. It works as a deconstruction, so, in practice, this means that identifying the noise in a piece of music is only the initial step; the next is to see noise as the relation between that first, explicit noise, and that which is not noise.¹⁵

Hegarty subscribes to a relational conception of noise whereby a thing (a sound, for example, or a musical-performative gesture) is formally constituted as noise by its context and its reception. It is that which is resisted, but it also supervenes the relationship between itself and not-itself, such that it becomes a deconstructive force redefining the signal against which it is placed in relation. For Hegarty and Brassier, as much as for Serres, noise, qua abstract concept *and* qua specific sonic event, *reveals*, whether that revealing be of the limits or frailties of a system, of the 'redundancy' or lack in the perceiving systems of its receiver, of

¹⁴ Brassier, 'Metal Machine Theory 3', http://www.mattin.org/essays/METAL_MACHINE_THEORY_3.html, accessed 30 May 2011.

¹⁵ Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, p. ix.

the artificiality of seemingly ‘natural’ boundaries between, for example, tonality and atonality in music, or, in a more positive sense, of new possibilities and alternative, even emancipatory, principles and procedures.

The connections just surveyed between systemic, musical, and cultural noise are perhaps obscure ones to raise, strange propositions with which to start an essay on Noise *music*. However, they key us into an allegorical understanding of noise that situates it in a realm beyond the aesthetic – to which we will come – in the space rather of politics and culture, or, at least, in the space *also-and-at-the-same-time* of politics and culture. The point is that the conceptual and the aesthetic and political are all joined in the multiple and mobile (e.g. critical, musical) discourses around Noise (many of the above quotations of course came from Noise musicians themselves). Yet, accepting this confluence, it nevertheless makes sense, for the sake of coherence, to consider each of these textual levels in turn. As such, the chapter is divided into various subsections that match the possible readings of Noise, in relation to its applications as history, as scene, as politics, and as music.

8.2 Noise as *History*

Noise, as with other music, evolves under the influence of technology and culture; music is, in Simon Frith’s words, ‘an effect of historical forces – social, technological and musical’.¹⁶ That is, music influences the development of other music, but that antecedent music, like what comes after it, is also crucially formed out of the technological and cultural (and social, and political, and industrial, and so on) contexts of its age.

¹⁶ Simon Frith, Review of *The Cambridge Companion to the Beatles*, edited by Kenneth Womack, in *Popular Music*, Volume 31, Special Issue 02, May 2012, p. 313.

However, that being acknowledged, I want to defend the focus sought below on music and, at a push, cultural issues. I am not, with this historical focus, suggesting that the musical developments surveyed can be seen to be in a necessarily causal relationship, but merely that they can be seen as correlates of each other. I am not, likewise, suggesting that these developments existed in a vacuum of ‘pure’ music, but merely that each of the mentioned artists could be seen of a piece, at least in musical and cultural terms, with the others. These musics, I suggest, developed from broadly shared cultural and technological contexts, such as the emergence of popular music as a distinct and pervasive cultural form, the new availability of cheap electric music instruments, and a postmodern, ‘information age’ blurring of boundaries between the past and the present (through the growth in technologies of record and preservation, such as the magnetic tape), and the ‘high’ and the ‘low’.

The aesthetic and political inclinations of earlier cultural movements or individuals, such as the Dadaists or composers such as John Cage, can be linked profitably to the emergence of proto-underground artists in the 1960s, from the Velvet Underground, to the Sonics, to the No Nihilist Spasm Band, to Peter Brötzmann. It is the case with Noise that a similar cultural heritage can be put forward. However, in order to bring a sharpened historical focus, I would like to focus on important developments that shaped the emerging Noise scene in the 1970s and 1980s. It is in this period that the most germane historico-cultural developments, such as the diversification of rock’s ‘signals’ with noise that is evident in the formally, lyrically, and gesturally exploratory music of artists such as Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart, alongside distinct Noise activity in itself, took place. I’ll focus on the latter.

8.2.1 Los Angeles Free Music Society and 1970’s ‘Amerinoise’

In contrast to the technical sophistication of Beefheart and Zappa’s music (where the

asymmetric polyrhythms and aperiodic phrasing of the former emerge out of highly sophisticated musicianship, for example), and yet building on the genre deformations – a term I discuss at length in section 8.4.4, but which essentially suggests destabilisation of expectation, in this case genre expectation/convention, through various means – and experimental, proto-Noise model of both artists with a freer sonic, technological, and compositional sense, the Los Angeles Free Music Society's (LAFMS) music displays an intense sense of Dada disorder and juxtaposition, a consistent formal jaggedness, and a taste for surreal sonic collage. The group's musical activities ranged from intimate tape collages, to wild noise improvisations, to tiny sonic curiosities derived from circuit bending activities with basic technology and objects. In Byron Coley's words, 'Improvisation, concrete assemblage, kraut-moosh, tinkling, noise, and weirdness for the sake of weirdness were all perceived as hallmarks of the LAFMS ethos'.¹⁷

The LAFMS is a loose federal configuration that originated as a record label and a sort of organising principle for a scene in East Los Angeles.¹⁸ The first moves in its direction were made in 1973 by Rick Potts, Joe Potts, and Chip Chapman. Their group, Patients in East L.A., made improvised music featuring taped cartoon samples. They were later to become Le Forte Four (following a transitional point using the 'LAFMS' as an actual band name), with the addition of Tom Potts in 1975. Around the same time, musicians Tom Recchion, Harold Schroeder, and, later, Juan Gomez, were gathering in Poo-Bah Record Shop (in Pasadena) and making music of a similar art brut bent. The Doo-Dooetes, as these three were to be known, along with the free-form group Smegma (whose improvisational music featured strange trinket noise makers, alongside tapes and turntables), also of Pasadena, were to merge

¹⁷ Byron Coley, 'Forever Expanding Internal Horizons', <http://www.cortical.org/spores/ByronColey.html>, accessed 13 June 2011; also available at <http://lafms.wordpress.com/byron-coley-essay/>, accessed 17 August 2012.

¹⁸ Much of my initial historical account is drawn from Rolf Sempredon's 'LAFMS' *All Music* entry: <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/lafms-p365911/biography>, accessed 18 June 2011.

with Le Forte Four (and others) in 1975 under the banner of the LAFMS.

Various compilations promoting affiliate groups' music were independently released through mail order by the LAFMS, including, between 1978 and 1980, the three volume *Blorp-Essette* series,¹⁹ and the 1976 open invitation pay-to-play *I.D. Artist*.²⁰ Throughout the late-1970s and 1980s new projects emerged from the LAFMS pool, including the Harsh Noise groups Airway and Dinosaurs With Hands, whilst, in addition, and in Edwin Pouncy's words, the LAFMS 'held Fluxus-style concerts and happenings, (and) published a magazine called *Light Bulb*'.²¹

Whilst it is the case that the label itself has not issued any new releases since the mid-1980s, it is also true that the LAFMS organisation continues to be active, has even been transformed by newer forms of media and by the proclaimed influence it has had over Japanese Noise groups such as Incapacitants and Hijokaidan. The core LAFMS artists performed in London in October 2010 alongside their Japanese (and otherwise) Noise descendants in the 'Lowest Form of Music' weekend-long Sound and Music backed event dedicated to celebrating their legacy,²² whilst the LAFMS now runs a comprehensive website that links to details and recordings of affiliates' performances, that sells affiliate-music, and that provides a linking-point for new and older fans alike.²³

The relevance of the LAFMS' range of self-determining, sub-mainstream (in aesthetics and practice), deforming techniques has obvious relevance to my wider subject of the

¹⁹ Various, *Blorp-Essette* Volumes 1, 2, and 3 (1978, 1980, 1980), LAFMS 005/010/011.

²⁰ Various, *I.D. Artist* (1976), LAFMS 002.

²¹ Edwin Pouncy, 'The Los Angeles Free Music Society', <http://www.cortical.org/pouncey.html>, accessed 20 June 2011.

²² The full programme of which can be viewed at the Sound and Music web site: <http://www.soundandmusic.org/projects/lowest-form-music/events>, accessed 7 July 2012.

²³ <http://www.lafms.com/>, accessed 21 June 2011.

underground. In Byron Coley's words,

The LAFMS was a lightning rod for pre-punk & non-punk musical whatsis from all over the globe...one of the LAFMS' prime functions was to transform itself (via 'mere' extended activity) into a kind of magneto-art-sump for universal noise oddballs. Because it was physically locate-able, and copiously documented its members' gush, the LAFMS drew disaffected weirdos to its hub in the way that doughnuts attract fat cops. Its name became a kind of secret handshake that allowed culturally disenfranchised puds & pudettes to identify each other.²⁴

Therefore, we can see in the LAFMS example, first of all, the expected predominance of physical media and physical distribution channels such as records, cassettes, and magazines, and mail order, and, secondly, the importance of local scenic locations and relationships in establishing the organisation. This physical boundedness, as Coley points out, drew other musicians and audience members to Los Angeles, whilst also encouraging the more extensive spread of LAFMS-affiliated work through the postage system and the network of 'zines and concerts through which Noise evolved in the 1970s and 1980s. And, as technology evolved, so have LAFMS, with the web being used by the group as an important tool of publicity and dissemination.

The improvisatory, collage/concrète, oddball humour, and avant garde DIY noisemaking-as-musical-performance/composition of the LAFMS groups has proved to be of signal importance for the Noise genre, as evidenced both by the prevalence of such techniques across the Noise scene, and by the canonising nature of the Lowest Form of Music Festival, where Noise luminaries and audiences welcomed the LAFMS musicians with heartfelt reverence. Moreover, I would like to suggest, LAFMS music can be understood to be Noise's first distinct exemplar in musical history: building on Free Jazz, Zappa, and the art brut experimental Americana of Harry Partch and Beefheart, amongst others, the LAFMS groups

²⁴ Coley, 'Forever Expanding Internal Horizons'.

can be seen to have provided a DIY noise template – both in terms of their self-generating mail order network and physical embeddedness, and their musical style(s) – that not only continues to be explored by Noise artists active today, but that also, in itself, deserves to be recognised as Noise and underground practice *as such*.

The various LAFMS artists, alongside sonic anarchists the Residents, who likewise drew on Dada, Zappa, Beefheart, and the Velvet Underground, and who used and explored noise, Rock instrumentation, (extreme) humour, and collage, might jointly be described in generic terms as something like ‘1970s Amerinnoise’. The nomenclature is not important, however; the wider point I’m trying to make about these musicians is that they can be seen to constitute a sort of cultural scene with comparable roots and practices, a scene that was also to prove of signal influence on the coming American Noise artists, and on the future ‘weird’ elements of the underground in general, from tape labels, to Japanese Noise, to Free Improv, to post-Noise alike. As Byron Coley has commented of the LAFMS, it linked ‘the Euro-rooted sophistication of early ‘70s American experimentation to the insanely intuitive noise gushing that came about after punk unlocked the underground’s id’.²⁵ As such, I would like to suggest that the LAFMS, along with groups such as the Residents, provide a particularly useful node of identification for the emerging outsider strains of culture that were to flourish within the environs of the underground.

8.2.2 A Schematic (Musical) History of Noise Music from the late-1970s on.

Noise music understood as such emerged in the late-1970s with a number of interlinked genres orbiting around the central sphere of Harsh Noise, the latter being a broad generic

²⁵ Byron Coley, ‘Forever Expanding Internal Horizons’.

category that covers much in the scene of Noise music. Noteworthy examples include Industrial and Power Electronics artists such as SPK, Non, Throbbing Gristle, Whitehouse, and Nurse With Wound, and, in Japan, the late-1980s and 1990s emerging LAFMS- and Harsh Noise-influenced Merzbow, Monde Bruit, Incapacitants, and Hijokaidan. The Industrial genre was named after Throbbing Gristle's record label, and blends extreme post-punk and electronic music experiments, usually in the context of transgressive themes, with song forms generally persisting. Power Electronics was named by Whitehouse's William Bennett, and features analogue and cheap digital synthesisers playing piercing high frequencies, distortion, and sub-bass rumble, in addition to sampled speeches and screeched and screamed lyrics, in a context of aperiodic, amelodic, and atonal gestures and designs. In contrast to Industrial Music, Power Electronics lies much more toward the extreme end of the Noise spectrum, with song form being fractured into a loose rallying call of repeated lyrics and passages of noise.

As Nick Cain suggests, what unites Industrial and Power Electronic artists is a desire to explore 'linkages between Noise, transgressive behaviour and taboo imagery'.²⁶ The Japanese groups, meanwhile, explored Noise less as a political than as a musical configuration (in Badiouian terms), a configuration where the negating, resisting impulse of Industrial music had been broadly subsumed by *musical* concerns. However, this is of course not to deny the possible (allegorical) embeddedness of political tensions within that music.

Since the 1990s the Noise scene has undergone wide hybridisation: latter day Harsh Noise subgenres, such as Harsh Wall Noise, which developed concurrently in the American and Japanese Noise scenes of the 1990s with artists such as Monde Bruit and Incapacitants for the

²⁶ Nick Cain, 'Noise'.

latter, and Skin Crime and Black Leather Jesus for the former, are practiced by artists Japanese (K.K. Null) or otherwise (Werewolf Jerusalem, Kites, Hum of the Druid, Wolf Eyes). These Harsh Noise genres sit alongside diffuse techniques and practices, from persisting Power Electronics (Genocide Organ), to DIY Noise Improv (Prick Decay, Sonic Catering Band, Morphogenesis), to the noisier ends of Lo-Fi, to Noise performance art (Justice Yeldham), to concept-laden Noise Rock and Improvisation (Mattin), to the wide scene of post-Noise music. I examine some of this music in Chapter Nine. The political vitality of Noise, finally, so explicit in the early taboo-baiting work of Industrial and Power Electronics artists, is now, in the hybridised Noise scene of 2012, less clear.

Broadly speaking, and as referenced at the start, Noise in 2012 is a broad quasi-federal banner that unites more or less ‘authentic’ Noise genres (from Harsh Wall Noise at one end to for example some forms of Dance at the other), whilst also remaining open to hybrid, cross-genre exchanges of ideas where noise – or notions or gestures from Noise – is used as a catalytic driving force for creation. I might indeed suggest a split between Harsh Noise artists, and artists operating either in post-Noise contexts or in the sort of interstitial, cross-genre space typified by improvisers such as Evan Parker and Ken Vandermark’s work with Noise artists/composers like John Weise and Mattin.

To describe Noise music and music that uses noise in a central role in 2012, I am led to the tripartite classification contained on the next page (with representative examples of genres in the lower row), in order of importance of ‘noise’ – sonic extremity, confrontational performance, etc. – to the music’s aesthetic. This classification provides a useful framework for understanding Noise music as it stands in 2012.

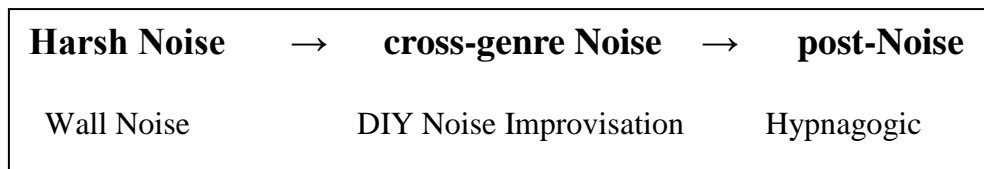


Fig. 2 The range of Noise activity in 2012, ordered by importance of ‘noise’.

The latter part of my history has been intentionally brief: I was especially interested in excavating the historical roots of Noise and, by doing so, the underground. However, beyond that I have given only a cursory account of things as they proceeded in Noise from the late-1970s onwards. Whilst I believe that such a schematic framework as I have provided is useful as a tool of clarification, it is hoped that the interesting tensions and practices that have arisen in Noise music in the past thirty years will profit from the kind of loose, thematic investigation provided below.

8.3 Noise as Scene

To add some more specifics on the Noise scene already discussed at length in Part II, I’ll briefly discuss specific examples of distribution models and intra-scene relationships, as a way of illustrating wider practices. In terms of record labels and so on, much of the Noise scene, as instanced in the example of LAFMS, is dependent on self-circulation, or at the most on circulation by independent labels and local distributors such as Hospital Productions. This latter label, for example, has released work by such prominent Noise acts as Burning Star Core, Kevin Drumm, and Prurient, with many of these releases taking the form of tape releases, a principal medium in the DIY/Noise scene.²⁷

²⁷ <http://hospitalproductions.net/> and <http://hospitalproductions.net/category/releases/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

A close relationship exists between New Age Tapes, which is the label of post-Noise musician James Ferraro and is used primarily for small run releases of his music on CD-R or cassette, and Volcanic Tongue.²⁸ Volcanic Tongue are distributors (and a label) operating out of a record shop in Glasgow and through their website, who provide Ferraro's UK and European audience with direct access to physical instances of his work; Volcanic Tongue, unlike larger distributors or web shops such as Boomkat, restrict their output to physical releases. The access to physical copies of Ferraro's work is especially prized, given the cost of shipping from the U.S.A to the UK and Europe. The physically-marked but web-facilitated (both rely on websites as central tools of publicity and communication) relationship between New Age Tapes and Volcanic Tongue is exemplary in terms of the international scenic channels, folded in on themselves digitally as they are, but dependent as they also are on physical concentrations of people for the hosting/attendance of concerts and festivals, and on specific distributors for bringing in sometimes hard to acquire physical copies of music (in this respect, at least, the underground's anintermediation breaks down somewhat).

In addition to this web-facilitated physical nexus, there are, of course, myriad small, independent distributors of Noise music who, because of the possibilities of the web, have been able to enjoy wide access to international artists, and who likewise enjoy an accessible presence on the web, for those who know where to look.

Wolf Eyes provide an interesting example in this regard of Noise distribution. Wolf Eyes have released some albums on a comparatively large label (*Burned Mind* and *Human Animal* on Sub Pop), and some on smaller, but sizable, Noise and Noise rock imprints (*Dead Hills* on

²⁸ <http://www.volcanictongue.com/>, and <http://www.volcanictongue.com/labels/show/329>, accessed 20 August 2012.

Troubleman Unlimited, *Always Wrong* on Hospital Productions).²⁹ However, the group release the majority of their vast output, which generally takes the form of CD-Rs or cassettes, and, occasionally, LPs, on their own American Tapes/Hanson Records label/s, for which Wolf Eyes member John Olson completes much of the artwork.³⁰ American Tapes now uses its Tumblr blog³¹ as the main portal of access for customers. Wolf Eyes have also been typical of the Noise scene in the frequency of their collaborative releases, as for example with their albums with Anthony Braxton (*Black Vomit*), Smegma (*The Beast*), and Prurient (*The Warriors*), their split cassette with Metalux (Untitled), their split LP with The Skull Defekts (*Yes, I am Your Angel*), and their split 7" with John Weise (Untitled), to name only a very small selection.

So, whilst Wolf Eyes are untypical of Noise artists in that they have released albums on a (comparatively) major record label, and in the (again, comparatively) very wide exposure that their music has achieved, they are also highly typical of the scene, in that they run their own limited release, physical media-focused label whose activities are facilitated almost exclusively by the web, and in the fact that they have engaged in a wide range of musical collaborations.

It goes without saying, in addition to the web-mediated physical connections of distributors and labels such as Volcanic Tongue and New Age Tapes, and the web-mediated sales of labels such as American Tapes, that much Noise music circulates on blogs and MP3 blogs, and through peer-to-peer filesharing services. These are simply too many in number to name, but significant examples of the former include Noise Not Music³² (which attempts to limit its

²⁹ A full Wolf Eyes Discography is viewable here: <http://www.discogs.com/artist/Wolf+Eyes>, accessed 13 June 2011.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ <http://americantapes.tumblr.com/>, accessed 20 August 2012.

³² <https://noisenotmusic.wordpress.com/>, accessed 20 June 2011.

sharing to ‘out of print or otherwise unavailable CD-Rs, cassettes and vinyl’), ‘harsh noise’,³³ The Static Fanatic,³⁴ Mutant Sounds,³⁵ and New Noise Net.³⁶

To conclude on this section, brief though it has been, I’ll once again cite Mattin. In his essay for *Noise and Capitalism*, Mattin discusses the underground framework of DIY concerts, collapsed notions of producer and consumer, and web-distribution models, as they are exemplified in the Noise scene:

The noise scene is founded upon people organising concerts in all kinds of places, releasing music in any kind of medium and finding, along the way, different means of distribution. This allows for many collaborations to occur. In this scene the do it yourself ethos is part of the survival... People have been self-organising themselves by organising concerts wherever possible and more. This self-organisation, which constantly makes people change roles; from player to organiser, from critic, to distributor, helps people understand each other’s roles. An example of this is Daniel Löwenbrück, who for the last 15 years has run the label and mail order outfit Tochnit Aleph. He has just opened the record shop Rumpsti Pumsti (Kreuzberg, Berlin), he performs under the name Raionbashi and he has organised concerts for some of the most radical artists in Berlin.³⁷

Noise music, as Mattin suggests, uses a DIY ethos, which combines with new forms of media and the distribution and promotion they facilitate, to produce the sort of self-determined networks of performer/composer-label-distributor-consumer/listener so common to the underground model of culture (as it is currently comprised), as we saw in a related sense in the discussion of Free Improvisation in Chapter Five. In this latter respect of collapsed boundaries between ‘producer’, ‘distributor’, and audience’, the Noise scene, again like the underground more generally, can be seen to be a small scale exemplification of Henry Jenkins’ ‘participatory culture’,³⁸ where hierarchies of consumption and production are made

³³ <http://harshnoise.blogspot.com/>, accessed 20 June 2011.

³⁴ <http://thestaticfanatic.blogspot.co.uk/>, accessed 22 June 2011.

³⁵ <http://mutant-sounds.blogspot.co.uk/>, accessed 21 June 2011.

³⁶ <http://newnoisenet.blogspot.com/>, accessed 20 June 2011.

³⁷ Mattin, ‘Anti-Copyright’.

³⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, 2006.

permeable to a substantial degree, and the resulting networks embed social as well as financial exchange. In addition, in the Noise and underground context, the problems of subsumption and exploitation by large corporations entailed in the Web 2.0 contexts discussed by Jenkins, are, as suggested in Chapter Four, to a degree circumvented through the scene's comparatively tiny, anintermediated and nested size and nature.

8.4 Noise as Politics

The duality of Noise-as-music and Noise-as-politics is recognised here as being at the heart of Noise music. A letter printed in the January 2011 issue of *The Wire*, by Noise critic Idwal Fisher, raises some important points in this respect. The letter was written in response to the plea in the previous month's issue by the magazine's Editor, Chris Bohn, for Noise musicians to work out – in light of the absorption or exhaustion of formerly transgressive practices common to Noise, such as the use of images of dead bodies or Nazi imagery on record sleeves – 'new strategies for telling unpalatable truths'.³⁹ Fisher asks,

Can't you make Noise and experiment with Noise and use what the hell you want for cover art or T-shirt art without recourse to explain yourself? Can't you make Noise and Industrial music just for the sheer pleasure of it? Because you like the sound of what you do?...How many Noise/Industrial artists still think of themselves as controversial?⁴⁰

Idwal Fisher here draws attention to a split in the discourses around Noise, where some aver on the necessity of, if not explicit political sloganeering or advocacy, then at least radical transgressive content, and others, such as Fisher in this example, respond with pleas of the order, 'Noise for noise's sake!'. Should Noise music define itself as a critical practice offering forms of moral and political resistance or transgression in musical form, or should it, rather, be 'allowed' as much as is possible simply to exist as a sonic phenomenon? This

³⁹ Chris Bohn, 'Masthead', in *The Wire*, December 2010.

⁴⁰ Idwal Fisher in *The Wire*, January 2011, p.6.

(tenuous) dichotomy, adopted for the purposes of argument, brings us directly to a hugely important tension – the relation and independence/mutuality of noise and politics. This tension has been at the heart of the discourses around Noise music since that music's inception in the 1970s.

I will proceed here by theorising on the nature of political discourse in Noise music, before subjecting these theories to analysis both in a central case study that focuses on the early Australian Industrial act SPK, and in a broader intertextual discussion of the political context of Noise.

8.4.1 Noise as Politics as Contestatory Strategy

Noise music is able to reflect in its extremity of subject matter and its sonic extremity the unvarnished force relations of society, to stage the brutality and grime of life and thus to reveal in some way the tensions that afflict that life (akin to the 'counter-magic' mentioned in Chapter Four). It does this in a way that few other musics can, at least in terms of sheer brutal bluntness of allegory. As with the scene of Extreme Metal, in relation to which I put forward, in Chapter Ten, the theoretical framework of 'melancology' and 'productive nihilism', many Noise musicians have as their stated goal the desire to 'cleanse' in some way what they see as a putrid, pathogenic, pathological, society. Italian Power Electronics artist Maurizio Bianchi's goal to 'produce technological sounds to work for a full awareness of modern decadence'⁴¹ is typical. Further, across all of the Noise artists examined below we find either a tangential engagement with radical ideas through extreme aesthetic choices, or direct grappling with issues of social justice and with critical frameworks of cultural apartheid derived from

⁴¹ Bianchi, <http://www.discogs.com/artist/Maurizio+Bianchi>, accessed 12 June 2011.

thinkers such as Michel Foucault.

This grappling often takes the form of miming of or over-identification with the practices of the ‘ruling ideology’, in order to expose the internal contradictions of that ideology. An illustrative example would be the Slovenian Industrial group Laibach, whose name is taken from the German version of Slovenia’s capital, and who model their concerts after fascist rallies turned (sometimes kitsch) musical spectacle, complete with demotic rhetoric, uniforms, and Nazi iconography.⁴² Laibach are the musical wing of the ‘Neue Slowenische Kunst’ collective, whose ‘mission’, in its own words, ‘is to make evil lose its nerves’.⁴³

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek pursues a similar rhetorical strategy, where, as a sort of grand and extended *reductio ad absurdum*, the underlying prejudices and distortions of hegemonic or totalitarian ideologies are taken on their own terms, shifted to their logical extreme, and pantomimed. This threefold process aims to expose the paradoxes inherent in such ideologies:

In order to function properly, power discourse must be inherently split, it must ‘cheat’ performatively, to disavow its own underlying performative gesture. Sometimes, therefore, the only truly subversive thing to do when confronted with a power discourse is simply to *take it at its word*.⁴⁴

Žižek even compares his own rhetorical strategies to those of Laibach, stating that,

The big question that everybody is asking herself or himself apropos of Laibach of course is, are they taking themselves serious or is it meant in an ironic way? Well I think of course this is the wrong alternative... I think that the whole point, the basic

⁴² A performance at Tate Modern in May 2012 had the band performing in militaristic uniform, with videos of industrial factories and Nazi space characters (from the film *Iron Sky*); Agata Pyzik, in *The Wire*, June 2012, p. 75.

⁴³ Quoted in Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK*, MIT Press, p. 95.

⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 237.

underlying premise of Laibach's strategy is that, in this whole, not only for Slovenia but let's say generally, for so-called late capitalism in general even, that system itself has as its inherent condition of functioning that its own ideology must not be taken seriously... The only way, I would even say, to be really subversive is not to develop critical potentials, ironic distance, but precisely to take the system more seriously than it takes itself... I think that this is one of the keys to Laibach's strategy.⁴⁵

Zizek, Laibach, and many of the Noise artists examined below mimic transgression in order to expose it. Theirs is not a comfortable, politically correct critique with clear answers and a balanced weighing of opinion. It is a model of critique that is organised around provocation, around asking questions of the audience's desires and predilections, rather than seeking to establish the desires and predilections of the musicians/critic. The very ambiguity of the critique leads some to question whether it ends up endorsing that which it seemingly seeks to undermine, or indeed even to question whether undermining is the desired effect in the first place. It leads others to question how effective as contestation such an ambiguous and open-to-interpretation strategy could possibly be.

As we will see below, many Noise artists have indeed been accused of subscribing to far right ideologies as a result of their adoption of and (over-)identification with iconography and imagery from these movements. My argument is that, through various contextualising means, the Noise music I examine resists such dichotomised, simplistic adjudication. In what follows I attempt to provide a critical framework, anchored in close readings of various artists and their music, through which the actions and aesthetics of Noise musicians might be seen in similar terms to those discussed in relation to the Zizek/Laibach model of contestatory resistance. I cannot provide definitive answers here to the questions of veracity and effectiveness, but I would suggest that the Zizek/Laibach framework of miming transgression for some sort of ambiguous, critical, or dissimulating purpose is a common trope within the

⁴⁵ Zizek in 'What the hell is Laibach about?', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BZl8ScVYvA>, accessed 18 August 2012.

Noise scene.

8.4.2 SPK

The case of Australia-originating and UK-based group SPK is an instructive one in this context. Operating primarily within the Industrial Music scene, SPK was started by two mental health workers, Neil Hill and Graeme Revell, in Sydney in 1978. SPK's goal, in its founders' own words, was as follows: 'The project ideal is to express the content of various psycho-pathological conditions, especially schizophrenia, manic-depressive psychosis, mental retardation and paranoia'.⁴⁶ Further, SPK state,

A lot of what we're doing is dirt, is filth, and we live in a society that pretends to be exceptionally clean. It cleans up everything, it paints facades and makes things shiny and bright. I think the unifying theme is that we are very conscious that whenever there's a winner in a clean society, there's a filthy loser as well. But that tends to be just shoved away either in a back ward or a jail or a back street or a dirty little squatter.⁴⁷

Whilst other Noise musicians advocated rituals or acts of cleansing, SPK desired instead to nullify what they saw as illusory 'cleanliness' through an accentuation of dirt and filth, through a subversion in music and text of the rigged stage-set that they saw as constituting socially-constructed reality.

SPK outlined a philosophically-engaged political programme through their series of manifesto-like 'Dokuments' and through various other texts. This political programme orientated around a Foucauldian diagnosis – a diagnosis notable particularly in *The Will to*

⁴⁶ SPK, 'Dokument 1', <http://home.pi.be/~spk/spkdokuments.htm>, accessed 17 June 2011.

⁴⁷ SPK, 'Interview', in *RE/Search #6/7: Industrial Culture Handbook*, <http://www.researchpubs.com/books/ichprod.php>, accessed 15 June 2011.

Knowledge,⁴⁸ the first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* – of power dynamics as these have been configured through biopolitical discourse in the past few centuries.

Power always rests in the last instance on the power to put to death - actual, threatened or symbolic. And in the modern case this power operates symbolically by the naturalisation, or MEDICALISATION of life and death... Death is everywhere in life. SPK is not fetishising a situation. It is exposing this cathedral of death. The strategy is not dialectical - liberation vs. control, unconscious vs. conscious, deviant vs. normal, sexual vs. chastity. The strategy is CATASTROPHIC - pushing the situation to the limit. The strategy is SYMBOLIC - using the system's own intolerable signs against it.⁴⁹

SPK's politics here are not advanced through an explicit engagement with grass roots political organisations or lobby groups, nor are they couched in dialectical-materialistic terms; rather the group seeks to stage an *aesthetic* catastrophe, a symbolic presentation of 'the system's own intolerable sins against it', thus echoing Laibach. At bottom, SPK held a Marxist/Foucauldian political conviction about society, a conviction that orientated around the iniquity of power relations as they have played out in Western capitalist society. Again, in their words:

SPK is trying to be a voice for those individuals condemned to the slow decay of mental hospitals and chemical/electro/surgical therapy, without fetishising them into blatant entertainment product. 'SONIC FOR MANICS' aims to be a vehicle for sharing mental experiences through sound.⁵⁰

SPK's derivation of its name from the manifesto of the radical Marxist group 'Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv', 'a patients' collective founded in Heidelberg in February 1970, by Dr. Wolfgang Huber',⁵¹ can be seen to be in keeping with its stated ideals. The *collective's* principle goal, as stated in the title of its most famous publication, was to 'Turn illness into a

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, London: Penguin, 1998.

⁴⁹ SPK, 'The Post-Industrial Society', in *RE/Search #6/7: Industrial Culture Handbook*, <http://home.pi.be/~spk/spkthepostindustrial.htm>, accessed 12 June 2011.

⁵⁰ SPK, 'Dokument 1'.

⁵¹ <http://www.spkpfh.de/Gossipcide.htm>, accessed 29 June 2011.

weapon'.⁵² Thus can the programmes of the musical group and the Marxist group be seen to be in sympathy. Each orientates around a distinct oppositional stance to mainstream society, where oppressed or neglected elements of that society (the diseased) are seized upon as possible focal points for resistance, as exemplars in the circuit of oppression which might be used, through re-articulation, *against* that oppression.

SPK conceived of the subaltern matrix as a site of possible weaponised revolt, albeit a weaponisation that would be fleshed out in sonics, in images, and in words, as opposed to guns or bombs. SPK's symbolic presentation of the dominant system's injustices was conveyed in musical, textual, and visual form through their tapes and records, and in physical form in their concerts, where practices such as mutilating dead animals on stage were common.⁵³ SPK's stated goals were indeed comparable to those of Throbbing Gristle, whose desires, in the words of Genesis P-Orridge, ran as follows; 'The idea: to heal and reintegrate the human character. To set off psychic detonations that negate control ... To exchange and liberate information'.⁵⁴ The last sentence is crucial for Gristle; where SPK sought a politics of the contaminated, Gristle focussed on issues of information freedom and propaganda, in addition to their regular themes of sexuality and pornography.

I will now turn to a specific examination of some of SPK's music and films in order to test their stated claims of subversion-through-transgression.

⁵² <http://www.spkpfh.de/Iatroimperialism.html>, accessed 30 June 2011.

⁵³ The group's *Despair* VHS, released in 1983 by Twin Vision, features a hooded band member chewing on what appears to be the corpse of a cat, in addition to oral sex being performed with a deceased human head. This section of the film is viewable at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyKX9yyKjjo&feature=relmfu&oref=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3D12Vs1ijujfE%26feature%3Drelmfu&has_verified=1, accessed 9 July 2012.

⁵⁴ Genesis P.Orridge, 'Behavioral Cut-Ups and Magick', in *Rapid Eye #2*, Annihilation Press, 1992.

The *Two Autopsy Films: Human Postmortem*,⁵⁵ from 1983, are exemplary in terms of SPK's thematic obsessions. Original music and image manipulation by the group were featured in the first video, with the second being simply the original autopsy film inviolate. These videos evidence SPK's desire to expose both the discursive processes that exist around the subject of death – in their actions here seeking not a sense of spectacle but rather the exposure of a clinical catastrophe; a heightening of a medicated coldness through aesthetic condensation – and also *the basic fact of death*, in Western society. SPK's titles and its lyrics are similarly suggestive of such thematic concerns. The title of their second album, 1982's *Leichenschrei*,⁵⁶ translates as 'The Scream of the Corpse'. An early track, 1979's 'Slogun',⁵⁷ more explicitly addresses in lyrics the group's 'ideal': 'Kill, Kill, Kill for inner peace/ Bomb, Bomb, Bomb for mental health/ Therapy through violence/SPK, SPK, SPK, SPK!'.

Musically, 'Slogun' is typical of the group, at least in its earliest phase, which would likely run until the suicide of Neil Hill in 1984. A superficial impression of six minutes of unalloyed screed overlaid with voices frantically shouting the aforementioned lyrics disguises some of 'Slogun's' distinct musical textures. An opening 45 seconds of stereo panned lo-fi noise gives way to a thudding drum and monotonal bass synthesiser loop, over which the lyrics are screamed in a metrically unrelated time. At around the two minute mark, the loop gives way to a shipwreck of sounds, with two voices now growling, one in each speaker, one in French and the other inaudible. They suddenly pronounce 'We will win!', and the loop kicks in, now hyperpaced and higher in register, with screaming feedback, metal thrashing (as with other Industrial groups, SPK often used actual pieces of metal as percussion instruments), and processed tape noises, in addition to pulsing synthesiser at the back of the

⁵⁵ SPK, *Two Autopsy Films: Human Postmortem* (1983), VHS, Twin Vision.

⁵⁶ SPK, *Leichenschrei* (1982), Thermidor, T 09.

⁵⁷ From SPK, *Factory* (1979), Side Effects, PRS 2643.

texture, dominating. The final two minutes feature the original form of the loop amidst a cloud of noise, the whole gradually fragmenting-forming into the crash ending. The overall impression is of an intense chaos, of a formal dissolution of music into turbulence, struggle, and fury, where specks of previous and future styles exist on the same plane as outright noise and heightened political sloganeering.

However, SPK's music was not all bluster and turbulence; a track such as 'The Agony of the Plasma', from side 2 of *Leichenschrei*, is more ambient, more calculated in its wedding of Noise aesthetics to collage and spoken word form, thus recalling both Throbbing Gristle and later Dark Ambient artists such as Lustmord and Strigoi Mortii.

'The Agony of the Plasma' is comprised of a woman's scream, quickly followed by smashing glass and surrounded by isolated synthesiser tones and sparing tom-tom fills, underlain by a barely-audible but authoritative voice intoning around the subject of epidemics and savages, and disease-as-predation. The track features a very deliberate use of musical space, each element being set in its linear and vertical place, allowed to build and coalesce, before a restrained but forceful climax of drums and noise arrives. Here, the unwieldy (though purposeful) sonic chaos of 'Slogun' is contextualised by a sense of moderation and a command of sources, which range in SPK's output from samples from films, to field recordings, to metallic percussion, to more conventional musical instruments.

'Napalm (Terminal Patient)', from the same record as 'Plasma', displays a similar sense of design; clanking metal and gurgling synthesiser sub-bass, along with menacing and mixed-low spoken word, move in and out of different atmospheres, with white noise, high frequencies, and processed noises akin to planes landing, building a textural dynamic as

subtle as ‘Slogun’ was cauterising.

Thus SPK use a sort of subliminal modality – which we could also call a sublime aesthetics⁵⁸ – in their work, where ambient textures filled out in fracture across the audible spectrum disguise buried voices, or industrial metals and frenzied noise serve as rickety and volatile counterweight to impassioned screams and uncontrolled screeching. SPK’s music resembles the brutal sonic and thematic programme of Industrial Music being supervised by stark Marxist theoretico-political conviction; by a politics of the subliminal, of the diseased and the contaminated, and of the weak. The lyrics and images do not homologise the music precisely, nor vice versa, but the strategies and goals SPK pursue across each of these ‘levels’ can be seen to be sympathetic and mutually informing, directed at the surveyed themes of ‘dirt’ and oppression, and engineered with ambiguity, intensity, and shock.

In their own words, referring to the ‘Information Overload’ concept of their debut album, *Information Overload Unit*, SPK rather plausibly condense their mission and their process into the following;

Information Overload supersedes normal, rational thought structures, forcing deviation into less restrictive mental procedures of so-called ‘mental illness’.⁵⁹

Notwithstanding this superseding of the rational in the context of a supposed instigation of a psychedelic mental ‘deviation’ into realms of mental illness on the part of the listeners and the producers, which I describe above with reference to SPK’s actual musical compositions in

⁵⁸ I am using the term ‘sublime’, as discussed at length in footnote 38 above, to communicate this music’s transcendence of conventional conceptual boundaries and perceptual categories. However, I am modifying the more general, historically-freighted concept of the sublime (again, see footnote 38) to reflect more directly the way this music is put together, and my own interpretation thereof. ‘Subliminal modality’ should be understood to invoke notions of the sublime, whilst denoting more directly the kinds of masking, concealing, and dissimulating processes and affects of this music.

⁵⁹ SPK, ‘Dokument 1’.

terms of a ‘subliminal modality’, the question of whether SPK can be seen to have performed any sort of ‘authentic’ political work, symbolic, material, or otherwise, by these means, is another matter entirely.

8.4.4 Political Noise?

The fact that key artists such as SPK and Throbbing Gristle, along with, for example, many artists affiliated with Broken Flag – an independent Power Electronics label run by Ramleh’s Gary Mundy which released, amongst other things, the important⁶⁰ 1982 *Neuengamme*⁶¹ compilation of a range of British and Italian Noise artists – used shocking imagery⁶² on their record sleeves (often of corpses, or of Nazi-paraphernalia), and took names derived from the Nazi Movement, as with the group Swastika Kommando or the title of *Neuengamme*, does not *necessarily* mean that Noise at this time had any substantive political content, either in terms of right *or* left politics.

In addition, the fact that many of the early Power Electronics concerts featured violence, even degenerated into mini-riots – as for example with the July 1st 1983 Roebuck Pub Whitehouse ‘live aktion’ with support from Ramleh, where, following glasses being thrown amidst violence in a crowd that included Nurse With Wound’s Steve Stapleton, the police raided the venue and, after being blocked entrance, eventually made a number of arrests⁶³ – equally does

⁶⁰ Particularly in the sense that it collected together in one place and thus documented some key Noise acts of the era, from Whitehouse to Consumer Electronics to Esplendor Geométrico, in a way that no other release of the era did.

⁶¹ Various, *Neuengamme* (1982), Broken Flag, STFV No. 1.

⁶² A famous example is Ramleh’s *Return to Slavery*, which featured an autopsy photograph on the cover, and which was banned the large record distributor Rough Trade in 1983: Steve Underwood, ‘Broken Flag’, in *As Loud As Possible*, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 84 - 85. The original Broken Flag issue of *Neuengamme* itself depicted a photocopied image of dead bodies (possibly Jewish victims of the eponymous concentration camp): Various, *Neuengamme*.

⁶³ Steve Underwood, ‘Broken Flag’, pp. 85 - 86.

not automatically signify political content. As Ray Brassier points out: ‘I don’t think it’s credible to attribute to Noise a directly anti-capitalist political valence... It’s not only content that’s political, it’s also the form of political deciphering: it’s not just what something is but also how it is interpreted that is political’.⁶⁴ Politics, as noted, is a relational concept, most often defined through ascription that is based directly on external reference points, such as the aforementioned riots and violence, as opposed, invariably, to the *sounds* of the music. It would be reasonable to describe a riot at a music concert as being in a broad sense ‘political’, just as it would seem to make sense to describe the decision of a distributor not to stock a certain album due to its divisive content as being in some way political. However, adjudicating over political efficacy or content *more precisely* is hugely difficult.

Compounding this difficulty is the fact that, even within the events and amongst its artists, Noise’s political motivations are generally ambiguous, rarely seeming to have developed further than a generalised nihilism and a desire for cleansing, which manifested in transgressive imagery, and violent actions and music. Noise music has been placed variously along the spectrum of political inclination, with the Nazi imagery and the far right sloganeering (Broken Flag’s *The Future Calls*,⁶⁵ from its *Soundtracks* series of cassettes using Third Reich and far right material with Power Electronics backing, even features a recording of a National Front meeting), obviously suggesting certain allegiances, and the experimentalism, the philosophising, and the taboo-baiting self-awareness of many of the musicians suggesting something quite distinct from these.

There is therefore a split in evidence between the apparent explicit political content of the words and images on one side, and, on the other, that content’s undermining (i.e. its being put

⁶⁴ Brassier, ‘Metal Machine Theory 3’.

⁶⁵ Various, ‘*The Future Calls*’ (1983), Broken Flag, 12.

into question as reliable and/or auto-biographical statements of value), its deformation – and here I mean to indicate the content’s sonic and affective re-articulation as something formally liminal, where a shift takes place in the actual delivery and receipt of those words and images in the context of extreme sound and performance, from the blank potential denotation of the content considered in an abstract sense, into its ‘thick’ connotation in concert or audition – and its overcoding, which latter term relates closely to deformation, but describes more explicitly the *emergent* semiotic effect of the undermining and deforming processes. These processes of undermining, deformation, and overcoding result from the artists’ noisy, exploratory, unpredictable music, and their excessive, carnivalesque stage antics.

Considering all this, we must return to my opening verdict of political ambiguity, coloured by Noise artists’ desire to ‘cleansed’ society by subjecting it to difficult and upsetting art. Broken Flag and Ramleh’s Gary Mundy echoes these points, as well as calling back in spirit to the Zizek/Laibach strategy of over-identification. In response to the point that the Nazi imagery was presented ‘without any explanation or apology’ on Ramleh releases, and thus was more ‘ambiguous’ than punks using swastikas on their clothes, Mundy states the following:

I liked the ambiguity, and I didn’t want it to be obvious whether it was pro- or anti-Nazi, or whether it was ironic or not. I was certainly OK with the idea that it might cause offence at the time, although I think when you listen to a lot of the stuff it’s fairly obvious that it’s not Pro-Nazi...I think because it was so extreme it was assumed it couldn’t be for real and we were mostly left alone.⁶⁶

Noise, as it was practiced by Ramleh and, it is reasonable to infer – considering the similarities in tone and subject matter – the rest of the Broken Flag artists, along with SPK, saw a sort of pushing of transgression to a tremendous excess. This excess undermined the very foundation of that transgression, made it into a sort of *ambiguous dissimulation*. This is

⁶⁶ Mundy in Steve Underwood, ‘Broken Flag’, p. 87.

a term of my own, which tries to get at the very intense sense of ironising dissembly that the excess just discussed achieves in this Noise music, and related forms, an ‘ironising dissembly’ that is nevertheless ‘ambiguous’, since it does not unequivocally signify one way or the other, it does not unequivocally render the expression in either dissimulating or confirmational terms. So, ‘ambiguous dissimulation’ can be described as an *affect*, a perception arising from the experience of the listener (in this case me), which unites and emerges from the ‘undermining, deformation, and overcoding’ just mentioned. In this case, the ambiguous dissimulation is apparent in how the the power of the far right imagery is somewhat estranged from itself here.

This sense of ambiguous dissimulation – of undermining, deformation, and overcoding – was reflected in the processes of the music, as we have seen in the case of the radicalised ironising of SPK. To take some more examples: the Rockwell *Hate*⁶⁷ cassette features electronic intensification (for example, using extreme volume to amplify certain statements) and undermining (in the spacing and distancing effects of echo and distortion) of the sampled speech of George Lincoln Rockwell, the American author of the infamous book *White Power*. The Whitehouse track ‘Buchenwald’,⁶⁸ which features high pitched grainy whistling sounds over metallic notes of barely-ordered feedback stumbling around some sort of desolation site, is simply too uncanny, too spectral, to be interpreted in anything other than ambiguous and confused terms. The same group’s ‘Ripper Territory’,⁶⁹ which features a recording of the voiceover from the nightly news on the day of Ripper murderer Peter Sutcliffe’s arraignment at court, and which sets this voiceover over a hairshirt bed of low-level noise with bursts of violent feedback, similarly presents the listener with a confusing, unsettling experience.

⁶⁷ Rockwell, *Hate* (1983), Broken Flag, BF09.

⁶⁸ Whitehouse, *Buchenwald* (1981), Come Organisation, WDC 881013.

⁶⁹ Whitehouse, *Dedicated To Peter Kurten Sadist And Mass Slayer* (1981), Come Organisation, WDC 881010.

It would be basically impossible to rally around these tracks as celebrations of their subjects; we are not accustomed to seeing such oddness being honoured by far right demagogues. However, it is also music that is difficult, challenging, hardly communicable to certain sections of society, such that its aesthetic organisation around a subliminal modality of affect that ends up, I argue, articulating a form of what I call ‘ambiguous dissimulation’, means that the music’s subjects are sometimes taken too literally. Indeed, the very taking of such subject matter as I have just surveyed is a practice certainly ripe for abuse. However, the manner in which that subject matter is largely treated in the Noise context, not with the certainty of a terrace chant but with haziness and discomfort, leaves the actual far right sympathiser in a difficult position of allegiance. This point is reflected in the Gary Mundy quotation above.

In addition to these two dimensions of how politics functions in Noise – the music’s operation within a subliminal modality of sound and performance which, through undermining, overcoding, and deforming of the music’s controversial subjects, leads to an affect of ambiguous dissimulation – Noise can be profitably related in two sense to the aesthetic ‘counter-magic’ mentioned first in Chapter Four, where ‘counter-magic’ suggestively counterposes the sublime ‘magic’ of capitalism with kinds of aesthetic deformation and undermining found in exploratory art and music such as that under examination here. The violence of the music here serves to reproduce the violence of the subject matter, bringing it into immediate experience and thus symbolically and sonically occluding some of the distance that, for example, exists between a neo-Nazi reading about the Holocaust, and the violence of the Second World War itself. The noise of Noise can in this sense be seen to serve a sort of moralising function, albeit somewhat obliquely; by confronting listeners with even a microcosm of the violence and the discomfort of its subjects, Noise musicians have

the courage to risk paying a back-handed compliment to that violence, whilst also exposing its full horror to those who would listen. This is the first sense in which Noise can be seen to offer an aesthetic ‘counter-magic’.

My final theoretical contention about Noise, and the second sense of its counter-magic, relates directly to its transgressive subjects and extreme sonics. A significant aspect of Noise’s subject matter, in line with the declarations of SPK and others, is that it allows the musicians sonically and symbolically to stage a concealed otherness (such as the death and contamination fixation of SPK), and thus to reveal features, perhaps iniquities, of a society, which that society ordinarily tries to suppress. This function is continuous with the use of Nazi and pagan imagery and words in Black Metal; these musicians work from a point of exclusion from mainstream society, and one of the ways they re-assert themselves is by identifying with and representing excluded others in these ways. By doing so they expose to that society simply that *it excludes*, first, and, second, that that exclusion has, to a degree, failed.

Jacques Rancière has written about the political possibilities of art actually lying in its ability to ‘re-distribute the sensible’, where the distribution of the sensible is understood as ‘the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it’.⁷⁰ Aesthetics can be understood, according to Rancière, ‘as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience’; and thus he concludes that there is an aesthetics ‘at the core of politics’.⁷¹ It follows from these points that ‘politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the

⁷⁰ Jacques Rancière, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London/New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 12.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 13.

talent to speak'.⁷² Finally, for Rancière, 'the arts can only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation... what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible'.⁷³

In this sense of politics revolving around an aesthetic discourse of what is visible and of who gets to speak, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the transgressive subjects and the extreme sonics of Noise music can be seen to expand both what is open to experience, and who gets to comment on experience, even if, as in the case of the diseased with SPK, that commentary is delivered by proxy. In this respect, Noise, in the words of Alain Badiou, serves as 'the creation of a new knowledge', as a presentation of 'something before the facts'; 'a new vision of the world'.⁷⁴ I would like to suggest, therefore, that in its own localised and volatile way Noise music can be understood to function in terms of a re-distribution of the sensible. That is, in addition to its performance of what I have described as an 'ambiguous dissimulation' through its subliminal modality, Noise music, particularly the Industrial and Power Electronics⁷⁵ genres being presently discussed, can be understood to be engaged on a programme of aesthetic expansion that is directly relatable, through Jacques Rancière, to a form of political emancipation.

Noise's re-distribution of the sensible can be related to wider trends in the underground. As we will see over the coming chapters, it is common across the underground to detect processes of deformation, or, to use a Giorgio Agamben term,⁷⁶ processes of *profanation*

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 19.

⁷⁴ Alain Badiou, '15 Theses on Contemporary Art', <http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm>, accessed 2 July 2011.

⁷⁵ And here I should note that much of the politically-engaged Noise we have been surveying originated in the UK and Europe, as opposed to the US or Japan (the two other major Noise centres); I can only speculate as to the role that political and cultural structures, where more established traditions of political dissent are present in the UK and Europe, have played in this situation.

⁷⁶ From Giorgio Agamben, trans. Jeff Fort, *Profanations*, MIT Press, 2007. In the central essay of the book,

(which serves as a supplementary, complementary theoretical term to the related ‘deformation’), where mainstream material is somehow denatured and by this process ultimately sublimated, repurposed for new political or aesthetic ends. I would suggest that in Noise music’s *use* of its particular subject matter, first, and second in its *deformation* of that subject matter in the manner just discussed, it too can be seen to be performing acts of profanation. One of Paul Hegarty’s key points about Noise music is that it has misuse at its core, whether that be in the misuse of instruments, of machinery, of contexts, or of practices. For Hegarty, ‘such improper use is part of the failure that constitutes noise’, and, these uses ‘end up revealing disruptions, cuts, and interferences that are always already present in the proper functioning’.⁷⁷ Hegarty’s ‘misuse’ lines up directly with my usage of Agamben’s ‘profanation’, each term here underlining core Noise processes and affects.

Concluding Thoughts

Whilst the complexity of many of the above mentioned Noise tracks or statements are clear, I must be careful not to expand from my core ‘political’ notions of subliminal modality/ambiguous dissimulation, profanation, and aesthetic counter-magic in the form of occlusion of distance between the listener and the music’s subjects on the one hand, and a re-distribution of the sensible on the other, into a cleansing framework of my own, which would exonerate Noise of its transgressions and acclaim its practitioners as political visionaries. The motivations of those practitioners, like the political content of the music and the actions themselves, are overdetermined and consistently ambiguous.

Agamben discusses ‘profanation’ as the most urgent political task of the moment, where actions, behaviours, gestures, and so on (for example the disinterest of a pornographic actress), are recuperated from the dominant order that seeks to suppress, depress, pre-own. Profanation is the reclamation of signifiers for contestatory ends.

⁷⁷ Paul Hegarty. *Noise/Music*, p. 181.

The point also stands that Noise might be seen actually to *absorb* oppositional energy, and thus to obstruct critical practice simply by imbuing people with the feeling, both through the scene's self-determining production models and the neural re-wirings of the music itself, that they are, somehow, liberated from capital and subsumption. In other words, Noise *may* function as a sop on the more general conditions, as opposed to functioning as a localised antigram (as an announcement of novelty), or diagram (as a reflection of iniquity), of those conditions. A final point to note here is that over-reading is certainly a real danger in writing about this music; let me just note that, in many cases, Noise simply provides listeners with pleasing aesthetic experiences.

I attend more closely to this dimension of Noise in Chapter Nine, albeit within the context of the core 'political' notions expounded here, where my examination of Noise continues, with the focus shifted from Power Electronics and Industrial to Harsh Wall Noise, Lo-fi, and post-Noise.

Chapter Nine: Noise and post-Noise as Music

Following on from my discussions of the global Noise scene in Chapter Eight as being configured of a range of local scenes and subgenres orbiting on a distinctively transgressive, politically ambiguous cultural practice, I develop in this chapter an account of more recent Noise and post-Noise musical practices and scenic discourses. I focused in section 8.4 on the 1970s and 1980s Industrial and Power Electronics scenes for the most part because, as noted in section 8.2, during the 1990s Noise underwent a process of hybridisation where, broadly, its political concerns were largely replaced by musical ones. This chapter, which as noted throughout Chapter Eight largely focuses more directly on the *sounds* of Noise in an intertextual context, expands the scope, seeking to account for some of the more recent Noise and post-Noise developments, mentioned in 8.2, whilst also attempting, at its core, to provide an interpretative aesthetic-affective framework and broad-based technical description of Noise and post-Noise music..

I look first at some interesting general trends in Noise music (particularly with regards to various Harsh Noise and Harsh Wall Noise examples), and then examine in more detail Lo-fi music in order to exemplify some general processes that I want to argue go towards constituting some of the richness of audience's experiences of Noise. The section on post-Noise, which is framed as a sort of sub-configuratory derivative of Noise informed heavily by attempts to go beyond postmodernist cultural discourse, follows this. Even though the framework of ambiguous dissimulation, and so on, is applicable to the music examined below, it is the case that much of the music abandons the explicit kinds of transgressive subjects of Power Electronics and Industrial Music, and as such that framework is less pivotal, less 'pertinent', here. Instead, I explore what I call the 'dialectics of form and texture'

in Noise; the notions of the ‘performative everyday’, ‘accidental audition’ and ‘comfort noise’; and, finally, the wider cultural reference points of post-Noise.

9.1 Dialectics of Form and Texture

A ‘loud as possible’ attitude is typical of the Noise scene, and can be perceived again and again in sonically violent releases pitched at ear-splitting volumes.¹ Whilst sheer volume of this sort is critically important to the scene, I attempt to be a little more exacting in my investigations of what is sonically important in Noise generally speaking, though as noted the focus is less on the transgressive musics of Chapter Eight and more on parallel and subsequent developments. I begin by looking at what I want to suggest are the fundamental dialectical processes (where dialectics functions as a metaphor for polarised tendencies in constant flux) detectable in Noise music: the first, between defined (most typically, song-based forms) and free forms on the one hand; and the second between edificial (as is the case in much Harsh Wall Noise music), and more refined textural approaches, on the other. In spite of the importance of improvisation to Noise – in live shows even song-based forms become to a degree broken apart, intensified, undermined by feedback and performative will, whilst more freeform Noise obviously embraces improvisation as a central principle – I restrict my critical analyses to recorded pieces of Noise, due to the fact that improvisation is largely an expedient function of *live* Noise, such that the material produced is, compared to Improv, repetitious, and somewhat ancillary to the more general buildup of sonic and performative atmosphere. It is thus felt that recorded examples of Noise will offer the richest

¹ Where, using the VU Meter on the Foobar2000 Media Player, for example, Merzbow’s ‘Woodpecker No 1’ peaks in the mid range at approximately -3db; Kites’ ‘The Hidden Family’ has a bass peak of -1db and a mid range peak of -2db; and Esplendor Geometrics’ ‘Japo’ peaks in the bass at -4db. In comparison, for instance, Paul Simon’s ‘Graceland’ peaks at -19db; Britney Spears’ ‘Boys’ at -12db; Remarc’s ‘Not For U’ at -18db; Kate Bush’s 2011 version of ‘This Woman’s Work’ at -12db; and Lady Gaga’s ‘Marry the Night’ at -8db in the bass, and approximately -18db in the midrange.

and most germane material for analysis.

9.1.1 Early Dialectics: ‘Japanoise’

The two dialectical processes just mentioned (of form and texture) permeate each other in practice. Harsh Wall Noise clearly implies a certain formal agenda; if pieces or tracks consist of superficially homeostatic walls of sound, then song-like forms (or any other conventional organisational models) would seem to be alien. Likewise, even in the most extreme Power Electronics songs of intense volume and screeching sounds discernible metrics and lyrics are commonly in place, and as such formal definition is more easily pinned down. The mutually-characterised dialectics are evident in the contrasting cases of contemporaneous Japanese Noise (commonly contracted to ‘Japanoise’) acts, Merzbow (real name: Masami Akita), Incapacitants, and Hijokaidan.

Drawing on the heritage of Industrial music, Merzbow’s work is conceived – to an extent (Akita has been quoted, contrariwise, saying that ‘there are no special images of ideology behind Merzbow²) – under a culturally engaged programme, where an association between the sexual, the transgressive, and the intuitive binds Akita’s conceptualisation of Noise practice. Akita states the following on the subject:

In the beginning, I had a very conceptual mindset. I tried to quit using any instruments which related to, or were played by, the human body...the first U.S. tour (1990) was a turning point for finding a certain pleasure for using the body in the performance. I am using more physically rooted Noise music not as conceptually anti-instrument and anti-body as before. If music was sex, Merzbow would be pornography...pornography is the unconsciousness of sex. So, Noise is the unconsciousness of music.³

² Masami Akita, ‘An Interview with Merzbow’, in eds. Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, London: Continuum, 2004, p.60.

³ Ibid, pp.59 - 60.

This focus on pornography manifests in two directions; in direct use of pornographic images in the packaging of his cassette releases in the 1980s (where he was involved in a mailing network with artists such as The Haters and Maurizio Bianchi), but also in conceptual terms. For Akita, 'Noise is the most erotic form of sound'.⁴ And yet, here we have a split case, since even as Akita emphasises his notion of sonic erotics, he insists that 'Western Noise is often too conceptual and academic', whereas, 'Japanese Noise relishes the ecstasy of sound itself'.⁵ Thus, Merzbow can be seen to be engaged in extra-musical conceptualisation, whilst also endorsing a focus on 'sound itself'.

Like Akita, Incapacitants (Fumio Kosakai and Toshiji Mikawa) and Hijokaidan (Jojo Hiroshige and Mikawa, with other members, such as Junko, coming and going) came to prominence in the early 1990s, in their case releasing a number of important Harsh Noise albums – such as Hijokaidan's *Windom* and Incapacitants' *Feedback of N.M.S*⁶ – on the leading Japanese Noise label, Alchemy. Each act worked with other labels, for instance Incapacitants' association with now defunct American experimental label Zabriskie Point. Like Akita, too, both acts tended to use electronic instruments and other noise generators such as no input mixing desks as key media, with voice and other instruments, such as electric guitar, also being periodically important. Like *and* unlike Akita, Incapacitants and Hijokaidan do not underwrite their music with any cultural or political baggage; instead, what we have with these artists is a form of Noise driven by 'purely' musical ends (Akita's 'ecstasy of sound itself'). Such a programme of absolute music was to become standard both in Japan, where it was taken up by later Japanese Noise artists, such as Masonna, Melt Banana, and Government Alpha, and elsewhere, as for example with Wolf Eyes.

⁴ Ibid, p.60.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hijokaidan, *Windom* (1991), Alchemy Records, ARCD-038; Incapacitants, *Feedback of N.M.S.* (1991), Alchemy Records, ARCD-022.

The other significant difference lies in the music itself; where Akita's work is dynamically vigorous, unpredictable even, both Incapacitants and Hijokaidan favour walls of Noise, with the former tending towards fused high frequencies and extended blast surfaces, and the latter's feeling differentiated at least by their sense of layered tectonics, and their sometime explosive instrumental detail. An example of the former would be Incapacitants' 'Apoptosis', from *As Loud As Possible*,⁷ which places unyielding, though comparatively mild, high frequency feedback over about ten minutes of low end explosions; crash-gestures suggestive of a noise wall juddering to the ground. Through the course of the track the high end sonics gradually congeal, and the final seven minutes, after the first ten, seem to resolve the previous separation into a cohesive and now brutal total-wall, bulldozing into a spent finale of bleeping AM scratches.

Whilst Hijokaidan's early work in the 1980s (on albums such as *Tapes*⁸) is akin to the kind of performance art aesthetic (which in Hijokaidan's case involved literally destructive live performances), Dada noise-improvisations of the No Nihilist Spasm Band or Borbetomagus, by 1990, with the vicious noise-tunnel one track *Romance*⁹ album, the group had showed its Wall Noise allegiances, though certain of its 1980s traits persisted, as for example with the hectic and chaotic guitar and drum parts – the latter usually played, incidentally, by Masami Akita – of tracks such as 1997's 'What A Nuisance'.¹⁰

Before moving on from the Japanoise scene, I'll add a little depth to the picture given so far of the music. 'Spiral Blast', from Merzbow's *Pulse Demon*, demonstrates well the type of

⁷ Incapacitants, *As Loud As Possible* (1995), Zabriskie Point, POINT 13.

⁸ Hijokaidan, *Tapes* (1986), Alchemy Records, ARLP-012.

⁹ Hijokaidan, *Romance* (1990), Alchemy Records, ARCD-018.

¹⁰ From *Noise From Trading Card* (1997), Alchemy Records, ARCD-098.

approach common to Akita's work. The track plays out as if someone has fitted welders or other metalworkers with contact mics and asked them to go about their business. There is an astonishing intensity to the sound, an intensity that marks the music out from even other Harsh Noise repertoire; we are here in the thick of disturbing drilling, blasting, and mouse-squeaks, sounds that assault the ears with an emotional pull that is hard to rationalise. These foreground features are set over a bed of continuous, explosive static. However, there is a clear formal dynamic at work here, with, for example, the scratchy gestures of the surface becoming gradually subsumed in the third minute by a more pressing, ascending wave of notes. By the 2'40'' mark these ascensions seem to have split apart the wall. All sorts of competing dynamic forces drive the bleached sonics to a kind of collapse at 3'40'', before a repetitive little coda, and a squall of radio feedback and condensed chaotic activity, bring the abrasion to a close.

'Woodpecker No. 1', the opening track from the same album (and mentioned at the start of the chapter with regard to decibel levels), demonstrates the same bullish intensity, whilst also exploring repetitive, quasi-sequential passages, and gestures akin to the banging beats of Techno. A wall of static falls out every few seconds, whilst a gurning but strangely funky pulsing noise figure of from four to nine steady beats steals in to suggest an alternative direction. The static gradually supersedes the grisly noise-beats, before these beats (the woodpecker of the title?) return, briefly, but sonically more refined than before. The consuming radio feedback and white noise static returns to the fore, however, with the pulsing figure reduced to high frequency clicks, which are now omnipresent. At 2'48'' the whole texture jumps brilliantly into a mangled wedding of the two pulsing figures, now beating continuously, but the pull-to-static and white noise, with the ever-present radio scratches, soon takes over. These three features – obscure, sub-bass pulsing; tendency

towards white noise; and febrile and coruscating high range scratches – in fact dominate Merzbow’s analogue era, which lasted roughly until 2000. The following three minutes see noise turbulence swaying this way and that, with the clean beating figure now faint, now loud, below the molten and coarse scratching and static. At 5’50’’ - 6’54’’, a neat little coda emerges, where the gestural palette of the track is rifled through in flits and starts, the intensity and textural density wound down somewhat (again, a common trait), before a sudden thudding and crackly twelve beats bring the track to a close.

The gradation of formal and textural properties (which, as I have said, are mutually-characterised) in ‘Woodpecker No. 1’ are discernible on the *Sonic Visualiser* spectrum analysis of the track, below.¹¹ Note the wide frequency range (the figures at the left of the capture), which sustains throughout the whole track across a range of approximately 21Hz → 8,800Hz (Merzbow’s music is distinctly frequency spacious in this respect). The concentration at around -3 Db → -18Db (the red to yellow patches) show both the high volume and, in the variegation between those parameters, the dynamic intensity of the track. Meanwhile, the scan parses the form of the music quite succinctly; the low-range bass frequency intensity runs throughout, as seen in red, whilst the sudden and jagged shifting between the beating gestures and the more sustained blasts of noise are represented by the patches of red and yellow, which indicate the sustained noise, and the gaps in between, where the beating suddenly takes prominence.

¹¹ *Sonic Visualiser* is a software programme developed at Queen Mary University for the analysis of audio files. Each of the scans I include here were done using the same colour scheme, gain level, and frequency and intensity resolutions, thus providing a solid basis for comparison.

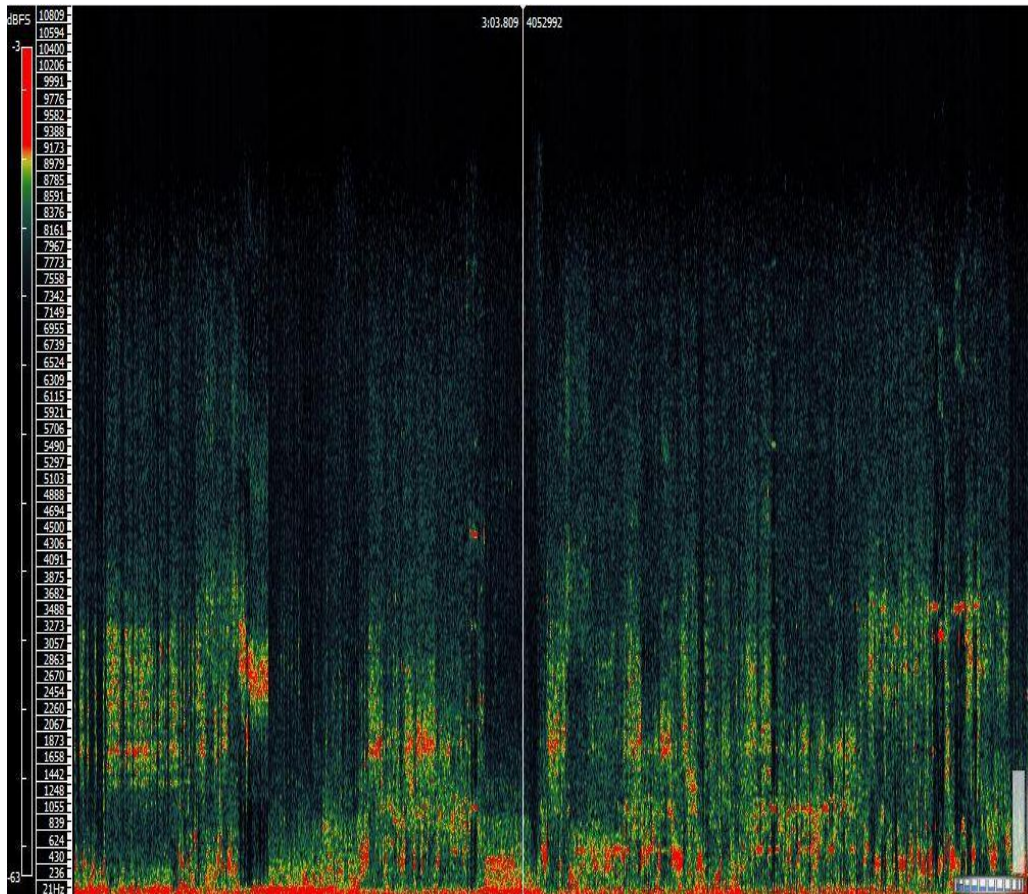


Fig. 1. Spectrum analysis of ‘Woodpecker No. 1’.

‘Woodpecker No. 2’, the following track, features a similar formal marshalling of white noise and beating gestures, though the surface is even more discontinuous here, the track playing out like a misremembered nightmare of the preceding one.

Though Merzbow’s output varies wildly, as I have noted – even within the analogue era, an album such as *Noisembryo* is organised into a much more monolithic slab of noise, with its 60 minutes simply carved up into parts one to four – the type of sonic and gestural procedures as found on these tracks are nevertheless prevalent. Merzbow’s music, though invariably violent and very, very loud, can be characterised by the sort of tension between rasping and tumultuous sonic walls, and gestural definition and formal dynamism, as is on display in the above surveyed tracks. This tension is in marked difference to the more unremitting, though of course internally dynamic, noise homeostases of Incapacitants and

Hijokaidan.

The Japanoise scene, thus, even whilst being musically differentiated to a degree, largely existed in its early years – and indeed continues to do so – as a musical configuration united by certain core themes, such as the exploration of analogue (and, later, digital) and conventional electronic instrumental walls of noise within a context of underground modes of performance and distribution, with a focus, for example, on one label (Alchemy), and the use of physical channels connecting the local scene to the global Noise scene (as evidenced in Akita’s mail order network with Bianchi). In this musical respect, the Japanoise scene mirrored and mirrors contemporary developments in the Noise scene, which had and has likewise moved away, as noted, from the explicit politics of Power Electronics, into a more submerged *aesthetic* politics.

The scene also mirrored the development of the global scene more generally speaking. The web has, since the 1990s, led to the work of Japanese musicians such as Merzbow and the members of Incapacitants and Hijokaidan being publicised and disseminated in a way that was impossible before, as has been the case with commercially minor American musicians such as Werewolf Jerusalem (examined below), with the result being, in spite of their continued employment in day jobs, that in the last few years members of the aforementioned two bands have been able to travel to Europe to play their first gigs outside of Japan, such as at the aforementioned ‘Lowest Form of Music’ festival celebrating the LAFMS.

9.1.2 Later Dialectics

Formal and textural dialectics continue to dominate the Harsh Noise scene in the twenty-first

century; in the case of artists such as Religious Knives, Prurient, and Whitehouse, for example, we can draw up a formal spectrum as an organising metaphor. In such a spectrum, the ‘pure’ Harsh Noise, freeform, screamed, and severely treble-laden music of Prurient¹² would sit on one side; Whitehouse, with their broadly lyric-led loose forms (even in the later Italo disco and African percussion stages), would sit somewhere in the middle; whilst Religious Knives, whose stoned psychedelic Noise songs are comparable in their punchy form and comparatively mild sonic texture to post-Noise music such as Broadcast or LA Vampires, would sit towards the opposite end of the **free↔song** formal spectrum. And many other examples could indeed be chosen to fit into the threefold framework. For instance, Incapacitants, Wolf Eyes, and Throbbing Gristle might be seen to occupy the three positions, which range from freeform to song-like form, on the spectrum. The point is that choice of formal strategy (and texture, a closely related phenomenon, as I have said) is key in Noise music, indicating much about artists’ sonic and aesthetic inclinations, whilst also providing a comprehensible framework for the organisation of the scene into an internally dynamic model of ‘musical’ practice. It also, incidentally, demonstrates the internal variety of what is sometimes accused of being a basically uniform scene.

That dynamism and variety would be evident when we come to examine a more recent artist such as Kites,¹³ whose style mixes Merzbow or concrète-like cut ups, with callused harsh noise; sub-bass drones and wall-ish textures; witty collage jitteriness; touches of Folk harmonies and lyrics; and off the wall vocal hooks and interludes – many of which features can be found in the extended, blistering track, ‘The Hidden Family’¹⁴ – and as such must be seen adhering to my spectrum in a mobile, multiply centred way. The spectrum, thus, would

¹² The Prurient, that is, of all the Prurient releases prior to 2011’s *Bermuda Drain* (Hydra Head, HH666-220-2), which contains a range of thematically linked electro songs, of comparatively transparent textures and forms.

¹³ The alias of Christopher Forgues, who also operates under the name ‘Mark Lord’.

¹⁴ Kites/Prurient, *The Hidden Family/White* (2004), Load Records, LOAD 062.

simply be a tool through which the broad differences that inhere in the Noise scene, even within artists' own outputs, can be graphed, and not a prescriptive analytical framework for limiting understanding or interpretation.

The Harsh Noise subgenre of Harsh Wall Noise that arose in the 1990s in America and Japan – where the Merzbowian notion of the 'ecstasy of sound' seems to have been of much more importance than the charged political enthusiasms of Industrial and Power Electronic artists, most of whom of course came from the UK and Europe – features a range of artists for whom the notion of a dialectic between stasis and friction is vitally important. Werewolf Jerusalem (Richard Ramirez) and Hum of the Druid (Eric Stonefelt) are just two artists whose music evinces the variegated experiences open to the keen-eared listener of apparently monotonous Noise music.

Ramirez puts old radios (from the 1970s and 1980s) through distortion, delay, and reverb pedals, turning the volumes of the radios up to what he describes as a 'complete buzz sound'.¹⁵ He also makes use of things like blown speakers facing each other, which thus produce heavy screeds of feedback. Ramirez' work features an almost unrelenting concentration of energy, where a track such as 'Bound'¹⁶ showcases his obsessive tracking of subtle gradations of static and distortion in the context of a bulldozing wall of noise. That wall of static and distortion, apart from a number of short passages where the spectral low end drops out completely, is unrelenting. Whilst the four-and-a-half minutes of 'Bound' appear to the ear as a bizarrely empty passage of non-sound, of blown speakers arching out in tiny climaxes of extra-loud static and crackle to the accompaniment of an indistinct and ominous low test tone, which comes and goes in the ear, the spectrum analysis, below,

¹⁵ Ramirez in Sam McKinlay, 'The Politics of HNW', in *As Loud As Possible*, Issue One, p. 14.

¹⁶ Werewolf Jerusalem, *Masked Spider of the First* (2007), Troniks, TRO-273.

demonstrates the faint but vital mutations that give form and shape to the material. Note, in contrast to ‘Woodpecker No. 1’, the relatively circumscribed frequency (approx. 21Hz→3,800Hz) and relatively unvarying dynamic (approx. -2Db → -20Db) ranges. The form here is much more monolithic, and internally homeostatic.

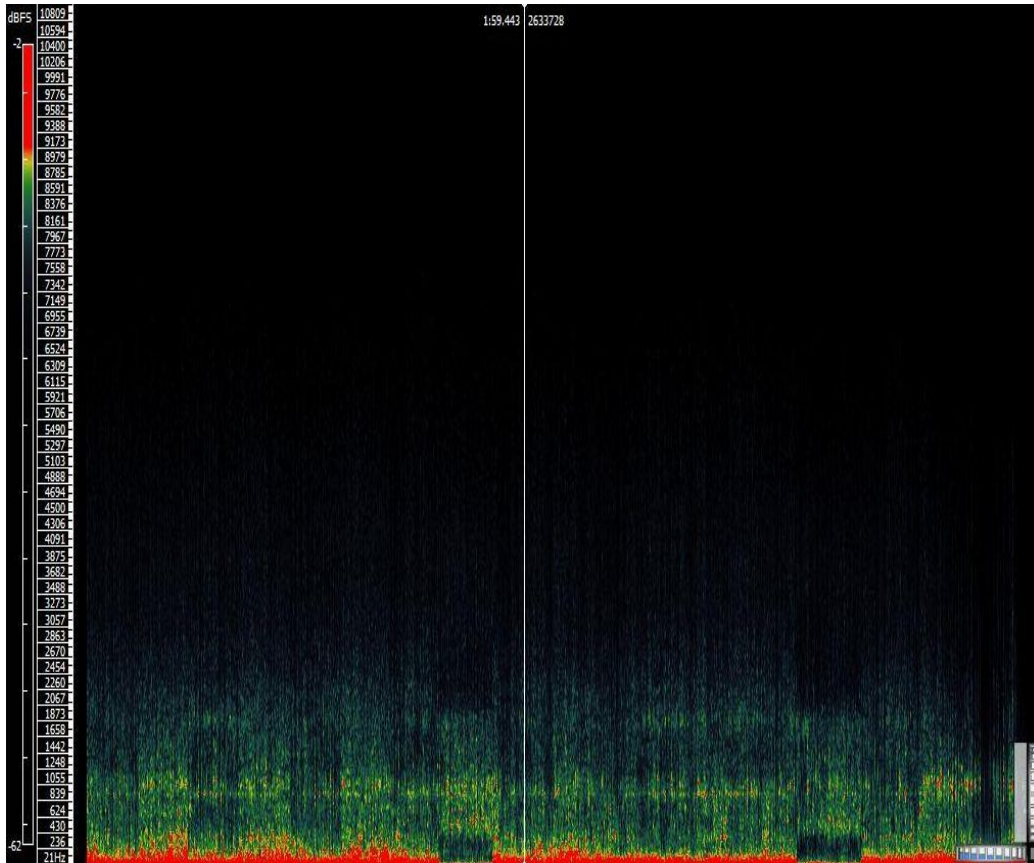


Fig. 2 Spectrum analysis of first four-and-a-half minutes of ‘Bound’.

Werewolf Jerusalem’s ‘Slit’ (also from the album *Masked Spider of the First*) appears first as unrelenting as ‘Bound’, though if anything it is even more abrasive, even more violent. And yet, it contains within its heavy volume a vibrancy of sonic activity, where a middle-register overtone motif seems to provide the higher range distortion and static with a mournful summary, a call from beyond that lifts the track into a definable space of aesthetics.

In contrast to Ramirez’ focus on retro technology and its crackling secrets, Hum of the Druid’s Stonefelt seeks, through the use of electronics and voice, a form of naturalistic white

noise that is closer to what he calls ‘the white noise of reality’, which, he suggests, is distinct from the ‘cheap’ static of other Wall Noise musicians.¹⁷ Stonefelt emphasises the ‘individual components’ of his noise walls. He examines their interlocking and shifting timbres, constructing graceful leaps and delicate sutures of material, whilst drawing out an acute textural complexity in the development of his sonic ingredients. Stonefelt’s process, which uses an array of found sound recordings (from a footfall to a distant phantom fart), as well as vocals and assorted other sources, thus contrasts with the single sound sources of Ramirez.

The first three minutes of Hum of the Druid’s ‘Norse Fumigation’¹⁸ vividly evoke such ‘individual components’ and ‘complexity’, as seen in the scan below. (The timings to which I refer are here visible at the top of the capture.) Contrasting with the deliberately scuzzy static noise of Ramirez, Stonefelt here moves from tolling and atmospheric tone reverberations, into thick mid-range microphone smothering (approximately five seconds in) over sustained drones in the sub-500Hz range and with punctuation from flecks of higher sounds, into, at thirty seconds, a much more spacious, phonographic sense of detail, where thuds and background smothering are contrasted with specky sounds of frantic industrial tinkering. At approximately 1’46”, these phonographic elements are almost subsumed, though they remain key to the vividness of the sonic delineation for the rest of the excerpt, by the sudden prominence of a fractured and fluctuant processed bass and drum pattern (which is visible in the flare ups of red between 473Hz and approximately 2,000Hz in the last minute of the scan). The full excerpt, though brief, conveys well the dual engagements of Stonefelt’s music in a kind of Harsh Wall Noise on the one hand, and sense of compositional detail and sonic variety (as seen in the comparative variation of the scan) on the other. The excerpt mirrors the

¹⁷ Stonefelt in Sam McKinlay, ‘The Politics of HNW’, p. 17.

¹⁸ Hum of the Druid, *Norse Fumigation* (2010), Scratch and Sniff Entertainment, SNSE077.

kind of subterranean dungeon crawl pictorialism of Death Ambient, whilst remaining comfortably within the distinctive static and scrawl contexts of Noise.

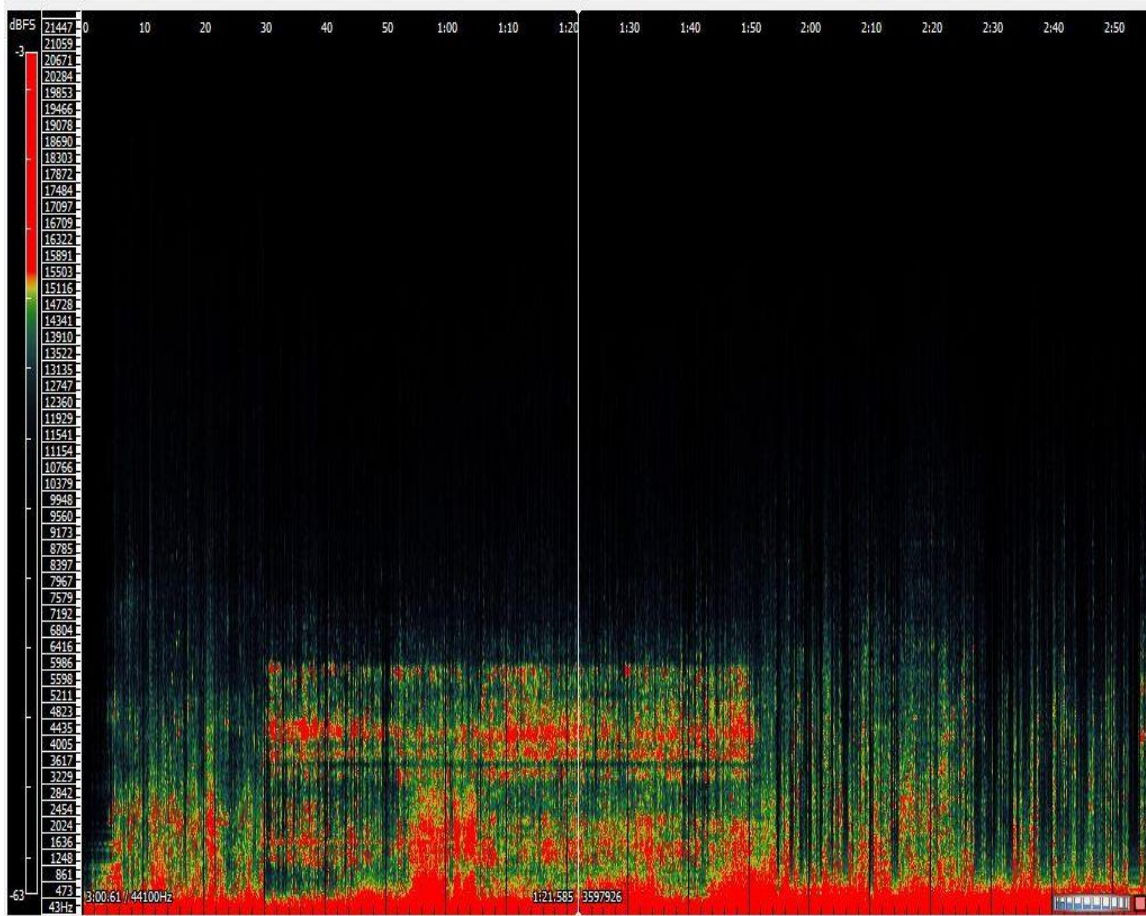


Fig 3. Spectrum analysis of first three minutes of ‘Norse Fumigation’.

Despite the significant differences in texture and process between Hum of the Druid and Werewolf Jerusalem, Stonefelt’s music, as for example in the extended piece ‘Raising the New Flag’,¹⁹ with its shift from harsh walls of screamed vocals and barrages of metallic electronic noise of a refined, atomic, detail, into a more spacious sub-bass ambience that yet preserves some of the gestural impact and the intricate textural detail of the first section, nevertheless compliments the noisy and monolithic crunch and crumbles of Ramirez.

¹⁹ Hum of the Druid, *Raising the New Wing/Braided Industry* (2008), Scratch and Sniff Entertainment, SNSE 072.

Stonefelt's music features after all a comparable exploration of subtle gradations of static and crackle in the context of high volume and dynamically restricted sounds, as Ramirez' does.

Both, in any case, serve as a testament to the sheer variety and dynamism that can be found in the contemporary Harsh Wall, and thus Harsh more generally, Noise scene.

The elaborate processes of textural and dynamic mutation of Harsh Noise (and their concomitant effect on timbre), I would suggest, are at the centre of listeners' experiences. It is not simply the ear-splitting volumes at which much of this music is heard, nor is it the intense performance situations, that drive the music into people's affections. As demonstrated above, sonic nuance is crucial to Harsh Noise, albeit here such nuance is hard to parse, is set into a context of masking distortion and diverting, sublime, volume. In Harsh Noise a sort of dumb extremity is epitomised; the music appears broad, aggressive, and turgid, but on closer examination, upon learning its codes, the listener appreciates its internal and intra-genre dynamism and distinction. Just as important as outward distension is a *musical* sense of detail and colour. This is sublime music full of confusion and chaos, both for producer and listener, which yet submits to parsing, explanation, and change.

Through the following case study, which as noted uses Lo-fi music as a portal through which to explain wider dimensions of Noise, I attempt to situate Noise music in a pertinent theoretical affective context that seeks to compliment the theoretical political and cultural context of Chapter Eight. The Lo-fi genre itself exists at something of a tangent to Noise, being describable as either a subgenre or a form of para-Noise, depending on what *kind* of Lo-fi is being discussed (para-Noise would be reserved for the more commercial end of Lo-fi). However, the fact that Noise music is almost exclusively,²⁰ in effect, lo-fi (as distinct

²⁰ With the exception of the computer calibrated micro-Noise of composers and artists such as Florian Hecker, Alva Noto, and Pita.

from being part of the Lo-fi *genre* - a distinction that should become clear below), first, and, second, the fact that my conceptual elaborations emerge more from the ‘lo-finess’ of the examined music as opposed to any generic conventions or concerns, means that the case study can be taken to be directly germane to and, indeed, centrally illuminative of, my wider discussions of Noise aesthetics and theory. Examples of Noise are, in any case, considered alongside more strictly ‘Lo-fi’ music.

9.2 *Lo-fi and Noise Affects*

Bennie knew that what he was bringing into the world was shit. Too clear, too clean. The problem was precision, perfection; the problem was *digitisation*, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh...*An aesthetic holocaust!*²¹

Lo-fi music, broadly speaking, is characterised by an enthusiasm for antiquated, particularly analogue, recording technologies, though digital media are also used. The crucial conceit of Lo-fi music is the rejection of sonic finesse and, I suggest – expanding the framework of lo-fidelity music from the sonic to the gestural – the corresponding emphasis on the music of the everyday and the punk-derived ethics of non-specialist musicianship. I call this latter emphasis the ‘performative everyday’.

In the context of a wider discussion of Lo-fi and Noise aesthetics, I examine here a selection of tracks from the 2010 album *Mantic*²² by underground American vocalist and multi-instrumentalist Lady Lazarus, alongside tracks from artists such as Beat Happening, Throbbing Gristle, and Le Forte Four. This is done in order to introduce what I identify as some key theoretical phenomena within the aesthetic and political province of Noise music, such as the aforementioned ‘performative everyday’, and the connected ‘comfort noise’ and

²¹ Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, London: Corsair, 2011, p. 23.

²² Lady Lazarus, *Mantic* (2011), <http://ladylazarus.bandcamp.com/album/mantic>, accessed 23 September 2012.

‘accidental audition’.

9.2.1 Lo-fi Versus Hi-fi

Lo-fi music rejects contemporary philosophies of recording,²³ and adopts instead a looser, more immediate, more ‘authentic’ (equating authenticity to faithfulness to the original acoustic context of the music) mode of capture of musical performance. ‘Lo-fi’ begins to gain traction as a descriptive term as soon as sound could be recorded with high enough quality to merit the invention of the term ‘high fidelity’. This took place sometime around the 1960s, when recording technology enabled previously unprecedented accuracy of frequency response and minimised noise and distortion. Things can be said to be ‘lo-fi’ once they can also be said to be ‘hi-fi’. The emergence of the category of ‘lo-fi’ also means that we retroactively come to recognise early recordings as being of lo-fidelity. Recordings made in the early decades of the twentieth century could not help but render sound with lo-fidelity, but we would designate them lo-fi in only a purely technical sense. Leadbelly recordings, for instance, are rendered with lo-fidelity, but this lo-fidelity is simply a matter of expediency.

9.2.2 The Lo-fi Genre

The Lo-fi being investigated here, by contrast, features lo-fidelity sounds by choice. *Mantic*, to which I’ll come in detail, sounds as spectral and as numinous as it does both because of

²³The so-called ‘loudness war’, where producers are exaggeratedly compressing the dynamic range of music in order that it can reach louder and louder volumes (or, to be more accurate and in the words of an informative article from *Sound on Sound* on the subject, limiting and compressing music, which leads to ‘reduced crest factor, envelope modifications... and in the worst cases, distortion’; Emmanuel Deruty, ‘Dynamic Range and The Loudness War’, <http://www.soundonsound.com/sos/sep11/articles/loudness.htm>, accessed 22 August 2012), is emblematic of this sort of recording philosophy.

Lady Lazarus's very deliberate use of an out of tune piano, and because of the fact and manner of her use of a Tascam four track to record the album, an anachronistic analogue recording device that first emerged in 1979. In accordance with my earlier expansion of the notion of the Lo-fi aesthetic from the purely sonic to the gestural, it should be remarked that Lady Lazarus's spindly, frail pianistic style and the halting, conversational writing and singing on *Mantic* are equally important to the music's Lo-fi status.

The Lo-fi genre originated roughly in 1980s America. I would want to trace the musical origins back a little further (to say little of the technological or cultural contexts), however, to earlier Free music artists such as the No Nihilist Spasm Band, and the artists involved in the LAFMS. With their ramshackle production and performing styles, these groups produced 'authentically' Lo-fi works before the term itself came to have generic distinction. Lo-fi itself is both *of* the underground and elsewhere, and the technique of lo-fidelity is equally diffuse. The Lo-fi genre (in its para-Noise sense) has involved such commercially and artistically assorted bands and artists as Beat Happening, Beck, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Guided By Voices, Elliot Smith, and Neutral Milk Hotel, to name only a small selection. Yet music with a lo-fi character, broadly understood, would have also to include such diverse genres as Grime, Black Metal, Hauntology, and Hypnagogic Pop, again to name only a small selection. In all of these genres the lo-fidelity aspect of the recordings is critical in varying degrees to the sonic character and aesthetic effect of the music, and as such often primarily constitutes the music's expressive character. Early Grime music, such as Dizzee Rascal's *Boy in da Corner*,²⁴ was for example crucially framed as 'authentic' through the use of out-of-control sonics and beats suggestive of pirate radio stings, and slang-laden vocals and barely-quantised arrangements produced on low end synthesizers. My focus, need it be said, is on

²⁴ Dizzee Rascal, *Boy in da Corner* (2003), XL Recordings, XLCD170.

Lo-fi music directly relevant to the underground.

The production of Lo-fi music in what is very much a high-fidelity age indicates that a very deliberate choice has been made on the part of the artists involved. The choice inherent to the Lo-fi aesthetic involves artistic as well as practical dimensions. The artistic dimension of the 'lo-fi choice' manifests in the music's embodiment of a type of lo-fi aesthetic whose dominant markers include apparently chaotic levels of distortion, phasing, reverb, and echo in the audio picture of the recording, and a certain ramshackle approach to performance and composition.

Beat Happening, an American group that came to some prominence in the 1980s, exemplify some key Lo-fi techniques. The group favoured live analogue recording; simple song and harmonic structures; repetitive and somewhat childlike lyrics; a conversational style of delivery; and almost primitive percussion instruments. Such qualities are in evidence on the title track of their second album, 1988's *Jamboree*,²⁵ which track also evinces the irregularity of tempo that so characterises the sense of the 'performative everyday' that I will suggest, in a moment, is critical to Lo-fi music.

9.2.3 Performative Everyday: Conversationalism, Primitivism, and Sonic Indeterminacy

My notion of the 'performative everyday' takes various forms, and features varying degrees of emphasis across the Lo-fi and Noise scene. In brief, it is an attitude and sensibility of the everyday, of the relaxed, and of the anti-formalist and anti-formal, which is conveyed by the music through various means - most obviously in the arrangements, production style, and performing techniques. As before, whilst this notion is being developed specifically within

²⁵ Beat Happening, *Jamboree* (1988), K, KLP 002.

the context of Lo-fi music, it should be understood, as with ambiguous dissimulation, subliminal modality, and profanation (the last two being reintroduced as regards post-Noise below), to apply to underground music more generally as a core technique and affective mode, whose applicability and pertinence varies depending on the music being considered.

The variability of the concept of the performative everyday can be illustrated if we contrast the No Nihilist Spasm Band's wild gestural primitivism in its vocals and in its sense of ensemble, with the more casual conversational intensity of a track such as Throbbing Gristle's 'Persuasion', from their 1979 album *20 Jazz Funk Greats*.²⁶ This track features a bare synthesiser outlining a calm two note bass figure of a rocking minor third, both notes getting four thudding beats each, whilst singer Genesis P-Orridge intones a narrative of creeping subjugation in a mannered, speech-song style, all of this supported by quiet moans and effects, and punctured intermittently by a strained and distorted overdriven synth gesture mimicking a woman's scream. 'Persuasion' performs a sense of the everyday through its simplistic musical materials, and its conversational vocal style. The Spasm Band, meanwhile, perform a hyper-everyday through their anti-formal and anti-formalist, wild, 'primitive', music.

For another version of the 'performative everyday', we could turn to the distinctive noise improvisations of LAFMS-affiliated artists such as Smegma and Le Forte Four. Using everything from hand toys, to reel-to-reel tape, to contact mics, to more conventional instruments such as piano and (spoken, sung, or screamed) vocals, these artists set out a template of hiss, crackle, and pop in sonics, and looseness of structure and technique in the design and playing, that is still being explored in the murky soundscapes of such post-Noise

²⁶ Throbbing Gristle, *20 Jazz Funk Greats* (1979), Industrial Records, IR 0008.

artists as Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffiti and Moon Wiring Club. The LAFMS artists 'perform the everyday' in a like fashion to the Spasm Band (SB) and Throbbing Gristle (TG), whilst adding a third layer to TG's simplistic conversationalism and SB's wild primitivism: sonic indeterminacy. Such indeterminacy, present here due to the deliberately lo-fidelity quality of the recordings and the improvisational nature of the compositional processes, ends up manifesting a sense of the *sonic* everyday, of the kinds of ramshackle sonic contexts most of us experience day-to-day.

I'll use some examples from the LAFMS artists' extensive catalogues to flesh this out. All of the music discussed below is available on the 1996 ten-CD retrospective entitled *The Lowest Form of Music*.²⁷

Le Forte Four's 'Telethon Returns' features a set of glasses being struck in imitation of Balinese-like gamelan metallophones, whilst percussion again akin to Balinese gamelan, at least in its insistent beat, trots along in the background, before a humorous conversation between the musicians occurs on the theme of an imaginary telethon, with voices being subject to echo and various noises driving things to the edge of chaos. 'Down the Congo in a Backwards Canoe', 'Simple Circus', and 'Keep that Point Up', each evince the group's predilection for creative yet straightforward use of samples: the first simply plays The Beatles' 'Ballad of John and Yoko', with the first two beats of each bar being replaced by the sound of a decaying rewinding tape; the second runs a fairground waltz backwards; whilst the third warps (apparently genuine, according to the sleeve notes) field recordings of Congolese boatmen, playing them backwards, looping certain sections. Smegma member Ju Suk Reet Meate's *Solos 78/79* focuses on a similarly sonically degraded, chaotic sense of structure and

²⁷ Various, *The Lowest Form of Music* (1996), Corti 11.1.

texture, and sample and loop aesthetic. Another, shorter, version of ‘Telethon Returns’ features some random clattering of pots and pans, with an excerpt from a conversation being audible before the track finishes. ‘To the Crow’ places a woozy carnival barker in front of a drunk and fuzzy Dixieland band falling apart at the seams, for a blistering 70 seconds.

Le Forte Four unite the carnivalesque, music hall approach of the Bonzo Dog Dooh-Dah Band, with the primitivist Improv aesthetic of a group like the No Nihilist Spasm Band, adding an enthusiasm for sonic chaos and experiment – an enthusiasm that is particularly focused on sounds and procedures relatable to a notion of the everyday – of their own. In this, they can be seen to participate in the aesthetic of the performative everyday on both the sonic and the gestural levels. As noted, LAFMS music echoes TG’s conversationalism, SB’s primitivism, and adds its own sense of the sonic everyday.

What is key is that the Lo-fi aesthetic (and I mean to include by this both Lo-fi music and underground music with lo-fi qualities, such as the Industrial work of Throbbing Gristle) seeks to de-emphasise sonic fidelity and clarity of the harmonic spectrum, whilst at the same time pursuing ensemble looseness, conversational vocal styles, and irregularity of tempo. By limiting the amount and/or *types* of editing and finessing of recorded sound, and by focussing on live performances as opposed to studio-based, multitrack production, Lo-fi music places less barriers between what we might call, for the sake of argument, the ‘artifice’ of art and the ‘naturalness’ of everyday life. Sometimes, perhaps most of the time, we are looking for precisely that ‘artifice’ (which, for the sake of a slightly better argument, we would call the *appearance* of artifice) in art. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that Lo-fi music *might* remind us of a time when art and life were in less of a mutually opposing relation, or at least might produce the illusion of such a time. These are the kinds of affective parameters that I

have been trying to pin down in the concept of the ‘performative everyday’.

In order to flesh this out and to introduce the aforementioned and connected supplementary theoretical categories of ‘accidental audition’ and ‘comfort noise’, I’ll now go in to more detail on Lady Lazarus’s *Mantic*.

9.2.4 Mantic, Accidental Audition, and Comfort Noise

Intimate and dust-covered, quiet and trembling, *Mantic* intensity emerges directly out of its apparent sonic frailties. The broadly lo-fidelity quality of the album is evident in the smeared tuning of the piano, the frail intonation of the voice, the ghostly and opaque capture of the sonic picture in the recording and production process, and on a more oblique level in the baggy, non-finessed approach to line and colour in Lady Lazarus’s performance style. *Mantic* features a set of sonically overdriven, reverb-heavy, and high-distortion analogue recordings of tumbledown songs that drift in and out of steady periodic time. As with any form of artistic experience, whilst listening one attunes to the distinctive qualities of the work being experienced, in this case adjusting one’s ears and expectations to the peculiar timbres and timescales of the music, which result from its particular sonic organisation and performance style.

Two of the tracks on *Mantic*, ‘Sick Child’ and ‘Immortal Youth’, can be seen to exemplify some central features of what I identify as the expressive currency and affective modality of both Lo-fi music specifically, and Noise music more generally. ‘Sick Child’ features a speeding-slowing sextuplet arpeggio in the right hand and a simple rising third in the bass of the piano, both of which are repeated with minimal variation throughout the song. The vocal

is characteristically light, conversationally vernacular, and thin at points of sustain and melodic apex. In its intimacy, looseness, and unlearned idiom the style is already *echt* Lo-fi in the same way that the music of a slightly more mainstream act like Beat Happening would be, though there is a sonic, psychoacoustic component to 'Sick Child' which I believe aligns it more directly with tendencies within the underground Lo-fi and Noise scenes. The ascent of the left hand of the piano from the tonic note to the third note of the scale coincides at its peak with the descent of the primary note of the treble arpeggio from its tonic to the sharpened seventh. This tonal event takes place in a sonic environment of overdriven, high-gain tones, such that as the third and seventh degrees collide a shard of feedback sparks off the two, producing a ringing third degree harmonic fully two octaves up from the bass third. Buried, almost subauditory assertions of further layers of overtone activity gleam off the vivid and curious audio picture. As one listens these sparks emerge from the ground of the music to draw unpredictable little figures on the music's surface.

'Immortal Youth' shares with 'Sick Child' an idiom of simple conversational looseness, a similar desire to manifest this sense of the everyday in the realm of music. The use of a non-equal tempered African thumb piano as accompaniment to the vocals on 'Immortal Youth', however, makes even more explicit the indebtedness of the Lo-fi aesthetic to Noise principles of psychoacoustic emergence and chance harmonic and sonic texturing. This sort of 'chance harmonic and sonic texturing' calls back to the more chaotic, but related, sonic indeterminacy of the LAFMS artists.

These Noise principles can be seen to connect, if indirectly, to Freud's discussion of accidental audition in the context of a patient who heard a 'noise' when lying with her lover, which Freud relates to the 'primal scene' of the parents awakening the child. Freud initially

describes the noise in terms of a typical ‘overhearing’, but, as described by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, he ‘immediately corrects himself by saying: “it is doubtful whether we can rightly call the noise ‘accidental’...Such fantasies are an indispensable part of the phantasy of listening’”.²⁸ Although Freud is talking about noise in a separate sense to the context of Noise, whilst also drawing on a typically idiosyncratic theoretical framing, I want nevertheless to marshal his observations as the basis for my own version of ‘accidental audition’, where, emerging from fundamental psychological drives or not, listening is a fundamentally uncanny sensory experience, full of strange resonances and unexpected conjunctions. Here I would call attention to the description of sound contained in David Toop’s *Sinister Resonance*. Toop states that ‘sound is a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is fleeting’.²⁹ The ambiguity to which Toop refers is *always* present in musical experience, but in Lo-fi and Noise that ambiguity is magnified by their lack of harmonic polish and syntactical rigour. Lo-fi and Noise offer to their listeners a refracted, aestheticised, but still unpredictable version of already-spectral conventional modes of listening.

Bart Kosko’s theory of noise can be seen to be in sympathy with the Freudian view. Toop writes in the same book of how Kosko emphasises that noise, far from being ‘a sudden incidence of disruption’, actually exists as ‘the constancy through which events of high value are highlighted’.³⁰ Sonic finesse and transparency, in this respect, would be understood to rob listening of its natural ambiguity, as well as, paradoxically, to remove the clarifying potential from noise, a potential richly preserved by Lo-fi and Noise processes.

²⁸ Freud in Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis ‘Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality’, in eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan. *Formations of Fantasy*, New York: Methuen & Co., 1986, p. 18.

²⁹ *Ibid*, xv.

³⁰ David Toop, *Sinister Resonance*, London/New York: Continuum, 2010, p. 61.

The concept of comfort noise is apt here. Comfort noise is a dimension of sound perception that contributes to such processes as accidental audition being as pleasurable as they are. Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman, the authors of *A Perfect Mess*, describe the phenomenon of ambient background noise in phone conversations: ‘This noise feels right to us: at an unconscious level, it is reassuring. The technical term for this type of background noise, in fact, is *comfort noise*, and trying to talk to someone in the absence of it is a bit disorientating’.³¹ For my purposes, comfort noise has to do with the sonic ambience in which we all conduct our daily lives; at every moment of our lives we are submerged in sound, whether that is explicit to us or not, and the concept of comfort noise suggests that we draw comfort from that submersion. When we hear digitally compressed recordings where dynamic range is limited, vibrancy of frequency suppressed, and other random noises edited out, productive aspects of sonic perception are expelled. Lo-fi and some examples of Noise music restore aspects of this *comfort noise*, this sonic detritus, to us.

An album like *Mantic*, then, could be seen to satisfy contemporary ears, to some extent, by restoring to them the sonic ambiguity that recent recordings have been so keen to excise. Noise and Lo-fi more generally, in contrast to for example the minute frequencial control explored in spectral composition, seek instead the fortuity of disarray, the improvisatory serendipity of relatively open approaches to musical organisation and technological experimentation. With Harsh Noise, we would, admittedly, be employing the notion of ‘comfort’ not perhaps in the sense of a palliative, but rather in a looser metaphorical formation where sonic freedom provides ears with pleasurable opportunities to seek out patterns, tension, and dynamics, where superficially there appears to be none. By contrast, with artists such as the Noise Rock groups Hair Police or Billy Bao, where short, detuned,

³¹ Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman, *A Perfect Mess: The hidden benefits of disorder*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007, p. 51.

and distorted guitar songs dominate, the importance of accidental audition and comfort noise rests less in intricate aural engagement, than in the experience of a liberated sonic and organisational sense, where form and gesture themselves convey a sort of caprice that connects directly to an accidental model of cognition. In these examples the performative everyday leads directly to affects of accidental audition and comfort noise.

I would suggest, in conclusion, that the attraction of Lo-fi and Noise music, which I have organised around concepts of accidental audition, comfort noise, and the performative everyday, is a reminder of the fact that aesthetic judgements are not absolute. We can appreciate a dingy, out of tune recording for the same reason that eyes attuned to digital high-definition will happily watch grainy footage on YouTube – aesthetic appreciation does not arise out of a set of fully developed principles that beget merely rigid expectations, but rather from a set of principles that allow for malleable circumstance. We adjust, *attune*, our critical faculties to account for the variance of the situation. To hear Mitsuko Uchida play Schumann on an out of tune piano would be troublesome for most, but listening to Merzbow or Lady Lazarus or Le Forte Four, we pay much less heed to the fidelity of the instrument/s. As well as furnishing us with rich sonic experiences and with refreshing musical idioms of chaos and experiment, then, Lo-fi and Noise music affirm for us the relativity of aesthetic appreciation, an insight as revelatory as it is straightforward.

In the next section I pick up some of the threads from my discussion of the current generic parameters of Noise music, by examining at greater length what I describe as ‘post-Noise’ music, which, as mentioned previously, is understood as a sort of sub-configuratory (in the sense of Badiou’s configuration) derivative of Noise.

9.3 Post-Noise

Following Noise's origins as a broadly integrated scenic movement organised around a set of philosophical and musical *ultimates*, the 1990s and the twenty-first century have seen a hybridisation and diversification of practice, with local and derivative scenes splitting off from the main scene, whilst still drawing on its musical practices and its 'institutional' scenic resources, and building new ones of their own, such as post-Noise's increasingly visible presence at pop festivals, such as at London's Field Day, and its unprecedented exploration of popular culture and web platforms. Reasons for this diversification, beyond the evolution natural to any musical style, are manifold, though they seem generally to concern Noise's perceived dogmatism as regards politics and musical style. In a revealing dialogue published on the latter's (now deleted) website *The Hidden Reverse*, Daniel Lopatin (a.k.a. Hypnagogic Pop artist Oneohtrix Point Never) and David Keenan discussed some of the problems they detected in the (comparatively) 'mainstream' Noise scene circa Summer 2009.³² Primary in their dialogue is an impression of Noise as being stuck in a self-absorbed attitude of anti-technique, anti-consensus, anti-pacification orthodoxy. Keenan suggests of post-Noise that it presents 'a sort of re-evaluation and broadening of a stifling, didactic, and kinda traditional style'. These of course must be understood as expressions of personal taste, but Keenan's criticisms nevertheless pick up on real and significant conflicts within the contemporary Noise underground.

Simon Reynolds' July 6, 2010 *Village Voice* piece on Oneohtrix Point Never likewise invokes these internal tensions within the Noise scene, highlighting once again the new music's differentiation of attack and affect from its Noise ancestry:

³² The URL for the website was <http://thehiddenreverse.blogspot.com/>, and I originally accessed the dialogue on 23 September 2009.

Oneohtrix Point Never emerged from the noise underground, but for a long while, Lopatin felt like an outcast among the outcasts. The ideas he was developing—bringing in euphonious influences from ‘70s cosmic trance music and ‘80s new age, creating atmospheres of serenity tinged with desolation—went against the grain: ‘My shit wasn’t Popping off at all’, he laughs. This was 2003 through 2005, when Wolf Eyes defined the scene with their rock-and-roll attitude. But Lopatin and a handful of kindred spirits such as Emeralds felt a growing ‘boredom with Noise, a sense we’d done it: We get this emotion’. Around 2006, the scene began to shift slowly in their direction.³³

Whilst Reynolds’ framing of the situation is entirely reasonable, considering the vast gulf that exists between, say, Whitehouse and Oneohtrix Point Never, it makes more sense to me, following David Keenan,³⁴ to describe this newer Noise style as ‘post-Noise’. My use of the ‘post-’ prefix denotes an evolutionary shift in the style, whilst anchoring the music in musical and practical senses to the wider and originary Noise scene. Its alteration to Noise should, I suggest, be seen in the same light as its transformation of rock; post-rock, according to that term’s originator, Simon Reynolds (coincidentally), employs ‘rock instrumentation for non-rock purposes, using guitars as facilitators of timbres and textures rather than riffs and power chords’.³⁵ Post-Noise, I suggest, performs a related invigoration of Noise technique, breaking apart its orthodoxies and inserting newer influences and references from popular culture alongside dyschronic affects (discussed below) and subliminal modalities, both functioning as vital new elements of the music’s expression.

The addition of the prefix ‘post’ works, then, to distinguish Lopatin and his peers’ music from its Noise ancestry. It also, at the same time, indicates their music’s continued allegiance to Noise experimentalism and cultural independence, and Noise production and procedural techniques, such as the saturation of musical texture with FX and feedback, and the preference for a viscous, indefinite sonic object over a refined musical canvass of more or

³³ Simon Reynolds, ‘Brooklyn’s Noise Scene Catches Up to Oneohtrix Point Never’, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2010-07-06/music/brooklyn-s-noise-scene-catches-up-to-oneohtrix-point-never/>, accessed 23 August 2012.

³⁴ David Keenan, ‘Childhood’s End’, in *The Wire*, August 2009, pp. 26 – 34.

³⁵ Simon Reynolds, ‘Shaking the Rock Narcotic’, *The Wire*, May 1994, pp. 28-35.

less distinct tones and rhythms. In the analysis of post-Noise offered below I focus on two interrelated genres, Hauntology and Hypnagogic Pop, within a framework of critical, culturally wide-ranging and fundamentally interdisciplinary hermeneutical analysis.

9.3.1 Hauntology and Hypnagogic Pop

Both Hauntology and Hypnagogic Pop reproduce the postmodernist preoccupation with the past, where there is a tendency to focus on ‘pastiche’ of older cultural forms that present the older material as somehow ‘contemporary’, but they bring this preoccupation with the past into the open as a core theme. In postmodern culture, linear cultural time collapses into a congealed ETEWAF omnipresence, whereas Hauntology and Hypnagogic Pop, alternatively, restore something of the modernist temporal hierarchy, albeit now conceived less as an unstoppable forward march, and more in terms of staggering, circuitous advance. In both, sonic artefacts are repurposed in an uncanny and somewhat ‘subliminal’ manner, such that the original sounding form becomes degraded or warped, or the signifying potential of the artefact is undermined by the context of its use. These artefacts comprise, in the case of Hauntology, ‘non-musical’ dialogue and sound effects from cinematic films; dialogue and sounds from public information films; Folk and occult texts and symbols; and library music catalogues. In the case of Hypnagogic Pop, the artefacts are derived from long-forgotten or long-reviled Popular music and other popular media (such as old advertising jingles and ads), and other inherited symbols and icons from popular culture. I’ll discuss each genre in turn.

9.3.2 *Hauntology*

Derrida coined the term ‘hauntology’ (‘hauntologie’, in French) in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*.³⁶ Hauntology is a theoretical movement that uses Derridean metaphysical insights to support a wide-ranging argument about culture being suffused with ghostly residues and being dominated by a condition of ‘dyschronia’. Dyschronia is a term used by writers such as Mark Fisher to describe the ‘time out of joint’ motif that had started to pervade post-Noise and Popular forms of music in the first decade of the twenty-first century.³⁷ This motif was directly relatable to the ‘broken line of the present’ (in Fisher’s words) identified by Derrida in the concepts of ‘différance’ and the ‘trace’, where essence, totality, self-presence, and epistemological and metaphysical stability are rejected in favour of an acknowledgement of what Derrida describes as the ‘non-presence of presence’.³⁸ The philosopher Colin Davis states that hauntology, ‘replaces the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive’.³⁹ He goes on: ‘Derrida’s spectre is a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence’.⁴⁰

Of course, the cultural past has always been a presence in the present - we need only think of the influence that Palladian and, hence, Greek and Roman classical architecture held over eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. However, Fisher and other theorists of Hauntology diagnose a superfluity of this (usually disavowed *as such*) presence of pastness in postmodernist art, and seek instead to describe and endorse an art that tackles dyschronia

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Specters of Marx*, London: Verso, 2001.

³⁷ Fisher in ‘Nostalgia for an Age yet to Come’, <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/nostalgia-for-an-age-yet-to-come/>, accessed 26 August 2012.

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, ‘Différance’, in trans. Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 3-27; passim.

³⁹ Colin Davis, ‘Hauntology, spectres and phantoms’, in *French Studies*, Volume 59, Issue 3, pp. 33 – 35.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

head on. The nostalgia mode of postmodernism, for Fisher, does not represent an obsession with memory so much as a memory *disorder*, which Hauntology seeks to displace.

Hauntological music ‘could easily be construed as ‘nostalgic’, suggests Fisher, ‘but’, he goes on, ‘it is the very foregrounding of temporality that makes Hauntology differ from the typical products of the nostalgia mode, which bracket out history altogether in order to present themselves as new’.⁴¹ Postmodernism, then, is ‘the dead end from which Hauntology starts’.⁴² Hauntology does not seek to revive the past, but rather *to create* both it and the lost futures it sees as deriving from these imagined pasts.

How might Derrida’s ‘non-present presence’ function or manifest in music? The genre features the foregrounding of the materiality and symbolism of time (as described in *The Guardian*: ‘static-crackle-as-the-texture-of-memory’⁴³). I might call on Morton Feldman’s famous description of his own compositional process as ‘formalising a disorientation of memory’⁴⁴ to describe the impetus underlying Hauntology. Hauntology abides in music where a sound or set of sounds or words are hauntingly present. Hauntological music is defined by phasing, amorphous ‘surfaces’, and richly referential stylistic frameworks. The haunting, which is expressed in a subliminal aesthetic modality akin to the quasi-sublime of Noise’s ambiguous dissimulation, can come in many forms, whether it be in the aforementioned static and crackle, in sampled voices or film dialogue, in retro-futurist imagery and/or production techniques, or in the broad revenant practices aligned to magick, occult ritual, gnostic arcana, and other marginal visionary-intellectual practices. These variable hauntings point towards a core split in the practice of Hauntology, where one group of musicians, with Broadcast at its centre, produce music drawing on occult inspirations within a framework of what I call the

⁴¹ Mark Fisher, ‘Frankensteinian surgeon of the cities’, <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/010770.html>, accessed 23 November 2011.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Maggoty Lamb, ‘Inky Fingers’, in *The Guardian*, 26 January 2010.

⁴⁴ Morton Feldman, ed. W. Zimmermann, *Essays*, Cologne, 1985, p. 127.

‘oneiric pastoral’, and the other, relating primarily to the label Ghost Box, makes play with paternalistic and droll materials from old Public Information Films and Library Music.⁴⁵ In order to substantiate all of this a little, I’ll examine music from both sides of Hauntology, before moving on to Hypnagogic Pop.

9.3.2.1 Broadcast and the Oneiric Pastoral

Broadcast are here used as exemplars of my interpretative framework of the oneiric pastoral, though it should be understood that their work belongs in a wider context of Hauntology artists such as Moon Wiring Club and older psychedelic groups such as the United States of America, and visionary British figures such as Alan Moore, Aleister Crowley, and even William Blake.

How are the key elements of the ‘oneiric pastoral’ – magick, occult knowledge, Folk music, and Folk culture as revolutionary practice – made manifest in Broadcast’s music, and how do they connect with hauntological ideas? I want to focus in on three key elements of their style in order to arrive at a rounded appraisal. The first and most obvious one is the mode of production. The second is the band’s use of tonality. The third is the subject matter and style of its lyrics. I offer a sustained critique of their 2009 releases *Broadcast and the Focus Group Investigate Witch Cults of the Radio Age*⁴⁶ and the limited-release EP/mini-album *Mother is the Milky Way*.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Although the split is, of course, permeable; Broadcast, whom I place at the centre of the ‘oneiric pastoral’ group, collaborated closely with the Focus Group, who belong to the other group of Hauntology musicians. Similarly, Broadcast released two albums of library music-like ‘music for links and bridges’; Broadcast, *Microtronics, Volumes 1 and 2: Stereo Recorded Music for Links and Bridges* (2003 and 2005), Warp, WAP 169 CD and WAP 199 CD.

⁴⁶ Broadcast and the Focus Group, *Broadcast and the Focus Group Investigate Witch Cults of the Radio Age* (2009), Warp, Warp CD 189.

⁴⁷ Broadcast, *Mother is the Milky Way* (2009), Warp, Warp CD 189T.

From the crackling, synth-led, sparsely arranged (though subtly lush, as with ‘Arc of a Journey’) music on their 2005 album *Tender Buttons*,⁴⁸ Broadcast leap with full force on *Witch Cults* into the disintegrating forms and dissolving sonic phantoms of Noise, via the modular, collage processes of Julian House’s the Focus Group, with whom this album (though some describe it as an EP) was collaboratively produced.

The core features of *Witch Cults* were drawn out engagingly by Joseph Stannard, who describes the album as ‘occult Pop laden with pagan psychedelia’.⁴⁹ Stannard goes on:

Only six of this 50 minute EP’s 23 tracks are recognisable as songs, and these are woven by Julian House into a seamless collage of song elements, improvised fragments, found sounds and lopsided loops...this EP is notable also for uniting two artistic projects instrumental in fomenting the aesthetic known as hauntology...this particular Pop belongs to a time that never was, an era that never transpired. Its manifestation in our own world is a glorious one, yet its fractal beauty seems to threaten the very fabric of our reality.⁵⁰

Turning to the music itself we find such impressions reinforced, and others introduced. The opening two tracks set a template: harp twinkles, ambient whirlpools of sound vaguely reminiscent of a British seaside town (‘Intro, magnetic tales’) lead into a teeming and sonically vibrant Pop song (‘the be colony’ - the title, as with the cut-up lyrics, intimating the split-level nature of selfhood that Broadcast’s singer Trish Keenan references in Stannard’s article). Each of these tracks orbit secure tonal areas (C major and F# major) that yet feel tonally invigorated, principally, I would suggest, because of the free-falling modular edits of the form and the vitalising noise feedback and flanging that tattoo the songs throughout. The effect is something akin to a minimalist grid of small diatonic gestures placed in constant re- and mis-alignment.

⁴⁸ Broadcast, *Tender Buttons* (2005), Warp, Warp CD 136.

⁴⁹ Joseph Stannard, ‘Broadcast’ in *The Wire*, October 2009, pp. 38 - 42.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Other tracks interlock more directly with the occult, and hauntological, aspects of the album's title: 'what I saw' is a 60 second vocal incantation taken from *The Witches' Bible* and based on the chords Eb-Db, with two voices moving in fifths, outlining the buzzing memory of a sort of smiling pagan rapture; 'I see, so I see so' starts with 1970s BBC synths, before shifting into an echoing, autoharp-led semi-nonsense invocation of magick and ritual; 'make my sleep his song' is conducted in a faraway room, through dark organ drones, with Keenan sounding like a spectre of a Victorian teenage girl desperately lamenting a forlorn love.

We witness on *Witch Cults* the disintegration of song form into a sort of perpetual becoming where categories of verse, chorus, bridge, introduction, coda, and so on lack functional stability, instead bubbling in a hyper-real metonym of themselves, eluding solidity whilst suggesting some kind of order at the same time. These post-Noise reinscriptions of the notion of 'song' represent a functional dialectic of form and forces-that-pull-form-apart, such as sudden cleavage and unexpected distensions or repetitions (a similar dialectic can be found in an artist such as Gary War). More simply, these reinscriptions come to represent a sort of escaping form where gesture and theme are constantly deferred in favour of (seemingly) organically mutating sonic platforms. Stannard, on House's technique (House edited and arranged Broadcast's pre-recorded songs) in this respect:

Witch Cults was assembled using a sampling method which makes a virtue of its imperfection. House evidently delights in the inexact fit, the abrupt cut, and for the most part, the rhythms on *Witch Cults* are irregular, giddily tripping over themselves and each other. In drawing attention to the awkwardness of each edit, House does not demystify the art of sampling so much as emphasise its position at the intersection of magic and science, underlining the fact that what is happening here is nothing less than the wilful manipulation of time.⁵¹

In a piece for *The Quietus*, Lee Arizona picks up on the album's curious compositional style

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 41.

and formal vicissitudes, relating these modular, inexactly interlocking layers to the hip hop of the Wu Tang Clan – and here I would call attention to Adam Krims’ writing on the ‘hip hop sublime’, where producers build blocks of somewhat unrelated material vertically in a like fashion to Broadcast and the Focus Group’s methods, which, I would suggest, similarly invoke the sublime, albeit here, owing to the particular formal-sonic phantasms and misalignments of the music, invoke a *haunted* sublime⁵² – whilst also highlighting the album’s occult affects and psychedelic inversions of Pop sensibility:

Witch Cults, a concatenation of lop-sided grooves with glimpses of song and sense around every corner, is structurally the cousin of, say, those early, literally sensational Wu Tang productions where the musical point of view is always first-person — where you’re thrown straight into the action without time to find your feet... [*Witch Cults*] zooms in on the interstitial bizarre, the psychic labyrinths beneath the pop surface; chance happenings, channelled identities, orgies, séances, catoptromancy and drug rituals all sit naturally in its world.⁵³

Mother is the Milky Way, the aforementioned limited release EP from late-2009, takes up these tropes of an oneiric pastoral within the context of dissolving textures and forms buttressed by major key tonality and a tender Pop sensibility, but places them even further behind levels of sonic and spectral intrigue. Trish Keenan herself captures the hauntological spirit explored on *Witch Cults* and exemplified by *Mother is the Milky Way*, explaining it in the following terms:

I think the evocation of memory in our music could be seen as the residue of imaginary time travel...When you go back to a previous musical time, you’re trying to recall a memory that never happened to you, that is not stored, so it would make sense that you hear a fuzzy, dissolving sense of time and place. When you make music in backwards time travel, it’s a shadowy or faint impression, as though you’re looking back through two clouded lenses. One is the time travel portal, the other is a false recollection process...in the present, we are always memory.⁵⁴

⁵² Krims, ‘Marxist music Analysis without Adorno’.

⁵³ Lee Arizuno, ‘Broadcast & The Focus Group Investigate Witch Cults Of The Radio Age’, <http://thequietus.com/articles/03116-broadcast-the-focus-group-investigate-witch-cults-of-the-radio-age-album-review>, accessed 21 June 2012.

⁵⁴ Trish Keenan in Stannard, p.42.

Such a ‘fuzzy, dissolving sense of time and place’ permeates *Witch Cults* just as it does *Mother*, a nineteen minute rhapsody of eleven separate tracks similarly cut-up and flexibly formed to those of *Witch Cults* (though it is a Broadcast-only release). The atmosphere is even more spectral here, however, with much of the EP being made up of barely heard snatches of music, sampled children’s voices, uncanny invocations of the rural in birds’ tweets and ambient noise, and ever-distant and ineffable vocal incantations from Keenan. Arching over it all is a skittery flute, here playing a similar curious futurist role that it had in Debussy – though it invokes the rural to a greater degree on the EP, even if its disjointed skeins evade the possible cosiness suggested by that label.

The band’s tonal designs on *Mother* work to underline the dreamy sense of stasis and the occult apparitions of its sonic surface. ‘in here the world begins’ exploits the ambiguity of the suspended but escalating (implied or explicit) pedal point on the dominant chord that we find so often in minimalism. The suspension is on B major in the case of the uncanny sonics and tightly wound dynamics of ‘in here the world begins’. The tension created by the escalation on B is heightened here by the continual suggestion of a secondary dominant in B of F# in the repeated A# notes in the melody line, and the voice leading supports this reframing in never tonicising the B fully. ‘Elegant Elephant’, a sweet pastoral elegy, arrests the harmony on an implicit pedal point of D, also featuring distinctive Folk ornamentation in the vocal line, though here even if the apparently stable tones and harmonies suggest Folk comfort, the wispiness of the vocal delivery and the everyday richness of the sonic picture suggest something else. ‘milling around the village’, meanwhile, places a charming Amaj7 - E major figure into a gentle whirlwind of backwards processing, encroaching found sounds, and ghostly ambiances. Even more than with *Witch Cults*, then, as seen in its queering of

conventional tonal designs with echoic sounds and inexact formal cuts, *Mother* intersects directly with, and even sonically stages, Derridean notions of ghostly presences and wan self-presence.

Mother is the Milky Way uses musical gestures from Folk music (mainly the tonality and the indexicality of the sound effects and flute), Rock and Pop, Noise, and Hauntology, and twists them into a spectral re-imagining of a remote/fabricated past. I want to suggest more generally that the locus of Broadcast's achievement lies in their supple wedding of simple and direct harmonic and formal strategies derived from common practice Rock/Folk canons, with Noise-sourced textural, timbral, and formal dissolutions. This wedding is sublimated by the band's predilection for articulating a hauntological sense of the pastoral, the latter being particularly the case in the music examined here, where explicit rural and occult subjects in the lyrics are paired with phased, psychedelic effects in the arrangements, in the productions, and in the harmonies. Folk music, meanwhile, has always been built on codes of musical simplicity and economy, and Broadcast's expansions of Folk sensibilities subtly reframe those codes through textural and formal misalignment and sonic indeterminacy, making them newly expressive of a quasi-nostalgic, oneiric vision of a mysterious British pastoral akin to the film *The Wicker Man* and the books of Alan Garner.

9.3.2.2 Library Music, Public Information Films, and the Ghosts of Paternalism

The second dominant alignment of Hauntology also focuses on a preoccupation with the attempt to disclose a particularly British version of an imagined past, or a once potential future, in the present. It is just that in the case of what I am calling the 'library music axis' it is less the folk-visionary past/future that is thought about, but a sort of faded, sepia paternalism. For Mark Fisher, British modernist culture had at its core a paternalistic notion

of the public good, whilst the contemporary moment has for him been characterised instead by a disavowal of the ‘oppressive’ father function.⁵⁵ It should be stressed in this respect that Fisher is careful to reject the patriarchal aspects of paternalistic culture. What he searches for, and what the library music axis of Hauntology celebrates and stages in its music, is a sort of paternalism-without-the-father.

Hauntology musicians who favour this approach invoke a phantasmatic nostalgia (phantasmatic because the nostalgia is actually an active mis-remembering, a creative reformulation or profanation) for the paternalistic public service motif exemplified by the Public Information Film (PIF) and for the library (or ‘production’) music that was used to score not only these films, but also a multitude of Open University-type education programmes. This library music proves of particular moment here, I would suggest, precisely for its esotericism; it is a functionary ‘unmusic’ that yet in its artistic richness offered the small pleasure of a kitsch but richly private future (being made so frequently out of modish synths and other nascent music technologies as it was). The almost numinous moments of non-discourse in library music, key signifiers of expired paternalism, are reterritorialised in this music through aesthetic repurposing. This ‘reterritorialisation’ can be understood as precisely the sort of profaning or ‘misusing’ operation alluded to in Chapter Eight as a representative underground practice. The library music hauntologists look back to a paternalistic time, but subvert the implicit patriarchal bias of that remembered paternalism through the experimental and revenant textures they build out of the quotations and samples.

Crucial to an understanding of the library music axis is an appreciation of the scenic dynamics that inform its integrated alliance of musicians and artists, graphic designers and writers (which of course crosses over to include the oneiric pastoral acts). Like the

⁵⁵ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, pp. 71-72.

underground itself, and post-Noise more broadly, the library music axis functions as a sympathetic network of musicians who make mutually-informing music orbiting a collective aesthetic configuration, built on the free digital tools of promotion and dissemination. Ghost Box,⁵⁶ the label at the centre of Hauntology, describes itself as being ‘a record label for a group of artists who find inspiration in folklore, vintage electronics, library music, and haunted television soundtracks’.⁵⁷ In the words of Alexis Petridis,

Buying one of its releases feels like stepping into another world: like Factory, it seems less interested in developing individual artists than maintaining an overall aesthetic. It makes short films and publishes a periodical, *Folklore and Mathematics*, the latter replete with fake newspaper articles describing supernatural events, old listings from the *Radio Times* and quotes from explorer and ‘psychic researcher’ TC Lethbridge. Its CDs come lavishly packaged. Early releases looked like 1970s Pelican paperbacks or school textbooks.⁵⁸

Ghost Box is an excellent example of scenic ambience, in how it draws in artists with a shared aesthetic impulse and with mutually complementary skills. The practice of Ghost Box, meanwhile, has been crucially facilitated by the web; the label’s prominence, for example, is largely traceable to the extensive discussions of Hauntology that have taken place across blogs and webzines, some of which, as for example with the Mark Fisher quotations related to Hauntology, has been surveyed here.⁵⁹

The thematic functioning of the name ‘Ghost Box’ is mirrored in those of its key artists; the Advisory Circle, Belbury Poly (Belbury being the fictional English town that originated in CS Lewis’ *That Hideous Strength*), and the Focus Group. These names wittily dramatise the subjects of the music. Belbury Poly’s albums, *The Willows* (2004), *The Owl’s Map* (2007),

⁵⁶ Ghost Box’s full catalogue is viewable at <http://ghostbox.greedbag.com/>, accessed 28 August 2012.

⁵⁷ ‘Ghost Box’, <http://www.ghostbox.co.uk/home.htm>, accessed 26 September 2010.

⁵⁸ Alex Petridis, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/jan/30/ghost-box-bellbury-poly>, accessed 3 October 2010.

⁵⁹ Out of many, many other examples, Rouge’s Foam’s 20,000 word blog post on Hauntology is perhaps most deserving of remark: Adam Harper, ‘Hauntology: The Past Inside the Present’, <http://rougesfoam.blogspot.co.uk/2009/10/hauntology-past-inside-present.html>, accessed 23 September 2012.

and *From An Ancient Star* (2009)⁶⁰ present a roster of dreamily reanimated sonic and iconographic memories from the musicians' childhoods, evoking brilliantly a lost sense of the British retro-futurist along the way. The title track of *The Willows*, for example, conjures in shadowy sonics and willowy synthesiser just the sort of (to my mind) weird energy that can suffuse flooded meadows and deserted forests in the English countryside. 'Caermaen', from Jupp's debut EP as Belbury Poly, *Farmer's Angle*, is a deeply phantasmatic track. Echoing the work of The Caretaker (examined below), as well as Gavin Bryar's famous tramp-sampling *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*, the track is built on a 1908 cylinder recording of Joseph Taylor, a Lincolnshire folk singer. Jupp uses the phantom of the crackly 1908 recording as a sort of meta-*cantus firmus* to build an entirely new melody, which he develops out of a speed-altered, pitch-shifted, structurally edited version of the original song. Here, then, we have a(n almost) literal phantom, in the spectre of Taylor's altered voice, but we are also presented with a notion of the technological uncanny itself, the medium's ability to embody temporal and cultural evolution through the very tenor of its development *qua* technology, which is here manifest in the juxtaposition of two technologies, that from 1908, and that from 2004. Between these two lies both Taylor's ghost, and the ghost of the concept of Hauntology itself.

The Advisory Circle, aka Jon Brooks, is another key Ghost Box act. *Mind How You Go*,⁶¹ his EP from 2005, brings the past forth as an uneasily heard sonic phantom through simple (often modal) musical material, lo-fi productions, and voice and sound samples from old PIFs and television shows (the latter in the eerie, dubby 'And the Cuckoo Comes', the former in 'Nuclear Substation PIF'). The paternalistic core of Hauntology is once again crucial here: 'The Advisory Circle: Helping you make the right decisions', as a voice intones at the opening of the record, seems the guiding impetus behind this music, albeit one that is

⁶⁰ A complete Belbury Poly discography is available at <http://www.discogs.com/artist/Belbury+Poly>, accessed 23 August 2012.

⁶¹The Advisory Circle, *Mind How You Go* (2005), Ghost Box, GBX006CD.

articulated in spectral sonic countenance here, a countenance that stimulates a strange sort of unsettled nostalgia for childhoods past.

The opening three minutes of Brooks' 2008 album *Other Channels*⁶² well sets out, and skews, each of his key concerns. 'Callsign 'A' - The TV Trap' begins as if it is a direct lift from a production music library of idents and themes. Crackly but skipping quavers on MOOG marimba move over a hackneyed major key pattern of scale degrees 1 – ↓5 – 2 – ↓5 – 3 – ↓5 – 4 – ↓5 – 5 – ↓5, before a sudden arrest of the tempo occurs when we hit flat 7, then flat 5, from there the music journeying into ever-distant polychromatic points. The transition into discontinuity in the rhythm and the gradual loss in the latter half of whatever production clarity was present in the first few seconds mirror the growth of the tonal array. We then hear, at the head of 'Civil Defense is Common Sense', a RP-voiced announcer with the following news: 'Here's an announcement for teachers. If you'd like to help we'd be most grateful if you'd ring support services, (pause), or you can write to support services, (pause) - and now, here's your programme'. The track proper features 1970s synthesiser colours, the main of which, a spacey pad, adumbrates the unsettled ambiguity of the track (and album) in its I - bIII anchored sequence, whilst the texture builds and falls away, before a sudden blast of noise reminds us we are in a zone at a remove from the cosy public service one suggested by the synthesiser music.

These opening salvos intimate directly, then, the memory concerns, the uncanny reformulations, and the paternalistic invocations of library music Hauntology. *Other Channels*, as with other Ghost Box music, constructs an archaeology of loss without needing to make recourse to irony, nor to a raising of the eyebrows.

⁶² The Advisory Circle, *Other Channels* (2008), Ghost Box, GBX010CD.

It is hard to gain purchase on any of this Hauntology music in discrete formal or ‘musematic’ (to use a term of Richard Middleton’s to which I’ll return in the next chapter) terms. But that is one of its points. Presence is gleaned only in a sidereal aspect. Musical styles flit in and out of the collage like sense memories in a particularly vivid dream. Hauntology, in this context, is a quasi-historiographical process constructed out of reterritorialised cultural detritus from the recent past, fused together in a profaning manner so as to underline the inter-complexity of the clashing signifiers and referents of the mix, and thus to render our relationship with the past in terms of an ongoing, exploratory association, rather than as an association of passive masters to their archived and conquered cultural inheritance. This music, then, is liberatory in a like ‘counter-magical’ sense to Noise, here the ‘counter-magic’ lying in Hauntology’s aesthetic reconception of cultural myths and memories, from the ghosts of paternalism to the ghosts of folklore and magick, through the sort of profaning practice endemic to the underground.

Of course, such woozy, vivid, abstruse, and richly-referential music as this, as with Hypnagogic Pop below, readily inspires correspondingly woozy and abstruse analytical and critical interpretations. It is hoped that I have not gone too far here in the direction of blind submission to the stated programmes of Hauntology. I experience the music as a vivid, somewhat ‘subliminal’ staging of Derridean ideas, but I should at least take a moment to acknowledge that, for many, its overtly programmatic basis has proved tiresome, and as such the over-excitable hermeneutics composed in response, such as those contained here, may prove problematic.

9.3.3 *Hypnagogic Pop*⁶³

Hypnagogic Pop presents similar disquisitions on historical progress and postmodern pastiche to Hauntology, though, as noted, its methods and affects are both explicitly and subtly differentiated from those of Hauntology. It is connected to Hauntology as a sub-configuration of Noise, and as a central post-Noise scene and configuration, drawing from the same ‘beyond’ postmodern, reterritorialising approach to a widely-conceived set of cultural references as Hauntology, whilst being marked by its own affects and profaning procedures. Keenan suggests of Hypnagogic Pop that ‘it is a stream of post-Noise music that deals acutely with nostalgia’.⁶⁴ This sense of nostalgia – problematised here as with Hauntology – allied with the ‘pop engines’ discussed by Daniel Lopatin as being crucial to the creative nexus of post-Noise in the dialogue with Keenan referenced above, dominate Hypnagogic Pop. As a way of concisely illustrating these ideas I’ll analyse a key Hypnagogic track by Oneohtrix Point Never, before briefly discussing other significant artists.

‘Nobody Here’⁶⁵ was uploaded onto YouTube by Lopatin (as ‘Sunset Corp’) on 19 July 2009, since going on to become something of a totem for theorists of Hypnagogic/Hauntological music. The reasons for this are clear. The track, though only approximately 122 seconds long, unfolds layers of reference and sensibility that far outstrip its minimal length. Popular culture; 1980s technology, techniques, and imagery; secular, refracted mysticism by means of detoured New Age principles of mantric repetition; avant-garde techniques of destabilisation and collage; interference strategies of Noise - all these feature strongly, combining to produce precisely the sort of dyschronia, spectrality, and technological uncanny common to Hypnagogic Pop (and Hauntology).

⁶³ Named by Keenan in ‘Childhood’s End’.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 26.

⁶⁵ ‘Nobody Here’, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RFunvF0mDw>, accessed 28 August 2012.

Elements from 1980s popular culture are most apparent in ‘Nobody Here’ in the fact that the track is built exclusively out of a four bar sample from Chris de Burgh’s 1987 song ‘Lady in Red’. Specifically, Lopatin uses the second four-bar section of the first part of the chorus, a passage where a shift occurs from the submediant chord (on the words ‘nobody here’) to the supertonic. Lopatin makes of this a sort of suspended anacrusis, depriving us of the shift onto the dominant that the song ordinarily provides by looping the fragment back on itself, cutting it off just as it should resolve onto the dominant chord. Lopatin slows the track from its original BPM of 76 to 67, transposing it down a full tone in the process, and adds a wash of reverb and echo. His (re-)version, by these means, achieves a looping-and-circling moment of musical hypnosis. The circumscription of the lyrics to the oneiric, mantra-like repeating daze of ‘There’s nobody here’ adds to the isolating detournement all the more. Lopatin also makes particularly effective use of smearing production effects of reverb, echo, and delay. Here, these techniques are used to convert the sickly, scopophilic strains of the original, into the sort of hazy bliss effect typical of Hypnagogic Pop.

‘Nobody Here’ exemplifies the most salient feature of Hypnagogic Pop; the repurposing and thus reterritorialising of popular culture influences and objects in a Noise context, such that postmodernism’s ‘memory disorder’ is configured anew as an explicit problematic. This quality is evident in other important releases in the genre, such as Sun Araw’s spectral funk and Afrobeat infused *On Patrol* album,⁶⁶ and James Ferraro’s arcade game dungeon crawl dystopia, *KFC City 3099: Pt.1 Toxic Spill*.⁶⁷

The latter album is particularly interesting in terms of the wider theoretical claims being

⁶⁶ Sun Araw, *On Patrol* (2010), Not Not Fun, NNF187.

⁶⁷ James Ferraro, *KFC City 3099: Pt.1 Toxic Spill*, New Age Tapes, CDr, 2009.

examined and claimed here. The *KFC City*, by virtue of its couching of Noise and 1980s symbols and sounds in the context of a futuristic fiction, represents a paradoxical sort of nostalgia for something that never existed. *KFC City* sees Ferraro profaning formerly commercial symbols and concepts, such as *Kentucky Fried Chicken* itself, and the more ambiguous sonic signifiers related to arcade games and other retro-technologies. This crossbreeding of the aesthetic and the seemingly mundane, the latter usually in the form of childhood commodity fetishes, mirrors the British hauntologists' spectral lauding of objects from their own childhood and from the recent British cultural past, whilst being marked out as distinctive from this lauding, too. Ferraro's music, as with that of Lopatin, introduces us to a curious, Videodrome-recalling hyper-reality where fictions – ephemera and dramas of pop culture – fold into reality, altering the stability of that reality, producing a spectral metonym of mutually smeared and American-marked fact and fiction.

The above hermeneutical 'lyricism' is of course somewhat imprecise, but the same caveats introduced with reference to Hauntology should apply here too; the music, whilst possibly proving overdetermined to some, to my mind vividly signifies and alludes. This Hypnagogic music, whilst transcending in a sense Keenan's necessarily limited original interpretative parameters, can be said nevertheless to go further inward *into* Keenan's descriptions, as opposed to breaking apart from them in any fundamental sense. This music *is* richly dependent on American popular culture, whilst also manifesting through profanation and reterritorialisation of the same its own distinctive sleepy, woozy sonic sublimity. However, it also ends up expressing in ways unforeseen by Keenan, such as with the direct correspondence I draw to Derrida/Hauntology, or with the just discussed metonymic vision of American society embodied in the aforementioned Ferraro album.

Concluding Thoughts

The Hypnagogic Pop musicians pick up on the strange cultural enigmas of the society surrounding them – where in Steven Shaviro’s words there is ‘absolute continuity and resemblance between Disneyland and everything else’⁶⁸ – but instead of simply reinstituting them in what might be overly self-conscious postmodern art, they seek to subvert, to question, and to interrogate them by making music that unashamedly pursues the enigmas’ uncanny and dyschronic qualities. The desired ‘ecstatic’ delirium of Harsh Noise music turns anew here, renewed, to a specific abyssal textural and symbolic viscosity (reminding us of Kristeva’s ‘abject’⁶⁹), thick with cultural resonances and aesthetic tensions. The music communicates a sharpened yet nebulous nostalgic haze for half-imagined pasts, just as Hauntology does likewise, although there the set of references and range of invocations orientate less around a profanation of popular culture objects and symbols from 1970s and 1980s childhoods, and more around cherished artefacts of library (un)music and the paternalistic miasma of Public Information Films, 1930s and 1940s popular music, and occult imagery derived from thinkers such as John Dee and Alesteir Crowley.

Whilst these post-Noise musics should be understood still to be centrally immersed in Noise-like sonic warp and weft and textural disorder – and thus to exploit comfort noise and accidental audition as primary expressive resources, even if, in the case of the symbolically and referentially self-conscious Hauntology at least, they communicate less of an emphasis on the performative everyday – their opening out to a more consensual interaction with popular culture and, in many cases, to song-based forms and comparatively traditional

⁶⁸ Shaviro, ‘Chapter 2’, in *Doom Patrols*, <http://www.dhalsgren.com/Doom/ch02.html>, accessed 23 September 2010.

⁶⁹ Julia Kristeva, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

tonalities, should likewise be recognised as shifting the somewhat narrow parameters of Noise orthodoxy into novel and productive realms of musical style and symbolism. It also,, as mentioned, brings Noise into new cultural relationships with Pop musical scenes and practices, and popular culture references.

I continue these hermeneutical, intertextual investigations of the music of the underground in the next chapter, where I analyse Extreme Metal from a similarly broad-based intertextual and ‘pertinent’ cultural perspective, notably under the auspices of what I call ‘productive nihilism’, a moral-political sensibility akin to that identified with respect to such Noise artists as SPK and Whitehouse, though marked out enough that I introduce the ‘neotribe’ in order to account for it.

Chapter Ten: Drone and Black Metals

This chapter deals with the most prevalent Drone Music of the last fifteen to twenty years, an axis of evil, if you will, that spans Doom, Sludge, and Drone Metal.¹ Though ‘pure’ drone musicians and composers such as Phill Niblock, C.C. Hennix, Charlemagne Palestine, Eliane Radigue, and even La Monte Young have continued to be productive to various degrees in the twenty-first century, it is largely the case that in recent years the drone as a fundamental organising principle of music has been taken up and explored most expansively by musicians active in the scene/s of Extreme Metal and other closely related genres. (In any case, the aforementioned musician-composers do not quite fit within my ‘underground’ framework.) Notable exceptions to this rule certainly exist - Eleh, Tim Hecker, Oren Ambarchi, Toshimaru Nakamura, and Fennesz come to mind as notable non-Metal underground practitioners of drone music, for example. These musicians notwithstanding, however, the primacy of the drone as figured in Metal is conspicuous.

My focus here on Drone Metal forms is complemented by a corresponding focus on Black Metal, a closely related genre, which, although it doesn’t make use of drones, explores similar affects and symbolisms to the Drone Metals. My examination of these genres, collectively described as ‘Extreme Metal’,² complements my discussion of Noise and post-Noise in the two previous chapters. Taken together, these music-centred chapters give an idea of the breadth and scope of the musical underground about which I am writing, without exhausting it.

¹ As elsewhere, I am using generic headings here with respect to common usage, and also with the understanding that despite their attribution often being impossible, their use, and their efficacy in introducing certain expectations and norms for their category, is nevertheless of enormous practical benefit. When speaking collectively of the aforementioned ‘axis of evil’, it should be noted, I will occasionally use the terms ‘Drone Metals’ or ‘Drone Metal forms’.

² I’m loosely following Keith Kahn-Harris’ use of the broad collective genre term here, from his *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006, although where Kahn-Harris’s sociological and subculturally-themed book focuses on Black and Death Metal, I also examine Drone and Sludge Metal in depth.

10.1 The Moral and Political Neotribal Metal Scene

My goal in this chapter is quite simple. Up to this point much time has been spent defining and then extrapolating a theoretical framework of scenes and configurations that allows the underground to be considered both as a cohesive network or circuit, and as a hypercircuit of diffuse parts and players. Within this framework, different local scenes aggregate into a total global scene in much the same way that local formations of (for example) British society fuse conceptually and actually to constitute British society as a whole. As seen, Noise and post-Noise musicians across Japan, the U.S.A., Britain, and mainland Europe utilise networked media to connect local scenes to the wider (musical and distributive) logic and power of global scenes, growing their own scenes and indeed their own practice as a result. This structure is exemplary, and can be found again and again across the underground.

My analysis of Extreme Metal and related genres follows this logic, using the conceptual framework of the underground considered as scene to help to elaborate the way the music behaves in the world as cultural production and object, and, co-extensively, how it sounds. However, because of the extreme social separateness of the Metal being considered here,³ because of its unique aesthetic, iconographic, political, and cultural nature, the framework has to stretch a little to accommodate it. This Extreme Metal music has to be understood as an enigmatic (global-) scenic singularity whose members comprise something like a neotribe (equating to ‘a certain ambience, a state of mind’), a singularity that nevertheless connects to and is even subsumed more generally by the global underground. In its exemplification at an extreme of a certain socio-aesthetic character of resistance and apartness endemic to the

³ As noted a number of times in Chapter Eight, I would draw a correspondence in this respect between Noise and Extreme Metal. However, as should become clear, the latter’s emphasis on individuality and nihilism places even Noise’s apparent sociopathy in sharp relief.

underground, this Metal music must be considered to be *of* that underground even as it radically sunders in its music and its behaviour any connection to feelings of community and unity that might be suggested by such an attribution. In this way, the music provides a critique of global forms of capitalist production in a manner to be expected of underground music, but also embodies the radical individualism that is the engine of that very globalism.

My argument here will be that, where in other underground scenes it is, broadly, distinct aesthetic (to the local and trans-local scenes) and shared cultural (to the global underground) practices that are the uniting forces, in the case of these chthonic and apophasic forms, these blackened musics of brutal sonic and thematic abrasion, it is rather their moral-political sensibility that provides the internal connecting tissue, as it were. Some form of aesthetic commonality is important, yes, but at least as, if not more important is the moral-political sensibility that unites Black, Sludge, Doom, and Drone Metal (and to a lesser extent Noise, as discussed in Chapter Eight, and cognate genres such as Dark Ambient). My contention is that finding a way into that neotribal character is the quickest route into finding out how the Extreme Metal scene is configured, both artistically and culturally, and thus, by this, explaining the scene both on its own terms and in terms of the underground more generally. . This tenebrous scene is constructed through the sounds of the music, of course, but it is also crucially constructed and communicated through that music's incantatory names and titles, through the imagery associated with the music, and through the behaviour of the musicians and their audience as it is apparent in the production, distribution, and consumption of the music (and otherwise). These 'pertinent' elements – the music and everything that surrounds it – constitute the ambient neotribal scene that is investigated at length below.

I begin with a sort of overture that introduces the general context of what I call the

‘melancology’ scene (10.2), which is comprised of all the music under discussion. I examine that scene’s musical (10.3), philosophical-theoretical (10.4), and political (10.5) contexts, following this introduction. The focus in sections 10.4 and 10.5 is largely on Black Metal. 10.6 examines melancology’s scenic dynamics. The chapter concludes with an extended look at the music of Drone Metal (10.7), where I critically analyse the use of tonality, the theatricality of the live shows, and, finally, repetition and form in the music.

10.2 The Melancology⁴ Scene: Jouissance and ‘Productive’ Nihilism⁵

Black Metal provides a neat encapsulation of some of the dominant concerns of the melancology scene. Its association with racist, violent, even fascist beliefs is well known; this has become something like a millstone around its neck, a millstone that has entered the popular imagination by way of the public’s fascination with a series of events that took place in Norway in the early 1990s. Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind’s 1998 book *Lords of Chaos*⁶ details these events. The book examines the series of church burnings and murders that occurred in the orbit of the Norwegian Black Metal scene in the early 1990s in the context of many of the musicians’ satanic and fascistic convictions.⁷

⁴ A term I am borrowing from one of the pre-eminent theorists of Black Metal, Scott Wilson. It unites ‘melancholy’ and ‘ecology’ in order to get at Black Metal’s inclination towards extinction and negation, its ‘negative form of environmental writing’: Scott Wilson, ‘Introduction to Melancology’, Black Metal Symposium II, http://kingston.academia.edu/ScottWilson/Talks/36888/Introduction_to_Melancology, accessed 23 August 2012.

⁵ The nihilism here is productive in the sense that these musicians, quite literally, produce something (the music) out of their nihilist inspirations, whilst also being productive in a more general sense, opposed to the stereotypical notion of nihilism as a moribund ideology, in terms of the vibrant musical products, and set of ideas and reactions that emerge from these, of Black and Drone Metals.

⁶ Didrik Soderlind and Michael Moynihan, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*, U.S.: Feral House, 2003.

⁷ These events primarily involved members of Burzum and Mayhem, and culminated in the murder of Øystein Aarseth by Varg Vikernes, the latter being the sole member of Burzum and also bandmate of the former in Mayhem, on August 10, 1993. A compelling account of events leading up to the killing, and an interview with Snorre W. Ruch, also present on the night of the killing, are contained in Brandon Stosuy’s July/August 2008 article for *The Believer*, ‘A Blaze in the North American Sky’: http://www.believermag.com/issues/200807/?read=article_stosuy, accessed 28 August 2012.

Norwegian Black Metal, then, at least broadly, has been associated with fascism of one sort or the other. However, the wider scene of Extreme Metal presents a politics (in its radical aesthetic form as much as its moral coding and aggressive posturing) of a more layered nature than I am affording, for now, to Black Metal. Drone Metal's iconographic practice focuses on similar blackened and portentous magickal ideas, texts, and imagery to those of Black Metal, as we shall see. However, the hard, violent, wraith-like sonic edge of much Black Metal music is instead transmuted to something more enigmatic in Drone Metal. The plasmodic structures and abrasive-amniotic sonic surfaces of the drone music moderate the foreboding imagery, inviting the audience by way of bristling, enwombing guitar drones to participate in a sort of sacred and celebratory nihilism, that insists on complexity even within broad negation. The music of the Drone forms detonates some of the tension found within Black Metal, dispersing its wound up aggression into something more politically ambiguous, more permissive, even as Black Metal itself can be seen to problematise some of its subjects in its own music. The correspondence to my notion of 'ambiguous dissimulation' as regards Noise should be obvious here.

Drone Metal instantiates a productive, blissful nihilism, a sort of 'nihil unbound'.⁸ I examine the contours of this nihilism using the thought of H.P. Lovecraft, Nietzsche, Alain Badiou, Dominic Fox, and Ray Brassier as touchstones. Lacanian *jouissance*, where an excess, an exorbitance of pleasure (breaking *through* the pleasure principle) produces a sort of traumatic bliss, a moving into and out of the frame of pleasure in a haze of feeling that maps the territory of a peculiarised postmodern sublime, will be an important theoretical yardstick for my take on the affective context of the music.⁹

⁸ After Ray Brassier's brilliant re-conception of Nietzschean ideas of nihilism in the book of the same name: Brassier, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

⁹ Adrian Johnston's essay 'The Forced Choice of Enjoyment: *Jouissance* between Expectation and Actualisation' discusses the nature of *jouissance*, and its divergence from Freud's pleasure principle:

The trans-local neotribal ambience of the Drone Metal scene is highly idiosyncratic in terms of its members' dress, musical and cultural allegiances, and physical appearance, though as befits the underground scene in general the borders are permeable, and the membership in constant flux. This is a neotribe where the ambience of nihilism, particularly in its manifestation in the rituals and ceremonies that are so important to this music, absorbs all individuals, at least for the duration of their (perhaps periodic, temporary) allegiance, providing a moment of significant self-identification within the multiple identification field described by Shields as a 'postmodern persona'.¹⁰ This identification of the audience as being members of a neotribe keys us into the fact that these somewhat disparate musics are united by the already mentioned shared moral-political sensibility.

Aesthetic *jouissance*; fascism of one sort or another; nihilism or nihil unbound as celebratory, productive negation; scenic and tribal dynamics: these are all, amongst other things, I argue, constituent elements of the melancology scene. I would add amniotic guitar drones and all the attendant political resolutions and/or ambiguities they bring in order to particularise the Drone Metal scene. I'll provide some historical musical context, before going into further depth on the philosophy and the politics.

10.3 On the Genealogy of Metals

The early history of Heavy Metal¹¹ moved from Black Sabbath's deceleration and dubbing of hard rock's fundamental pulse, through Judas Priest's chromatic, riff-based designs and theatricality, into a diversification of practice throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a period in

<http://www.lacan.com/forced.htm>, accessed 2 September 2012.

¹⁰ In Andy Bennett, 'Subcultures or Neotribes', in Bennett, Shank, Toynbee eds., *Popular Music Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 108.

¹¹ Ian Christie's *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* covers this area with great authority, Christie, New York: Harper Collins, 2003.

which the mainstream popularity of groups such as Metallica contrasted with the burgeoning Metal underground. As Metal practice diversified in the 1980s and 1990s a host of subgenres and derivative styles came into evidence, and classification consequently becomes a little more difficult. I am interested specifically in Kahn-Harris' aforementioned 'Extreme Metal':

The Extreme Metal scene emerged in the 1980s out of an interconnected musical and institutional rejection of Heavy Metal. Influenced by punk, bands such as Venom began to develop more radicalised forms of Metal that eschewed melody and clear singing in favour of speed, down-tuned guitars and growled or screamed vocals.¹²

We can already see in this early development of Extreme Metal a detouring of the mainstream impulse (which at that time, the early eighties, would have been dominated by the so-called NWOBHM – the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, a 'wave' that included bands like the showy and quasi-operatic Iron Maiden), a turning away from populist concerns towards a practice that in many cases would lead both to the sort of productive nihilism referenced earlier, and, more specifically, towards the underground forms of production and consumption shared between Extreme Metal and other scenes across the underground itself.

From the first and second waves of Black Metal in 1980s and early-1990s Europe – described by Brandon Stosuy in an article for *The Believer*, with reference to pivotal acts such as Venom, Celtic Frost, Bathory, and, then, Burzum, as orbiting on quick drums and buzzing guitars, on 'lo-fidelity recordings, Satanic lyrics, and grim vocal style'¹³ – we move in the 1990s into Sludge (sometimes known as 'Stoner', though I'll use the former term) Metal, with acts such as Melvins, Corrupted, Sleep, and Bongzilla. These acts emphasised the reduction of musical material, pace, and surface detail found in 1980s Doom acts such as Candlemass and earlier in Black Sabbath, favouring down-tuned and reverb heavy bass and

¹² Kahn-Harris, 'Roots?', in eds. Bennett, Shank, Toynbee, *Popular Music Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 129.

¹³ Ibid.

guitar led tracks often built on the architecture of a single, repeating, intensifying riff-texture.

I'll look briefly at an emblematic example of Sabbath's work by way of illustration.

According to research published in *The Times Online*, the average beats per minute (BPM) rate of number one songs in the British charts has remained relatively constant: 'By and large, songs that have triumphed in the charts have had a BPM of 85 or higher. They fall into two main sweet spots: the 'Killing Me Softly' speed (85-95 BPM) and the 'Don't Leave Me This Way' speed (115-130 BPM)'.¹⁴ In contrast 'Black Sabbath', from the album of the same name,¹⁵ features a BPM of around 65-68 – the musicians clearly weren't working to a click track, with their proto-Doom lumbering veering to either extreme as the elastic drone absorbs the band in its amber freeze. Other aspects of the track were to prove just as significant. Following an ominous introduction of bustling, rainy atmospheric noise punctuated by solemn tolling of a tubular bell, guitar, bass and drums crash in with the riff that forms the basis of the ensuing four-and-a-half minutes of music, varied only in volume and distribution amongst the musicians:

G5 - (8va)G5 - C#5
2 BEATS - 2 BEATS - 4 BEATS

Fig. 1 Riff Structure of 'Black Sabbath' by Black Sabbath (*Black Sabbath*, 1970).

Played with aggression on distorted, murkily recorded guitars, and rolled out mournfully underneath lyrics such as; 'Big black shape with eyes of fire, Telling people their desire, Satan's sitting there, he's smiling, Watches those flames get higher and higher, Oh no, no, please God help me!', the track presents a grim intimation of the possibilities of droning hard

¹⁴ 'Britain's Top Selling Singles Ranked By Beats Per Minute', labs.timesonline.co.uk/blog/2009/08/19/britains-top-selling-singles-ranked-by-beats-per-minute/, accessed 14 October 2010. This is currently a dead link. The infographic from the article can also be found at http://current.com/entertainment/music/90733956_infographic-top-singles-based-on-bpm.htm, accessed 3 September 2012.

¹⁵ Black Sabbath, *Black Sabbath* (1970), Vertigo, VO 6, 847 903 VTY.

rock. Using those bare fifth power chords indicated above, sometimes reducing the harmonic texture to simple statements of the notes G - 8vaG - C#, Sabbath lay out what became the slowly roaring and seminal template of chromatically-inflected modal¹⁶ riff tectonics across Drone Metal forms. Though Drone Metal artists (as distinct from Drone Metal subgenres such as Sludge) were largely to abandon any sense of metrical or mensural periodicity, Sludge musicians preserve Sabbath's sense of pulse, commonly making music that sits roughly in the range indicated above (whilst also adopting Sabbath-type chromaticism, too). For example, much of the Japanese band Corrupted's output ('Nieve-Segundo'¹⁷ and 'Nieve'¹⁸ for instance) hovers in the high 60s. Seemingly more common are BPM in the low 70s, as is the case with bands such as the Melvins ('Boris'¹⁹ being a famous example), Harvey Milk ('I Just Want to Go Home'²⁰), and Dystopia ('Diary of a Battered Child'²¹).

In the twenty-first century, Drone Metal acts such as Sunn O))) and Asva, following the innovations of Earth in the 1990s, took the Sludge template even further into minimalist, experimental contexts, with duration extended well beyond conventional song lengths, volume and register being pushed to their limits (respectively, upward and downward), and conventional notions of musical complexity being inverted, from figuration to *density*. As I hope to show, Drone Metal, through these innovations, configured perception as affection, highlighting listeners' own bodily presence in the world, and the world's (in the form of the drone and the space of audition) resonance in the listeners' own bodies.²² Drone music, I

¹⁶ I discuss the modal-tonal-chromatic complex evident in Drone Metal forms in much more detail in section 10.7.1.

¹⁷ Corrupted/Phobia, eponymous (1999), Rhetoric Records, RH55.

¹⁸ Various, *Twin Threat to your Sanity* (2001), Bad People Records, BPR-017.

¹⁹ Melvins, *Bullhead* (1991), Boner Records, BR25-2.

²⁰ Harvey Milk, *A Small Turn of Human Kindness* (2010), Hydra Head Records, HH666-206.

²¹ Various, *Twin Threat to your Sanity*.

²² Merlau-Ponty's notion of 'the flesh', where our bodies are involved in what has been described as 'a complex movement of overlapping and folding that exceeds all binary oppositions', seems particularly apt here: As discussed by Anneleen Masschelein in 'Flesh World: On the New Uncanny', in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?type=&id=844&fulltext=1&media=>, accessed 3 September 2012.

argue, more generally works in the register of the affective rather than (just) the perceptive or the cognitive - Drone Metal, with its consuming volumes and haptic sub-bass, is the *ne plus ultra* of this tendency.

Before we quite arrive at that juncture, however, it will be instructive to consider a little more of the Black Metal context.

Black Metal, though morally dubious in some respects as we have seen in passing, nevertheless interlocks with the underground in ways that cannot be ignored; Sunn O))), Xasthur, and Uneathly Trance are just some of the important underground musicians who either identify as or have collaborated extensively with Black Metal musicians. Its musical ‘grammar’, meanwhile, whilst broadly divorced from the drone, maps onto that of Drone Metal in significant ways, although any such interlocking is most significant in the overlap of the moral-political sensibility of each genre. Bathory, an alias of Tomas Börje Forsberg, were one of the important first wave bands in Black Metal history, as indicated in the Stosuy quotes above. From the name (adopted from Elizabeth Báthory, 17th century Hungarian noblewoman and mass murderess), to the extreme emotional states indicated by the titles (for instance: ‘Hades’, ‘Necromansy’, and ‘In Conspiracy With Satan’, all from 1984’s *Bathory*²³), and fleshed out by the thrashing and gurning blast beats, overdriven guitar riffs, and crushing vocal style in the music, Bathory’s Black Metal template echoes everywhere in the Extreme scene. It even reaches into Drone Music; Bathory’s ‘Storm of Damnation’²⁴ navigates just the sort of dungeon crawl ambient textures that Lustmord and others were to make their own under the aegis of Dark Ambient in the 1990s and beyond. Meanwhile, the band Venom’s overdetermined, flanging noise textures and their use of a distinctive power

²³ Bathory, *Bathory* (1984), Black Mark Production, BMLP666-1.

²⁴ Ibid.

chord driven chromaticism were to prove crucial for later Sludge acts.

The nihilistic philosophy of Extreme Metal more generally, examined in the next section, originated largely in Black Metal specifically, which adopted the Satanic lyrical concerns of Black Sabbath but abandoned things like their anti-war sentiment in favour of a relentless focus on the overcast, the individualistic, the vengeful, and the fiendish. The following set of lyrics, from Venom's 'Sons of Satan',²⁵ can stand as an example of the unrelentingly scabrous misanthropy that dominates Black Metal and that, once filtered through the dronal enigmas of Drone Metal, will take on a certain spectral, *jouissance*-invoking form:

Somewhere in time we were born,
And brought blood, lust, hatred and scorn,
You're sorry now you trusted me.

Now I command that you get down on your knees
For Hell the deceiver, Satan's child,
You're a believer, And we're going wild.

Put away all your virtues, Stop your climbing the walls,
Just sign your name on the paper,
We'll have ourselves a ball.

²⁵ From Venom, *Welcome to Hell* (1981), Neat Records, NEAT 1002.

10.4 On the Genealogy of (Extreme Metal) Morals: Against the World, Against Life

It was like the drone of some loathsome, gigantic insect ponderously shaped into the articulate speech of an alien species... There were singularities in timbre, range, and overtones which placed this phenomenon wholly outside the sphere of humanity and earth-life. Its sudden advent that first time almost stunned me, and I heard the rest of the record through in a sort of abstracted daze. When the longer passage of buzzing came, there was a sharp intensification of that feeling of blasphemous infinity which had struck me during the shorter and earlier passage.²⁶

These words come from H.P. Lovecraft's novella *The Whisperer in Darkness*. Lovecraft (1890 - 1937) was an American author of Weird and Fantastic horror literature who attained (largely) posthumous fame for a constellated canon of interconnected short fictions centring around the Cthulhu Mythos. This Mythos, which originated with the author but has since been taken up by many other horror writers,²⁷ depicts an almost doctrinal ontology of cosmic, non-human 'Outer Beings' or 'Old Ones'. Lovecraft seeks to convey through the Cthulu Mythos, in Michel Houellebecq's words, 'a cosmos devoid of hope... This abject universe, where fear spreads in concentric circles from the unnameable revelation, this universe where our only imaginable destiny is to be crushed and devoured'.²⁸ Rotting, viscous, oozing flesh, terrible tentacles, fetid odours - these are the matter of Lovecraft's fictive bestiary, matter shared with Extreme Metal.

Expressed again and again in luminous, poetic prose that unfurls both Metal's occult thematic obsessions, and its organisational principles of circling repetition and bold riff-based rhetorical gesturing, Lovecraft's prose mythologies create a rupture with mainstream society, forming a para-zone of occult underground lore. As with the later Extreme Metal music, the stories are nihilist in their thinly-veiled rejection of mainstream society, but they are also

²⁶ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Whisperer in Darkness*, <http://www.dagonbytes.com/thelibrary/lovecraft/thewhispererindarkness.htm>, accessed 3 September 2012.

²⁷ Beginning with August Derleth's vast contribution to the publication (he founded Arkham House in 1939 in order to publish Lovecraft's work), expansion, and recalibration of the Lovecraftian cosmos in his own fiction, and continuing in the work of such writers as Brian Lumley and Lin Carter.

²⁸ Michel Houellebecq, *Against The World, Against Life*, Gollancz, 2004, p. 5.

aesthetically delectable, sensual in their exorbitance, extravagant in their *jouissance*-invoking chanting and their fixation on terrible deaths and destinies. These stories, rich in musical language and suffused with great, gasping imagery as they are, are of a world-making magnitude. In revealing the Weird, unknowable angles and whispers of the world as phenomenological experience, Lovecraft affirmed the involuted, spectral quality of life itself, the bristling Real that subtends the reality principle. In respect of Lovecraft's invocation of the 'bristling Real', and I defer here to the philosopher Graham Harman,²⁹ Lovecraft's fiction can be fruitfully aligned with speculative realism, a philosophical system that seeks to overcome the Kantian for-us and from-us quality of perception and metaphysics.

Lovecraft's vision of the universe, where 'life is a hideous thing',³⁰ has been of signal importance to a huge number of Heavy Metal musicians, much in the same way that films such as *Scarface* are crucial for Mafioso and Gangster Rap artists. As just suggested, structurally Lovecraft's literary texts provide a model for the repetitious, incantatory musical modes that have been and continue to be much explored in Black and, especially, Drone Metals. Both orbit around repetition and *jouissance*. The correspondence, though, is never closer than in the reverence each has – the author and the musicians, that is – for the mystificatory power of language; for its ability to express both denotative (at the juncture of indexical meaning and symbolic, apparitionary spell-making) and musical meanings. We find baroque, penumbral, terroristic formulations such as 'Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn' and 'Ia! Shub-Niggurath! The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young!'³¹ throughout the author's work. Just in terms of titles, we have the following: *The Haunter in the Dark*, *Dreams in the Witch-House*, *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, *The Lurking*

²⁹ Graham Harman, 'On the Horror of Phenomenology', in *Collapse IV*, Urbanomic, 2008, pp. 332 - 364.

³⁰ From *Facts Concerning Arthur Jermyn and his Family*,

<http://www.dagonbytes.com/thelibrary/lovecraft/thelatearthurjermyn.htm>, accessed 2 September 2012.

³¹ From *The Call of Cthulu*, <http://www.dagonbytes.com/thelibrary/lovecraft/thecallofcthulhu.htm>, accessed 3 January 2011.

Fear, The Rats in the Walls,³² and so forth. In Extreme Metal, we find a similar hypertrophy, this case in the band names, in the album and song titles, and in the lyrics, all of which aim for the same sort of quasi-ancient, blackly mythic feel as attained by Lovecraft, a ‘feel’ that is at the core of the neotribal ambience of the scene. In the review section of the June/July 2010 issue of *Rock-A-Rolla*, perhaps the leading paper publication on the Extreme Metal scene, we find the following bands (in bold), and their albums:

The Austerity Program - *Backsliders and Apostates Will Burn*

Bison B.C. - *Dark Ages*

Coffinworm - *When All Became None*

Culted - *Of Death and Ritual*

Hooded Menace - *Never Cross the Dead*

Ramesses - *Take the Curse*

Twilight - *Monument to Time End*

For more on this ‘quasi-ancient and blackly mythic’ neotribal ambience, we can look to the track titles of a significant Black Metal album, Burzum’s 1991 self-titled debut,³³ the titles of which run as follows:

1. ‘Feeble Screams from Forests Unknown’
2. ‘Ea, Lord of the Depths’
3. ‘Black Spell of Destruction’
4. ‘Channeling the Power of Souls into a New God’
5. ‘War’
6. ‘The Crying Orc’
7. ‘A Lost Forgotten Sad Spirit’
8. ‘My Journey to the Stars’
9. ‘Dungeons of Darkness’

³² All titles viewable at <http://www.dagonbytes.com/thelibrary/lovecraft/index.html>, accessed 20 December, 2010.

³³ Burzum, *Burzum* (1992), Deathlike Silence Productions, ANTI-MOSH 002.

This almost delirial tendency towards the *naming* of a sort of nihilism that rejects mainstream society and, in the case of second wave Black Metal musicians at least, celebrates destruction, genocide, and sempiternal nightmares, relies both on the mystificatory power of the sort of language being used and on the libidinising force injected into that language by the music to which it is set. Before moving onto a more theoretically rigorous staging of the relationship between nihilism, *jouissance*, and Extreme Metal, I'll try to illustrate the iconographic flavour of Black and Drone Metal. The gothic, ritualised, paganistic symbolism of the lyrics and the music are matched in the ritualistic live shows, the costumes adopted for those performances, and the logos and imagery associated with each artist. By way of actual illustration, however limited, I give a small but basically representative selection of band logos and photos of the musicians themselves below. These images should convey well enough the kinds of quasi-medieval, paganistic, and grave iconographies these musicians play with.³⁴ The ritualistic nature of the live performances are discussed in more depth in section 10.7.2.

Images 1 and 2 - Band logos (Burzum, Xasthur):

BURZUM



³⁴ The sources for these images was a general search on Google Image: these logos and images are available at literally thousands of sites.

Images 3 and 4 - Musicians (Gorgoroth; Sunn O))))):



10.4.1 Productive Nihilism and Black Metal: Theory

How can we properly think through the link between Extreme Metal (where Black and Drone Metal are understood to orbit the same neotribal ambience, broadly speaking) and nihilism?

A number of important theorists have been engaged in this very pursuit over the last couple of years, and their insights, alongside those of certain other pertinent philosophers and thinkers, are worthy of survey. In 2009 and 2011 respectively, two symposia on Black Metal

theory – ‘Hideous Gnosis’³⁵ in New York and ‘Melancology’³⁶ in London – took place, the first initiated by Associate Professor of English and Medieval Studies at Brooklyn College, Nicola Masciandro, and the second by Scott Wilson, Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at Kingston University, London. The first of these has already made it into book form; *Hideous Gnosis*, a selection of papers from the symposium, was published by Createspace in 2010.³⁷

In the words of Nicola Masciandro, these symposia, and Black Metal theory itself,³⁸ can be thought along the following lines:

Black metal theory territorializes the potentiality of a non-systematizable coherence, a substance without law. Or we could say that black metal is formally equivalent to Kurt Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, that its topos or place is the black spaces or unreachable interiors/exteriorities that system per se cannot reach. As these spaces are different with respect to different coherent or axiomatic systems, so black metal is not something universally fixed, but a virtually mobile unreachable thing, like an unmineable mineral that weirdly relocates its inaccessibility according to the equipment on the surface.³⁹

The tensions between Black Metal’s unknowability or resistance to being thought are recognised in the Masciandro quote. These tensions point towards an essential quality of the music; namely, that it is haunted by the possibility of its own explanation, that it even abrogates that explanation in a queer moment of apophasis. This resistance to the world of thought is at the heart of the music’s moral-political sensibility, as seen in its emphasis on individuality, extinction, and terror.

³⁵ Details are at <http://blackmetalththeory.blogspot.co.uk/2009/10/hideous-gnosis-schedule-and-flyers.html>, accessed 3 September 2012.

³⁶ Details are at <http://blackmetalththeory.blogspot.co.uk/2010/11/melancology-black-metal-theory.html>, accessed 3 September 2012.

³⁷ *Hideous Gnosis*, ed. Nicola Masciandro, Createspace, 2010.

³⁸ ‘Theoretical blackening of metal. Metallic blackening of theory. Mutual blackening. Nigredo in the intoxicological crucible of symposia’: <http://blackmetalththeory.blogspot.co.uk/>, accessed 3 September 2012.

³⁹ Masciandro in ‘Dominik Irtenkauf interviews Nicola Masciandro’, <http://thewhim.blogspot.com/>, accessed 23 February 2011.

Scott Wilson gives important pointers as to the nature of Black Metal as a form of cultural practice:

As a musical form that evokes frozen, desolated landscapes, infernal forests real and phantasmal, physical and metaphysical, for example, Black Metal is clearly a form of environmental writing, but one that could not easily be accommodated into current ecological discourse. Participants seriously considered the idea of melancology...as an ethos, looking at black metal as the re-occultation of black blood and bile in rituals of mourning and celebration for the death of God and the extinction of his creation, particularly humanity, under the black sun of melancholy.⁴⁰

The suggestion that Black Metal might constitute a form of ‘environmental writing’, a form of writing that ‘re-occults’ both the body and its psychic humours, and also the landscape external to that body, chimes with the lyrical and sonic-aesthetic content of the music itself.

The group Immortal were at the centre of the Norwegian Black Metal scene, alongside Mayhem, Gorgoroth, and Burzum. However, in contrast to the Satanic, anti-Christian lyrical themes common to Bathory and Celtic Frost, Immortal introduced, as it were, forests, winter, and genocidal nature to the lexicon of the scene. Their second and most thematically exemplary album, 1993’s *Pure Holocaust*,⁴¹ offers a counterblast to theism by underscoring, both sonically and lyrically, the ‘sempiternal’, cataclysmic power of nature. God was dead, as with Gorgoroth⁴² and the others, but for Immortal this death was largely an irrelevance; much more important for them were the pagan forces of nature that would wreak a ‘burning hell’ on all of humanity. From the third track, ‘The Sun No Longer Rises’:

In The Mist Of The Twilight
You Could See Me Come
To Walk The Endless Woods Alone
The Earth Is Freezing

⁴⁰ Wilson in ‘Black Metal Theory’, by Francesco Tenaglia, <http://kaleidoscopeoffice.wordpress.com/2011/02/13/black-metal-theory-by-francesco-tenaglia-2/>, accessed 23 February 2011.

⁴¹ Immortal, *Pure Holocaust* (1993), Osmose Productions, OPCD019.

⁴² Gorgoroth’s 2003 album *Twilight of the Idols* plays out this drama, featuring a burning church on the cover, patently cold and churning buzz-textures in the music, and lyrics that are, according to the subtitle, ‘In Conspiracy With Satan’ (Nuclear Blast, 121152). Meanwhile as detailed in *Lords of Chaos*, Burzum’s Varg Vikernes was convicted in 1993 of actually burning a church; specifically, the 12th century Fantoft stave church (with seven other arson attacks on stave churches taking place around the same time).

As I Walk It Become Colder.

Forever Descending In A Place Of The Moon
Where Shadows Moves With Grotesque Eyes
Where Demons Rise

Surrounded By Black And Mourning Moonfog
And The Eyes Of The Dark Ones
Sempiternal Woods Wait Only For Me
A Path Opens Clearly
The Sun No Longer Rises
Over Cold And Forgotten Valleys
The Sun No Longer Rises
Where I Walk And Where I Come
I Believe In Tragedies
I Believe In Desecration
To The North And Into Eternal Winters
To The North In The Grip Of Eternal Frost

Here the human, the individual subject of the song, is entering willingly into a communion with nature that will see his or her own effacement to the force of ‘Eternal Winters’ and ‘Eternal Frost’. The music stages such an effacement, as it does elsewhere on the album, in a characteristic Black Metal lurching between double, normal and half-time sections, all of these saturated in a wash of ‘cold’ guitar feedback, a sonic drone that serves as a figuration of the immanent natural world in which humanity is seen merely to be a weak actor. Frantic, non-syncopated semi-quaver blast beats in the drums (which have the effect in their speed, as they commonly do, of actually unsettling the beat, the periodicity, hovering by way of the fragile collective performance of the band, above those beats, in and out of the beat’s pocket), introduce us to the fevered tellurian world of the track. The central body of the track consists of a stream of tremolo and power chord guitar riffs (with bass mixed low) that move around the chromatic scale loosely whilst cleaving always to an implicit tonality centred on F, with raspy, spoken-screamed lyrics issuing forth across the bleached surface. At the word ‘desecration’, the blast beat intensity of the opening returns, as if to perform that very desecration itself upon the ‘blasphemous masses’ (a line from the album’s title track).

It is in this centring of a pontificating moral discourse that is exclusionary, callous, and dismissive of the ‘masses’, where Black Metal’s problems might be seen to lie. Buttressing the radical aesthetic forms of the music are lyrics, as we have seen, that seem to endorse a deeply troubling sort of moral escapology, an abdication of community in favour of the elevation of individual judgement and mass damnation. This morality rhymes with that of Lovecraft, in detail as much as goal.

This sort of discourse can be usefully related to the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, specifically to his essay ‘Self-Reliance’, wherein a radical individualism struggles against the demands of conformity, community, and society, albeit with different emphases: ‘The man must be so much, that he must make all circumstances indifferent. Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age’; ‘do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong’.⁴³ Emerson rejects the *a priori* demands of Hobbesian society, extracting himself from what he sees as the dead decrees of tired institutions and vestigial systems of thought. At the same time, Emerson emphasises that self-reliance must be a starting point for ethics, a principle from which might issue virtue and empathy.

Though the intensity of Black Metal orientates around a negative transcendence (a form of centred meaning, à la Emerson), the emphasis is so far from Emerson’s regarding ethical concerns as to be antinomial. Black Metal and Emerson share a radical individualism, but diverge on what that individualism might mean (particularly in its relation to the external

⁴³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’, <http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm>, accessed 8 February 2011.

world). The political philosophy of Black Metal thus seems caught between Emersonian self-reliance and a nihilistic renunciation of worldly bonds, whilst its music subverts that contradiction in its radical, avant-garde charge. However, just as the music embodies a destructive sonic-aesthetic urge that might prove truly radical (in the sort of ambiguous dissimulatory process identified in Chapter Eight), the lyrical content and ritualistic posturing of the musicians themselves habitually captures that radical destruction in a discourse of baleful hate. I say habitually because it is not always thus: in latter strains of Black Metal the nihilism of earlier bands, already equivocal, is ‘queered’ to the point of ambiguity. As with Drone Metal, latter-day Black Metal uses the radical nihilism of early Black Metal in new contexts.

10.4.2 Productive Nihilism and Black Metal: Music

I’ll give an illustrative example. Xasthur were⁴⁴ at the forefront of the contemporary Black Metal scene. Since 1995, the band’s sole member, Malefic, has adopted the corpse paint and lo-fi techniques (including recording on a four track tape machine) of such groups as Burzum, Immortal, and Bathory, whilst at the same time jettisoning their Satanic or paganistic lyrics in favour of a bewildering, excessive focus on death and detestation, on ‘murder, winter, suicide, astral projection type of subjects’.⁴⁵ The track titles of 2007’s *Defective Epitaph*⁴⁶ are worth surveying both for their illustration of the sort of themes on which Xasthur focuses, and for their communication of the strange mixture of the ridiculous and the revolting that, even in this more advanced, ‘complex’ form of Black Metal, still defines the genre:

⁴⁴ In March 2012 Xasthur ceased to exist, to be replaced by the similarly one person Nocturnal Poisoning.

⁴⁵ Malefic in ‘Xasthur, an interview by Roberto Martinelli’, http://www.maelstrom.nu/ezine/interview_iss11_130.php, accessed 25 February 2011.

⁴⁶ Xasthur, *Defective Epitaph* (2007), Hydra Head Records, HH666-130.

1. 'Soulless Elegy'
2. 'Purgatory Spiral'
3. 'Cemetery of Shattered Masks'
4. 'Malignant Prophecy'
5. 'Oration of Ruin'
6. 'Legacy of Human Irrelevance'
7. 'Dehumanizing Procession'
8. 'Funerals Drenched in Apathy'
9. 'Worship (The War Against) Yourself'
10. 'A Memorial to the Waste of Life'
11. 'The Only Blood That Pours Is Yours'
12. 'Unblessed Be'

Musically, blast beats are less important to Xasthur (particularly the case as regards *Defective Epitaph*, where acoustic drums were first favoured over the previous drum machines), though they are important here and there, as on such releases as 2003's *Funeral of Being*,⁴⁷ whilst the characteristic Black Metal lurching to and from half-time sections, in a broadly slow, texturally churning context, is present. Of utmost importance to Xasthur is the total saturation of the sonic picture with thick fields of fuzz and distortion and screamed, buried-in-the-mix vocals. Similarly important is the music's wonderfully rich use of chromatic modal riff structures (where modally identifiable movement around the chromatic scale buttresses total white noise chromaticism), which, in their flanging, reverb-heavy, high gain state, produce ornate and complex overtone fields and crackly tone clusters.

Blocks of riffs move in slow motion in the field of white noise, driving each Xasthur track through waves of distortion and looped, phasing slabs of music, occasionally stopping off in episodes of half-time punch and clarity, or intensifying with tremolo picking and violent detonations of feedback. The screams that complete the violent frontage and chromatic noise textures of Xasthur's music, meanwhile, are amelodic and primarily atmospheric in effect,

⁴⁷ Xasthur, *Funeral of Being* (2003), Blood Fire Death, BFD 014.

the voice having undergone delay and saturation in FX, even being ‘more or less improvised’⁴⁸ in the first place. ‘Prisoner of Mirrors’, from 2006’s *Subliminal Genocide*,⁴⁹ is a roughly twelve minute track that encapsulates these central qualities of Xasthur’s music, being formally more convoluted and extended (though essentially repetitious) than some of the group’s other tracks, but aesthetically representative in its abrasion and sonic violence, and chromatic modal musical language, all the same.

Potentialities of radical aestheticism and complexity of expression that inhered in earlier Black Metal find strange expression in Xasthur and in related acts such as Leviathan and Judas Iscariot, twisting in on themselves in the extremity of the musical designs and sonic textures, even as the titles and lyrics seek the same genocidal destruction or chthonic sacrament as earlier groups such as Immortal or Burzum. Even with these earlier acts, the radicalism and coarseness of the music, as with the sheer extremity of the subject matter, meant that political or aesthetic interpretations of either radicalism or simple hateful revulsion were never quite on solid ground. With later acts such as Leviathan and Xasthur, this fragility and ambiguity has only been intensified.

10.5 Black Metal: Politics

It is fair, considering the above discussion, to see Black Metal, in the words of a *New York Times* article published in the wake of the ‘Hideous Gnosis’ symposium, as a music of ‘decay, radical individualism, misanthropy, negativity about all systems, and awe of the natural world’.⁵⁰ Such radical individualism and misanthropy are matched, as I have tried to

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Xasthur, *Subliminal Genocide* (2006), Hydra Head Records, HH666-115.

⁵⁰ Ben Ratliff, ‘Thank You, Professor, That Was Putrid’, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/15/arts/music/15metal.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1, accessed 7 February 2011.

show in the case of Xasthur, to an aesthetic radicalism in the music, creating a duality of sensibility and affect in Black Metal. This duality can help us find a more precise rhythm for the identity of the politics⁵¹ of Black Metal, an identity that will be of use later in the discussion of Drone Metal. Benjamin Noys' chapter in *Hideous Gnosis* is insightful on the subject of Black Metal's politics.

If we were to define a degree zero of Black Metal politics then it would be an unstable amalgam of Stirnerite egoism and Nietzschean aristocratism: a radical anti-humanist individualism implacably hostile to all the ideological 'spooks' of the present social order, committed to creating an 'aristocracy of the future', and auto-engendering a 'creative nothing'.⁵²

Anti-humanism and pro-individualism, resolving into an authoritarian, hierarchically-inclined annihilation that centres on a taste for the void: this kind of sensibility should be familiar to us by now. Noys also sees Black Metal as evincing a sort of 'racial-national metaphysics', and quotes La Sale Famine of French Black Metal group Peste Noire, who places the music rather bluntly to the far right of the mainstream political spectrum: 'without being necessarily N[ational] S[ocialist], real Black Metal is always extreme right-wing music'.⁵³

Noys sees the duality of radicalism and revulsion that I have been discussing as a 'functionally coherent incoherence', as a 'constitutive impurity';⁵⁴ whilst many of the groups seem to subscribe to a 'völkisch' notion of essences and people-land correlates, their music simultaneously undermines such a 'purifying' aspiration. It would be a mistake, says Noys, simply to assert that the one (music) completely subsumes or reterritorialises the other (the more explicit ideological leanings). The music's curious 'mixture of pathos and bathos'⁵⁵

⁵¹ In the kind of ambient, non-pragmatic or economic sense of Chapter Eight, as opposed to the framework of political economy of Chapters Three to Seven.

⁵² Benjamin Noys, 'Remain True to the Earth' in *Hideous Gnosis*, p. 105.

⁵³ *Ibid*, and Famine in *Ibid*, p. 108.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 125.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

instead articulates a centrally consistent contradiction. This is not ‘pure’ or classical fascism, nor is it a liberatory undermining or overidentification in the manner of Noise; it is all of these things at once. My contention below, as hinted at, is that the key to Drone Metal, compared to Black Metal, is that it largely eliminates⁵⁶ from its aesthetics Black Metal’s bathetic quality, even in spite of its maintenance of ritual and costume. Nihilism is modulated in Drone Metal, both clarified and pushed into altogether stranger territories. This modulation, as I have suggested, was already taking place in Black Metal, particularly in later artists such as Xasthur.

Theorist Dominic Fox reflects further on this kind of updating of Black Metal’s extravagant bile, discussing the nihilistic, annihilatory impulse with reference to Xasthur.

Insofar as Xasthur’s music is at all ‘Nietzschean’, it is so because of its obsession with the ‘death of God’; but its god-less universe is structurally identical to the ‘one God universe’ derided by Burroughs. The place of God is empty, but not closed; the cosmos whirls to extinction around an evacuated throne. As with Lovecraft’s mythos, Xasthur’s aural chaosphere is oriented towards the confabulation/disclosure of an existential horror.⁵⁷

The existential horror that Fox identifies in Xasthur, then, pivots decisively on a structural re-affirmation of the Judeo-Christian universe, a replacing of God-as-centre with no-God-as-centre. This represents another contradiction of Black Metal: the *authority* of mainstream society is to be revoked in favour of the anti-theistic *authority* of Satan, of the earth, of nature, or simply of destruction. Black Metal does not identify a structural problem with the way society and its knowledge works, but simply wants its own form of that structure to take precedence, a form where hate trumps love and death trumps life as the new reality principles. The emphasis in the Fox quotation on the horror of the Black Metal universe connects us again meanwhile to the emotional atmosphere of Lovecraft, where a similarly

⁵⁶ This is of course a subjective judgement; a more systematic analysis of music’s comparative bathetic qualities would likely be highly rewarding.

⁵⁷ Dominic Fox, ‘Paint the Devil on the Wall’, http://codepoetics.com/poetix_old/2007/02/12/paint-the-devil-on-the-wall-2/, accessed 13 November 2010.

anthroperipheral universe is ordered chaotically, leaving little place for morality of any recognisable western variety.

Instead we have nihilism. But this nihilism is not so simple as to bear an empty belief in nothing. In *Nihil Unbound*, Ray Brassier explores the idea that Nietzsche's nihilism, so often misinterpreted as a gesture of hopelessness, actually represents a bold finale to the expanse of thought itself, taken to its logical endgame by way of extrapolatory reason, where a notion of the universal is finally accessible through the mathematisation of thought. In Eugene Thacker's words, from a *Leonardo* review,

Nihilism is not, in Brassier's hands, something reducible to psychology, or to the resentment of a subject in crisis about its own subjectivity... For Brassier, nihilism is 'the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumptions of human narcissism, is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the 'values' and 'meanings' which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable'.⁵⁸

This conviction of the inability of humanity to master the world, to make 'hospitable' its existence by means of Kantian idealism (where the world exists 'for-us'), can potentially be taken in a number of different directions. A link to the trans-human ontology of speculative realism is one obvious correlation. Alain Badiou provides another. Badiou discusses the intellectual and cultural context for the nihilist tendencies of Extreme Metal in his diagnostic, far-sighted book *The Century*.⁵⁹ Drawing parallels between on the one hand the tendency of the art and culture of the 1890 - 1914 period to sunder its relationship with its own language, to rupture and invent new forms of expression (which he exemplifies in Schoenberg, Mallarmé, Freud, Picasso, Proust, and Chaplin), and on the other the century's totalitarian political movements' desire to create a new humanity by destroying the old, Badiou asserts

⁵⁸ 'Nihil Unbound: Review', in http://leonardo.info/reviews/feb2009/thacker_nihil.html, accessed 17 September, 2010.

⁵⁹ Alan Badiou, trans. Alberto Toscano, *The Century*, London: Polity Press, 2007.

an antagonistic and confrontational account. Badiou sees the century in the following terms:

The century's subjectivity, prey to the passion for the real and placed under the paradigm of definitive war, stages a non-dialectical confrontation between destruction and foundation, for the sake of which it thinks both totality and the slightest of its fragments in the image of antagonism.⁶⁰

The century is one of destruction and disjunction where the project of annihilation is often masked by the call of the new, the appeal for a sort of a holy cultural war. At the heart of modernism is a negation, just as at the heart of Black and Drone Metal stands a centrifugal negation. Badiou's cultural anthropology here provides context for the ideologies of Black Metal. More broadly, in the Extreme Metal scene, the twentieth century's tendency towards destruction and its commensurate crisis of alienated subjectivity has likewise been transmuted into a distinctly retrogressive, chthonic paradigm, which is nevertheless representative of a kind of 'productive' nihilism.

Before going on to examine the music of Drone Metal more closely, I will discuss some of the specifically scenic dynamics of the melancology scene.

10.6 The Melancology Scene

As with other underground forms, the music of the melancology scene utilises familiar guerrilla tactics of distribution and promotion. Record labels are small, independent, and often artist-run and web-based. Close collaboration between bands that results in split releases and shared membership is common, and internet-based promotional and distribution strategies dominate.

⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 6-8/p. 8/p.39.

By way of illustration, we can look first of all to Hydra Head Records. Hydra Head is a label run by Isis frontman Aaron Turner, which includes such acts as Agoraphobic Nosebleed, Boris, Lustmord, Khanate, and Xasthur on its Extreme Metal-centred roster (though it also promotes Noise and other underground forms). Hydra Head began as a small distribution company in 1993, but now flourishes as a promoter and distributor almost solely via its website, webstore, and blog, notwithstanding important advertisements and promotion in pertinent magazines. Their music is released in multiple formats, including LPs, CD-Rs, tapes, and MP3s, thus satisfying the Extreme Metal scene members' particular neotribal predilection for intense engagement with the world of the tribe, channeled here through the semiotically-marked art work and objects of the physical musical artifacts. This predilection is also assuaged by Hydra Head's range of artwork, books, live recordings, and band merchandise, the latter including t-shirts, jumpers, and posters. All of this material allows the neotribal member to code themselves publicly as belonging to the tribe, whilst also enabling them to burrow further into the scene on both the personal-intellectual and property levels, through the reading of related literature on the one hand, and the owning of items such as posters and small physical paraphernalia on the other.

Another artist-run label, Southern Lord,⁶¹ boasts a similarly eclectic, interpenetrating roster. Southern Lord is run by Sunn O)))'s Greg Anderson. It focuses on Extreme Metal such as that made by Drone artists like Om and Earth, more recently also promoting and selling Black Metal groups such as Twilight and Wolves in the Throne Room. From their California base Southern Lord use their website to run a worldwide distribution network that likewise takes in music, merchandise, and artist ephemera. Whilst the scope and reach of these labels –

⁶¹ <http://www.southernlord.com/>, accessed 5 September 2012.

Southern Lord's releases are sold at innumerable physical locations around the world – is comparable to the older model of medium to small-sized independent record company, it is the case that, particularly as regards Hydra Head (and of course this is applicable to the scene's host of smaller, 'micro' labels), the flattened, accessible model of web distribution and self-promotion has proved an unprecedented boon, allowing these formerly small, artist-run imprints to flourish.

As regards the scene's close collaborations between bands, we need only think of the ongoing movement of members between first of all Melvins, Big Business, Men of Porn, and Fantômas (drummer Dale Crover unites all these, although much more crossover exists), and secondly, across the alignment that is built on the centripetal foundation of Stephen O'Malley and Greg Anderson's Sunn O))) (links in the latter spread across acts such as Thor's Hammer, Burning Witch, (these two featuring O'Malley and Anderson in pre-Sunn days), Earth (from whom Sunn derived their name, and with whom they share a collaboration with bassist Joe Preston, a.k.a. Thrones), Khanate (O'Malley's band after Burning Witch split), Xasthur (Malefic toured with Sunn O))) in support of their *Black One*⁶² album, on which he provided vocals for 'Báthory Erzébet'), Asva (whose leader, G. Stuart Dahlquist, and drummer, B.R.A.D., were in Burning Witch), and Goatsnake (which involved Greg Anderson and Asva's Dahlquist), to name only the most obvious of connections. Even the two aforementioned networks of artists can easily be linked; the Doom band The Obsessed included Wino, Greg Styles, and Dale Crover as member, with the first two of these also being members of Shrinebuilder, a group that features Al Cisneros of Om and Sleep, both of which groups are signed to Southern Lord. (Phew!)

⁶² Sunn O))), *Black One* (2005), Southern Lord, Sunn50.

Whilst the previous paragraph might read confusingly, the key point it evidences is the melancology's scenes close network of collaborators, which even includes Black Metal artists, although that genre's individualism means that it is less prominent in such networks. Close collaboration of this type between a wide range of artists is a distinctive hallmark of underground models of production, where emphasis is less on discrete artistic identities as revenue generators, and more on the synthesis of various artistic credos. As elsewhere in the underground, the pool of musicians on the melancology scene is limited, but alliances are plenty.

Scenes within the underground are often anchored to a particular location, as evidenced most explicitly in Chapter Three. This is no less the case here, as is seen with the Norwegian Black Metal scene of the 1990s, or the Seattle-based avant-Metal and Sludge alignment that included bands such as Earth and the Melvins, and orbited around labels such as Sub Pop. However, as networked media destabilise the former reliance on geographical proximity (notwithstanding the persistent importance of things like festivals), trans-local scenes with their foundations in the sort of global digital media examined in Chapter Six allow the familiar scenic dynamics of audience interaction, musical collaboration, and product dissemination to take place across material boundaries.

This is the framework that sees labels conducting activity chiefly through the web, that sees forums and blogs flourishing – Metal Ireland, for instance, is currently unmatched in its range of coverage and vibrancy of participation in the Metal community in Ireland⁶³ – and that sees artists such as Malefic, for instance, choosing to conduct much of their promotional activity on the web. Notwithstanding occasional deals with labels to distribute his music, as happened

⁶³ <http://www.metalireland.com/>, accessed 6 October 2012.

in March 2012 with the retrospective collection *Nightmares at Dawn*,⁶⁴ Malefic personally sells the majority of Xasthur's material on eBay,⁶⁵ and on his own website.

In these ways is the melancology scene *of* the underground. Yet as I have said, it is also set *apart* from it as a neotribal singularity. Metal fans have long been known for their 'geeky', eager, encyclopedic tendencies, and these tendencies have produced a number of outlets providing valuable information about Extreme Metal bands (and its genres). For example, the Encyclopedia Metallum⁶⁶ is a huge database of Metal reviews, band biographies and other such important content that includes much material on Extreme Metal. A.N.U.S⁶⁷ (American Nihilist Underground Society) features similar material, alongside criticism, theory, and other such matters relating to nihilism, philosophy, and Metal, and the points at which they intersect. Transcix's Metal Archive,⁶⁸ meanwhile, hosts a range of useful and extensive links to Metal-related sites, including, alongside the expected reviews and so on, a horde of links to business, social, political, academic, gender, art, activism, and historical topics as they relate to Metal, frequently to Extreme Metal. Finally, mainstream Metal magazines such as *Kerrang!* often feature bands and artists from the Extreme end of the Metal spectrum, whilst slightly alternative publications such as Pitchfork include regular Metal columns, as is the case with their 'Show No Mercy' regular feature,⁶⁹ written by the aforementioned Brandon Stosuy. These many platforms do not equate to popularity *as such*, but do mark Extreme Metal underground forms out from other underground forms, just as, for instance, Sound Art is marked by its own institutional and cultural frameworks.

⁶⁴ Xasthur, *Nightmares at Dawn* (2012), Avantgarde, AV211.

⁶⁵ The following post well illustrates Malefic's preferred method of sales: <http://xasthurnews.blogspot.co.uk/2010/03/out-now-and-ending-now.html>, accessed 5 September 2012.

⁶⁶ <http://www.metal-archives.com/>, accessed 5 September 2012.

⁶⁷ www.anus.com, accessed 5 September 2012.

⁶⁸ <http://transcix.awardspace.com/metallinks.html>, accessed 5 September 2012.

⁶⁹ <http://pitchfork.com/features/show-no-mercy/>, accessed 6 September 2012.

So, Extreme Metal's neotribal underground status arises both from its distinctive moral-political sensibility, *and*, as shown here, from its character as a form, albeit a derivative form, of Heavy Metal. The wider Metal neotribe is characterised by an intense devotion to its scene, and the Extreme Metal subdivision is no exception: for example, substantial resources are mobilised, often free of charge, in the service of compiling and maintaining the sorts of sites and publications just mentioned. This is no less the case for the 'producers' as it is the audience, as is evidenced in the example of Turner's financial hardships in attempting to keep Hydra Head operative, as discussed in footnote two of Chapter Five. In any case, Extreme Metal's neotribal status does not, nevertheless, sunder it from its fundamental correspondence with underground practices of self-promotion and distribution, aesthetic extremity, and cultural reclusion.

The rest of this chapter balances the foregoing emphasis on culture and politics more generally conceived, with a closer examination of the music of the scene, particularly the music of Drone Metal, since so much time has been spent thus far on Black Metal. Whilst cognate genres, such as Dark Ambient, with its focus on the sepulchral and deliriously organic (sepulchral as regards the cold distortion, organic in terms of the warm sub-bass), subterranean aspects of our environment – a focus which is sonically staged by artists such as Lustmord, Brighter Death Now, and Dave Philips in a speculative realist-echoing context of denuded, electronically mediated droning bass rumbles and flickering voices – would provide rich contextual material, there is much to be discussed with reference to what I call the 'Metallic Drone', and as such it is that on which I focus below.

10.7 The Metallic Drone

Sneaking out here and there up to now in this chapter have been the distinctive qualities the

drone introduces to the politics and aesthetics of Extreme Metal (which, I repeat, even in the case of Black Metal were already equivocal). In closing, I examine Drone Metal forms in order to add depth and context to those ‘special qualities’. I make use of a two-pronged music-theoretical interpretative approach in discussing this music, on the one hand contextualising its use of repetition in terms of Richard Middleton’s theories on the subject, and on the other analysing its use of tonality, modality, and chromaticism in terms of Walter Everett’s writing about such subjects in relation to popular music forms. I go in depth on the musical side of things, albeit within an affective context, in order to articulate more fully the pertinent, intertextual issues pertaining to the music ‘itself’. This is all in addition to some first person accounts of live shows, and theoretically-based thinking about the music’s wider implications.

Drone Metal reflects the ‘political’ allegiances as Black Metal, exploring as it does similar occult titles and lyrics, similarly dark and portentous iconography on its sleeves and merchandise, and similarly ritualised performance practices. Yet its music is something else, even if it can be broadly aligned with Xasthur-type modal chromaticism. The emphasis, here, compared to the cold, alienated sonics of Black Metal, is on warm, reverberant, haptic audio drones stacked on sub-bass frequencies recorded at extremely high volume. And already, in this, we can see the (allegorical) political divergence from Black Metal: where it figures alienation and terror in its wintry white noise textures, Drone Metal instead resolves a similar dense, clustered chromaticism made out of distorted guitar power chords into down tuned, humming, oceanic drones of strange aspect.

10.7.1 Drone Metal: Tonality and Affect

In his 2004 *Music Theory* article ‘Making Sense of Rock’s Tonal Systems’,⁷⁰ Walter Everett provides a template for thinking about tonality in popular music that can usefully be applied to the harmonic strategies of Black and Drone Metal (though I, unlike Everett, hope to layer such strategies within a broadly hermeneutic, affective reading). Everett layers rock’s tonal systems in terms of distance from common practice tonality, by his sixth category reaching the ‘chromatically inflected triad doubled or power chord doubled pentatonic systems of early metal’.⁷¹ In this category, a tonic, if supported at all, would be so only by assertion, not syntax – in other words, the music would not comprise a series of functionally related chords articulating movement to and from a central, pre-eminent chord or tone, but rather of a tone or chord *feeling* central through its blunt repetition and projection as such.

Such a description fits well the eponymous Black Sabbath track discussed above, where the G is tonicised much more through simple repetition than any voice leading or fifth-based harmonic drive. Everett shows how this sort of pentatonic practice shifted, through the use of simple semitone embellishments (comparable to the kind of ‘filling in’ of modal inflections across the music of Wagner, Debussy, and early Schoenberg), into his next category (6b), which features chromatically related scale degrees with little dependence on a pentatonic basis. There, tonal harmonic and voice leading attractions and tensions are irrelevant at deeper levels as well as at the surface; ‘tonal centres are given little or no syntactical support’.⁷² Everett gives an example of an Alice in Chains track, ‘Them Bones’, in which the progression C#5-D5-D#5-E5 forms the nucleus of the song.

⁷⁰ Everett, ‘Making Sense of Rock’s Tonal Systems’, in *Music Theory Online*, Volume 10, Number 4, 2004, http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.04.10.4/mto.04.10.4.w_everett_frames.html, accessed 14 September 2010.

⁷¹ Ibid. This sort of ‘category’ is comparable to Alf Björnberg’s notion of ‘aeolian harmony’ in contemporary popular music: www.tagg.org/xpdfs/bjbgeol.pdf, accessed 7 September 2012.

⁷² Everett ‘Making Sense of Rock’s Tonal Systems’.

Everett's '6a' and '6b' categories are extremely useful for analysis of Black and Drone Metal, though they require a little qualification. Everett shows in his article how over the course of Rock history, specifically in Metal, major and minor mode systems founded principally on diatonic tensions and harmonic drive (and simplified of the enrichments such systems underwent in jazz and on Broadway), were destabilised by blues-derived chromaticism in the Rock music of the 1960s, before being totally unsettled in Heavy Metal in later decades. But he doesn't quite go far enough for my purposes. To Everett's six categories, I want to add my own seventh category, which, like his last one, splits into two.

Category 7a, then, would feature broadly atonal, power chord based designs that yet show vestigial organisational principles familiar from pentatonic modal Rock and Metal, as referenced by Everett's fifth and sixth categories. Such designs can be found all over Norwegian Black Metal, in some of Xasthur and Leviathan's tracks, and even in some Drone Metal. Sunn O))) employ such a tonal strategy across their oeuvre, though as indicated by my description of the category, the music that results must be understood to be tonally liminal, to move in and out of stability and clear tonal identity (and here lies the difference between Everett's 6b and my 7a), chiefly through the saturation of the texture with feedback and sonic distortion. The group's tracks 'Hunting and Gathering' (from 2009's *Monoliths and Dimensions*⁷³) and 'Death Becomes You' (from 2002's *Flight of the Behemoth*⁷⁴) feature such movement in and out of stability and tonal hierarchies. The latter, within the perennial setting of oceanic drones and bristling feedback, uses the following modal, power chord riff patterns throughout its duration (in very, very loose tempi, rhythms, and orderings), albeit in the context of trans-equal temperament Noise textures:

⁷³ Sunn O))), *Monoliths and Dimensions* (2009), Southern Lord, Sunn100.

⁷⁴ Sunn O))), *Flight of the Behemoth* (2002), Southern Lord, Sunn15.

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B |-----|
F#|-----|
D |-----|
E |-0-----2-----3-----0-----0-----0-----0-----1-----0|
A |-0-----2-----3-----0-----0-----0-----0-----1-----0|
E |-0-----2-----3-----0-----0-----0-----0-----1-----1-----0-----0|

```

Fig 2. ‘Death Becomes You’, rendered in the form of guitar tablature in order to reflect as clearly as possible the mechanical set-up and resulting sonic masses of the music.

Notice here how even within the context of comparatively conventional chromatic power chord riffing, the guitar tuning is altered to the extent that the top three strings ring with a first inversion B minor chord against the bass strings’ strange second inverted A5-B5-C5, and the later bass movement of F-E. This arrangement not only sets up the obvious repeated clashes of B minor/C5 and B/F, but it also produces, in the reverb, high volume setting of the instrument, a cluster of tones that only spectrally and occasionally reassert the A ‘tonic’ implicit in the riff. The periodic emphasis of a second inverted implied Bb5 chord (illustrated above with the bass string’s 1-0 movement), serves also to destabilise the central A, although the F-E bass movement also functions as a suspended sixth resolving onto E, the dominant of A, which actually emphasises the centrality of the A tonality.

Sludge act the Melvins’ ‘Boris’ (D#5-E5 forms its basis) is a significant example that would also fit into my ‘7a’ category. It is indeed a category that could be seen to encompass much of the Sludge/Drone scene, for example capturing the essentially chromatic modal (and only ever loosely pentatonic), circling always to the fundamental tone through riff- or drone-based vocal and instrumental sections, music of acts such as Noothgrush, Corrupted, Bongzilla, Dystopian, and many others besides.

The cluster of tones mentioned with reference to 'Death Becomes You' is captured by my second supplementary category, 7b. 7b sees the vestigial pentatonic basis of 7a being abandoned in favour of a total chromaticism defined by Noise feedback and high gain, distorted, crackly textures that transcend equal temperament, moving rather in the orbit of electronic overtones and their related psychoacoustic phenomena. 7b is a highly interstitial category, rarely glimpsed in itself, rarely being stable (in its instability) for long. Single tracks move in and out of 7a and 7b, depending on the weighting given to riff structures – which are invariably anchors to which the music returns, even from the furthest sonic chaos – at any point in a Drone Metal composition or performance. (The latter recreate recorded compositions faithfully enough, though in this context of volatile sonics and unpredictable psychoacoustics, indeterminacy and improvisation will always be significant elements of the live musical event.)

Because of the droning, repetitive nature of Drone Metal, even with music that might be seen to accord with 7b, it is important to note that a tonal centre is still preserved, after a fashion. In 7b, the pentatonic-derived riff structures of 'Death Becomes You' are abandoned, yes, but at the same time, some sort of pitch centre ends up being articulated nonetheless. The music may move within chromatic fields of complex overtones and clashing tonal layers, but anchoring it always is the track's fundamental tone, which is asserted, usually, as the lowest register note of all the pitched instruments involved. The tone manifests as the foundational note both through the riff vestiges from other points in the track, and through this registral importance within the compound pitch array of the music.

My Bloody Valentine's thirty minute drone jams at the end of concerts, played as the

interlude to their track ‘You Made Me Realise’, would fit into my ‘7b’ category. The aforementioned ‘Báthory Erzébet’, from Sunn O)))’s 2005 album *Black One*, which features guest Malefic singing/screaming from inside a coffin, upholds such a standard likewise. The track also satisfies, here and there, the characteristics of category 7a. 7b, as noted, is a liminal, transitional category. Neither of my categories is intended to capture any of Sunn O)))’s (or any other Drone act’s) tracks completely: they are simply strategies for thinking about the different ways that the music is organised. Most Drone tracks, then, if they do indeed move away from riff-textures to embrace 7b (which, I reiterate, preserves some sense of a fundamental tone), invariably come back to that anchoring, 7a, basis.

‘Báthory Erzébet’ is a representative track in other respects. It is music that is more about atmosphere and tone colour, timbre and texture, than any tight formal or tonal plan, although riff structures nevertheless remain somewhat important. The point about this drone music is that it wobbles, flickers between categories, rarely settling into a resolved shape long enough to be pinned down as one thing or another. Even when it seems comfortable emphasising what I just called ‘atmosphere...and texture’, the music’s distance from any conventional codes of musical signification and organisation mean that it impacts in the register of *jouissance* as opposed to that of clear discernment. This is even the case in the more texturally refined and orchestrally-enriched music we find on Sunn O))) and Earth’s later albums, such as *Monoliths and Dimensions* and *Angels of Darkness, Demons of Light I*,⁷⁵ respectively, where the addition of instruments such as cello (Earth), and brass, winds, and strings [Sunn O)])] does little to domesticate the eldritch inscrutability of the droning sonic flows, in the latter case serving, in the main, to enhance and bring orchestral definition to the spectral, abstract chord progressions and drones of the band.

⁷⁵ Earth, *Angels Of Darkness, Demons Of Light I* (2011), Southern Lord, LORD128.

The opening track of *Monoliths*, for example, ‘Aghartha’, unfolds a huge, reverberant, chord sequence on down tuned guitar, which slows as the track progresses and ebbs and eddies according to the whims of the performance itself (metrical time is of little significance in this rolling, adamantine music), over its 17’35’’ length. The drawn out cyclical sequence, E5-Eb5-C5-B5-C5-B5-Eb5-B5-(Eb5) (with chord names here to be understood as loose approximations of a bristling overtone field of vibrations and feedback), is repeated as the basis for the first ten or so minutes of the track. The first iteration lasts 1’25’’, the second 1’35’’, the third 2’20’’, and the fourth 1’50’’ (with Attila Csihar’s high-in-the-mix, semi-spoken semi-glowered horror incantations entering here). Just as the fifth iteration is winding to a close, around 9’20’’, the sequence breaks down, with the harmonies moving down to A, hovering between there and D briefly, before returning to an oscillation on Eb and C. A Tibetan ‘Dung Chen’ long trumpet appears, winding out a buzzing drone, which gradually comes to dominate the track, closing it starkly. Even here, with guitars and bass ultimately absented, the enigma of Sunn’s drone remains.

Album closer ‘Alice’ shifts the group much more directly into late Earth-like clarity of harmonic progression, with the chamber array of instruments here refracting and reflecting some of the inherent richness of the droning progression beautifully, as the vocal and orchestral elements of ‘Hunting and Gathering (Cydonia)’ do likewise. With these chamber-like tracks we are as far from obscurity as Drone Metal gets, and yet still the enigma, still the sustained tones and the emphasis on tonal spectrality, remains.

Tracks such as ‘Aghartha’, ‘Báthory Erzébet’, and many other Drone pieces consume self in their enwombing power, articulating our own flesh as a mesh of surface and vibration, barrier

and resonating field. In this respect, as discussed earlier, Drone Metal can be seen to place an emphasis on affect as opposed to percept – on the bodily experience as opposed to just the cognitive processing – and thus, on *jouissance* as primary mode of reception. The music shifts our sense of complexity from the surface filigree and subterranean mathematics of post war composition, into a submersive, trans-subjective body-knowing-feeling.⁷⁶

Time and space, in addition to the body and cognition, are also configured interestingly in Drone Metal. Drone music in general underlines the nature of time as an *affective experience* (as opposed to a transcendent category), where its objective existence is subsumed by the delicate and fragile negotiations and modulations of time-as-lived-in-the-drone. The size and sonic ‘weight’ of the drones in Drone Metal underline the lived experience of time and space, rendering spaces and inner time daunting and strange. Drones also conspire in their dense fogs of feedback and distortion to produce perceptions of microacoustic profiles (even outside the context of microacoustic planning), challenging notions of authorship by this, and showing music in some ways as an object-orientated art, an art that evokes in its separation from human agency the trans-human metaphysics of speculative realism referenced earlier.

The sheer volume on the one hand, and the ceremonial aspect of the live shows on the other, ratchet up the enwombing, consuming element of the drone experience in Drone Metal, altering our perception of time and space, as noted. I want now briefly to concentrate on the second of these aspects, the live shows, before bringing my discussion to a close with an analysis of repetition in Extreme Metal.

⁷⁶ Drone Metal offers listeners the experience of the kind of proprioceptive aesthetics proposed by Barbara Montero: Montero, ‘Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense’, www.sfu.ca/~alevisoh/proprioception.pdf, accessed 6 September 2012.

10.7.2 Drone Metal: Live Shows and Affect

Black Metal musicians are known for the extravagance and extremity of their live shows.⁷⁷ Drone Metal shows are similarly heightened, but, as with Drone's queering⁷⁸ of the nihilist tendencies of Black Metal, their figuration as ambiguity and pathos, the live presentations of Drone Metal mimic the superficial details of Black Metal's extreme pantomimes, whilst at the same time dislocating the farce that attends such pantomimes as a result of their intense self-seriousness and over the top sentiments. Drone shows are, instead, clandestine, creepy affairs, full of ambiguity. Bathos is here a distant emotion. By recounting my own experience of one such show below, I hope to convey first of all something of the nature of Drone Metal live performance (although it is not always freighted with such theatre and ritual as is the case here), and, secondly, to express in basic phenomenological terms, what such shows *feel like*.

Sunn O))) at All Tomorrow's Parties, Minehead, UK, 12 December 2007.⁷⁹

In 2007 Sunn O))) performed at the Portishead curated All Tomorrow's Parties festival. Every extra-musical effort was made by the band to intensify the experience, to push the concert into the *jouissance*-invoking realm of exorbitant, even traumatic, pleasure. With the audience already somewhat on edge following a raucous Noise performance from the Japanese group Boris, Sunn's tactics ensured that that edginess was exaggerated to the point,

⁷⁷ Mayhem are famed for having pigs heads and dead animals on stage, whilst in 2004 in Kraków, Poland, Gorgoroth featured onstage sheep heads on stakes, 80 litres of sheep's blood, Satanic and paganistic symbols, and four naked, crucified, models.

⁷⁸ I use 'queering' in its idiomatic queer theory sense of the destabilisation of formerly mainstream codes for subversionary ends; my use is intended to complement suggestively the similar terms profaning, deforming, and undermining.

⁷⁹ Although the post itself is generally unedifying, the following review at least contains a basic description of the show, and includes pictures from the concert: Rich, <http://www.nothingatall.net/review.php?what=reviewView&item=205>, accessed 7 September 2012.

just to the point, of farce. What follows is a retrospective account of that concert.

Just as Sunn O))) were about to take the stage in the packed, comparatively small (500 person capacity) club venue of Butlin's, Minehead, a loud and jarring fire alarm went off. Nobody quite knew what to do; even with knowledge of the band's liking for mischief, people seemed unwilling to take any chances. Bar staff towards the sides of the venue pulled the shutters down, looking panicked, whilst some people started moving confusedly towards the exits. This went on, with alarm blaring, for about two or three extremely tense minutes.

As the mood was threatening to turn nasty, the lights in the club suddenly dimmed to almost nothing, and huge plumes of smoke began emitting from the stage. Glimpses could be caught of the hooded figure of Oren Ambarchi, Sunn O)))'s guest guitarist and synthesiser operator. A strange tree appeared to be moving, lumbering, at the lip of the stage. Feedback started howling from the huge stacks⁸⁰ of Sunn amps. The crowd still seemed unresolved on the question of the fire alarm, but most, by this time, had turned in the direction of the stage.

Our field of vision cleared to the extent that band members could just about be made out (this was the extent of visibility throughout). It appeared that the tree we had all seen at the front of the stage was not, in fact, an animated piece of flora, but was actually guest vocalist Attila Csihar. Csihar had dressed as a ghoulish, goblin tree. Several hooded figures were by now visible on stage, crouched over instruments, faces shielded by smoke and dark light.

Suddenly a huge, overwhelming bass note rang out from Greg Anderson's down tuned bass. This was, in volume, depth of resonance, and register, unlike any sound I had heard or

⁸⁰ The group's motto, 'Maximum volume yields maximum results', was being adhered to.

experienced before or since. The crowd pushed back and teetered around me, many mouths gaping at the enormity of the sound. Molten, subterranean guitars joined the bass. The audience's already-altered psyches submitted to a looming, amniotic drone, which continued seemingly without rest for the duration of the sixty minute concert. Our bodies folded and overlapped with the drone's vibrations according to slight movements about the space, and in alliance with the tectonic riffs and obscure motions of the music.

Although the traumatic opening of the concert certainly left its affective mark, rendering the sublime profile of the music abject, distressing and seductive at once, the warm, consuming drone soon eased the audience into some kind of floating state of contentment. Csihar's scrawling vocals continually unsettled that contentment, however, just as the apparent tension (real or not) between the musicians on stage compounded our anxiety. The bizarre atmosphere was capped off at the close, when the band's two core members, Stephen O'Malley and Greg Anderson, seemed to get caught up in a physical tussle.

Drone Metal is already intense, ruthless in its total sonic immersion, but with live shows such as the one just described – and I have seen others that use dark lighting and smoke to similar effect, and others that pulverise with the simple directness of abstract, loud, and consuming drone music, such as the My Bloody Valentine reunion shows at the Roundhouse in London in 2008 – the aggression, farce and bathos, and sheer violence of Black Metal performance transmutes into something finally revelatory in its traumatic, unsettling ambiguity. The ambiguity and intensity of these shows mirrors the of Noise, where as discussed in Chapter Eight actual violence often accompanies the hostile, transgressive, strange, sometimes bathetic but often powerful and unsettling performances.

10.7.3 Drone Metal: Repetition, Form, and Affect

Beyond the ritualised aspect of the live shows and their relationship with the affective profile of the music, I want to think a little about the use of repetition and form in Drone Metal in similar terms. As we have seen, riff-based structures ground the music, whilst consuming drones anchor those riffs in sensation-ordering sound. Repetition is here used for its own erotic affectivity, although it is hidden from itself *as* repetition in some of the more ambiguous drone structures. We expect change when listening to music, even drone music, and our perception is charged, libidinised, when that change is not forthcoming or is strangely deferred or suspended.

But what is the nature of those repetitive forms to which I keep referring? In Sludge groups such as Bongzilla and Noothgrush, gonzo riffing not too dissimilar to a chromatically-enriched Hawkwind sits alongside more suspended patterns of down-tuned (to D, or lower) guitar drones of some chromatic flavour. Riff-structures – often either comprised simply of an exploration of the riff, or alternatively being akin to verse-refrain form, with the riffs functioning as the latter to the conventional verses – alternate here with more ambient, atmospheric drones. The former structures, though, in contrast to Drone Metal, dominate in Sludge, where tracks are generally shorter, and forms more literally repetitious. Doom/Death group Thor's Hammer, meanwhile, anticipate the droning freedom of Sunn O))) (with whom they share two core members) in their volume and their tunings, but stick to simple, drawn out, temporally contracting and expanding statements of riffs (with or without the alternating verses) that in tonal profile would fit with those described earlier for category 7a. Melvins cleave to this strategy sometimes, whilst evincing a more liberated and indeed complex formal strategy elsewhere, not to mention their characteristic and very precise metrical shifts

between 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 beat patterns.

Earth, *the* foundational Drone group,⁸¹ make use of compelling formal strategies, which first established the norms just described, on albums such as the feedback frenzied *Earth 2* from 1993, and the 1991 EP *Extra-Capsular Extraction*. Later, in the band's second incarnation, from 2005, the group developed these simple, drawn out structures into much more tightly-woven, slowly and purposefully expanding forms - a development matched in the drastic simplification of the textures to clean, trebly guitars, bass and drums. Like a condensed Philip Glass, later tracks such as 'Ouroboros is Broken (2)' (from 2007's *Hibernaculum*) and 'Old Black' (from 2011's *Angels of Darkness, Demons of Light*⁸²) place repeating melodies (chromatic, distorted guitar on the former; cello and clean guitar the latter) over similarly repeating, cyclical and tonally relatively simple ostinati, though unlike Glass their metrical proportions do not change. These cycles eventually and invariably move towards some sort of intensification or some resolution, some qualification of the bright drone, a qualification that often takes the form of a shift away from the ostinato, whilst maintaining the droning tonic, with some new melody being introduced or a thickening of ensemble and texture happening. Form in later-Earth is thus both more complex and more easily parsed than it is in other, more involuted Drone music.

Richard Middleton has given us a simple way to formalise all of these strategies. In his article 'In the Groove or Blowing Your Mind? The pleasures of musical repetition',⁸³ Middleton separates repetition into two basic models: 'musematic' and 'discursive'. The first of these

⁸¹ Sunn O))) named themselves after the group's favoured band of amplifier, whilst the above mentioned early releases instance the first drawing out of Metal's pulse to such extreme, droning forms.

⁸² Earth, *Earth 2* (1993), Sub Pop, SP185b; *Extra-Capsular Extraction* (1991), Sub Pop, SP123b; *Hibernaculum* (2007), Southern Lord, Sunn74; *Angels Of Darkness, Demons Of Light I* (2011), Southern Lord, LORD128.

⁸³ Richard Middleton, 'In the Groove or Blowing Your Mind? The pleasures of musical repetition', in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, Bennett, Shank, and Toynbee eds., London: Routledge, 2007, pp. 15 - 20.

features short units such as riffs (understood holistically to encompass rhythm, harmony, melody, and colour) that are likely to remain undeveloped, and to exist within unitary structures of cycles and replication. Discursive repetition has to do more with longer units of music, such as at the level of the phrase. Discursive repetition absorbs repetition into complex structures where hierarchy is constantly asserted, undermined, developed, and resolved into a final affirmation. Musematic repetition, meanwhile, is more conducive to improvisation and rhythmic variation, and to the communication of a secure hierarchy founded on a stable, central, motto.

I would like to suggest that Extreme Metal (Drone Metal forms chiefly, but also Black Metal, to an extent) makes use of both of these strategies, whilst complicating each one. Musematic repetition would seem the obvious model, and whilst it makes sense to pick out the riff-based structures looked at so far, these structures are so ambiguously and freely developed over long time spans (frequently of ten minutes and up), that they become much less clearly riff-based. This is also the case in some Black Metal, where for example Xasthur cleaves to formal ambiguity within a song-based context. The structures, and the riffs themselves, of Drone Metal become only interstitially recognisable as themselves over the time spans just mentioned. Musematic repetition provides the template, but the uncanny, profaning impulse native to Drone Metal forms provides the affective key.

At the same time, in later-Earth primarily, but also increasingly in other groups such as Corrupted and Asva, forms are getting stretched out to the point where it only makes sense to think of them in terms of larger, discursive formations. The authority of the riff, over those long durations and within the sticky, gelatinous flow of the drone edifices, is undermined. We don't know what is structuring the music, other than a vague sense of repeating phrases and

stretched out blocks of riffs-come-sentences. In this way, the music hovers compellingly between Middleton's two basic models. 'Aghartha' is the clearest instance of such hovering examined here, but many other examples exist besides. As with my harmonic categories of '7a' and '7b', then, Drone Metal forms, as is sometimes the case with Black Metal, articulate a 'both/and' version of the musematic/discursive model.

By all the above means of chromatic enrichment and ultimate destabilisation of Metal's pentatonic basis, the deployment of related theatrical and ceremonial live tactics derived from Noise and Black Metal, and a tactical use of repetitious, cyclical formal plans, Drone Metal forms burnish the paradox of blissful trauma (the element of *jouissance* discussed earlier) found in the intense sonics of Black Metal. Emphasis is placed on unsteady affect here, whilst the contradictory (though equivocal) politics of Black Metal, where radical sounds rub up against reactionary lyrics, are undermined and, ultimately, in effect, I would argue, rejected.

Concluding Thoughts

I have suggested that the dually pathetic and bathetic moral and political character of Black Metal, already indistinct, is fundamentally queered, destabilised by the exorbitance of Drone Metal forms. Each of these forms moves in the productive nihilist world – the neotribal moral-political ambience discussed above – of Black Metal without ever securely suggesting a stable political or aesthetic reading that might place them in sympathy with apparently right-leaning Black Metal music, though even there, of course, the accusations of rightist sympathies is on shaky ground.

I have been seeking to frame the exorbitance of Drone Metal and other forms here within a psychoanalytic context of *jouissance*, relating to the music's inversion of musical complexity

from figuration to density, and its configuring of perception, in a sense, as affection, where the music's haptic, consuming intensity defeats attempts at perception in a conventional sense. But what might Drone Metal's production of a new aesthetic and affective 'space' (a space that enhances the conflictual destructive tendencies of Black Metal), actually mean in a wider sense? Whilst clearly corresponding to the wide underground practices of profanation and aesthetic 'counter-magic', I believe we can look to the Lacanian theory of sublimation for a more directly pertinent answer. Alenka Zupancic describes Lacanian sublimation in the following terms:

The Lacanian theory of sublimation does not suggest that sublimation turns away from the Real in the name of some Idea; rather, it suggests that sublimation gets closer to the Real than the reality principle does. It aims at the Real precisely at the point where the Real cannot be reduced to reality. One could say that sublimation opposes itself to reality, or turns away from it, precisely in the name of the Real. To raise an object to the dignity of the Thing is not to idealize it, but rather to 'realize' it, that is, to make it function as a stand-in for the Real.⁸⁴

The unreal is seen in these terms as 'realer' (i.e. closer to Lacan's 'Real'⁸⁵) than 'reality', in place of which opposition we could substitute Drone Metal(s) on one side (as the 'unreal'), and musical norms, such as those of Heavy Metal (as 'reality'), on the other. Drone Metal forms would in this respect be seen to perform a sublimation, to move beyond conventional aesthetic forms and experiences so as to produce instead an entirely new space, a new 'Thing', through an encounter with a kind of affective void (the *jouissance* referred to throughout). This new 'Thing' exists within the strictures of mainstream ideology (in this case 'within' Heavy Metal discourse), and yet provides an affective and cognitive map for the thinking and experiencing of a space beyond that ideology.

⁸⁴ Alenka Zupancic in k-punk, 'Lions After Slumber', <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/005255.html>, accessed 22 February 2011.

⁸⁵ Lacan's notion of the 'three orders', comprised of the Real, the imaginary, and the symbolic, is explained here: <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/symbolicrealimaginary.htm>, accessed 7 September 2012.

Although such an allegorical and indeed extravagant interpretation needs to be handled carefully, it is my contention that, in a quite basic sense, Drone Metal forms can be seen to perform the kind of sublimation just discussed, even if the emancipatory political dimensions I identified are of course difficult to verify. Noise and post-Noise forms, too, might be similarly positioned as performing kindred sublimations within their own scenes. I have preferred to describe their ‘profanations’ in terms of a more basic ‘counter-magic’, however, due to their lack of emphasis on Drone Metal’s very particular mode of perception-as-affection, a mode directly relatable to Lacan’s *jouissance*. But, this notwithstanding, Drone’s sublimation and Noise’s profaning counter-magic should fundamentally be seen in the same spirit. Such sublimation and such counter-magic should be seen as fundamental capacities of underground culture.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

Across the three parts of this thesis I have sought to demonstrate the richness, vitality, and variety of underground music culture, which, as I have argued, is an actually-existing-scene of music whose boundaries have been mapped, and thus in some way defined and even ‘invented’, through the writing up of this research.

The core arguments of the thesis operate at different discursive levels. My first claim is essentially ontological, and it is that it makes sense to speak of – and to map in so doing – the underground as a basically integrated entity. Over the course of the thesis, this claim has been evidenced in the global correspondences adduced across the practically, politically, and aesthetically-tied local and trans-local underground scenes. However, despite these material and affective correspondences, I also tried to avoid reifying the term itself, such that my arguments would be able to lay claim to any sort of objective, naturalistic ontological research ‘object’. So, the ‘underground’ is both a heuristic device signifying a range of loosely-connected criteria orientating around politics, cultural positionality and practice, and aesthetics, *and* a set of events and performances happening in the world, in response to which the discursive sign can only capture so much. My heuristic drawing together of those events within the theoretical framework of the ‘underground’ attempts to give organising coherence to them in terms of what I critically and intuitively determine to have been their dominant characteristics over the past forty years or so, without denying the unavoidable remainder left on both sides of the relationship shared between the term and its particularised events.

My key framing claims, those of the musicological and colloquial concept of the ‘scene’, the sociological concept of the neotribe, and the philosophical concept of the artistic

configuration, derive from my first ontological claim. Methodological claims of ‘pertinence’, intertextuality, interdisciplinarity, and interpretation, drawing on a wide range of texts and contexts, colour my arguments within the frames just given.

More ‘applied’ arguments are contained by these ontological, framing, and methodological claims. I observe the preponderance of underground scenes in large cities, and conclude that those cities’ concentration of resources, from people to venues to capital, facilitates the development of scenes, which therefore depend on the flows of capital even as they endorse radical anti-capital politics (in many cases). I also make the point, through the Irish scene in particular, that the growth of underground scenes does not *necessarily* require capitalist economic support, even if a thriving and broad cultural tradition and permissive liberal pluralist ideological apparatus is probably necessary for their flourishing; motivated and proactive individuals, particularly in a digital age of easy dissemination and promotion, have been as important to the growth of local and trans-local scenes as the availability of capitalist resources have been.

I explore the political contexts of the underground, particularly in terms of underground figures’ attitudes and practices and how these are affected by politics and the political distribution of capital. The latter of which provides an important theme across Part II, where I extensively explore, through both primary and secondary research, the digital age and post-Fordist context of real subsumption, flexible accumulation, and digital piracy. Responding to statements from a range of underground artists, label heads, festival organisers, and so on, I argue that the underground both escapes subsumption, to some degree, through its size – I term this ‘real but partial subsumption, though it could also be compared to the kind of ‘space

of exception' discussed by Georgina Born in 'For a Relational Musicology'¹ – and also that it co-determines capital for somewhat contestatory ends.

Turning to Part III, I find echoes of these political models of contestation and subversion in the aesthetics of the underground. Within an intertextual framework I concentrate on the music, which I describe using a unified, though terminologically diverse, framework of sublimation, subliminal modality, ambiguous dissimulation, profanation, deformation, aesthetic 'counter-magic', and reconfigurations of the sensible (in addition to various local arguments, such as those relating to the tonality and forms of drone music). These concepts variously attempt to describe how underground music plays on convention, scrambles sensibility, and offers alternative representations and aesthetic symbols and affectivities, which do or do not have political ramifications, but certainly *do* have rich aesthetic results.

All of the above terms, concepts, and claims, are intended to tease out and to colour in, in various ways, what I take to be something like the core (albeit dynamic and variable) qualities of the underground: its experimental and exploratory – and often challenging – aesthetic forms; its invariably radical politics; its marginal existence; its dependence on but distance from capital; its direct participation in the digital age as a musical form being typically turned upside down and inside out with both positive (liberatory channels of collaboration, promotion, accessibility) and negative (increasingly exploitative business models) results; and, above all, its para-zonal status outside, around, within, and without both the pop and classical mainstream of musical production.

These core arguments and claims cover an extremely wide range of topics pertaining to the

¹ Georgina Born, 'For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* Volume 135, Issue 2, 2010, pp. 205 – 243.

underground's politics, aesthetics, and culture. And yet, due to considerations of space, certain underground and trans-underground musics had to be left out that would themselves have suggested supplementary analytical lines of inquiry. Most notable in this respect, it seems to me, are the two chapters that were in fact written, but essentially (although aspects and passages made their way into other chapters) weren't included: 'Composerly Underground' and 'Free Improvisation'.

The first of these examined the music and cultural contexts and practices of composer-artist figures such as Wolf Edwards, Jennifer Walshe, Seán Clancy, Julia Holter, Ed Bennett, and J.G. Thirwell. These figures were shown to operate in a sort of liminal zone somewhere across both the academy and the underground, where certain dimensions of their practice, whether it be Bennett's interest in improvisation, or Edwards and Clancy's participation in Noise groups and their general stated aesthetic preferences, which skew heavily to underground types of activity, relate to underground conventions, and others, notably many of the above's university educations and academic positions, their notation-based music, and their more conventionally avant-garde influences, mark them out as more traditionally-understood 'academic' composers. I argued that we are now at a generational inflecting point, where most contemporary 'classical' composers have immediate personal experience, whether as fans and listeners or as musicians, of popular culture and avant-gardes outside the notated mainstream, and as such that their practice and proclivities as composers evinces such split allegiances directly. It may be the case, I suggested, that it will no longer make sense in some respects even to speak in such oppositional terms as the 'academy' and the 'underground' in the future, since both cultures, at least in their avant-garde aspects, are tending more and more to a kind of mixed, multiple range of activity and taste, even if the institutional dimension of the academy necessarily marks it out as distinct from the

definitionally non-institutional underground.

This opposition between institutions and non-institutional artistic activity was explored further in a secondary line of inquiry within the same chapter, where I looked at another kind of ‘composerly underground’ figure, the sound artist (of a certain kind), exemplified by such artists as Akio Suzuki, Ryoji Ikeda, Janek Schaefer, and Rolf Julius. Such artists were again shown to be split across different artistic scenes, drawing aesthetically on mainstream avant-garde figures such as Cage, but also dealing extensively in the kinds of compositional techniques and characteristic sonic and procedural tensions found in the underground. These figures were also shown to participate directly in the underground through concerts at underground festivals and venues, whilst exploiting the comparatively high levels of cultural prestige that sound art, as a corollary of visual and fine art, enjoys, in order to show their work at galleries and large public art institutions, and thus to reap commensurate financial rewards from doing so.

I used the example of Ikeda in this respect, particularly, to evidence my claim that there is not necessarily anything essentially verboten in underground aesthetics that scares away bodies such as the Arts Council and even large audiences; it is more likely the contexts of its existence (the dark small rooms), its *lack* of cultural context (i.e. is it art or popular, high or low?), and the manner of its presentation as a scuzzy or abstract musical form, that keeps audiences small and funding low or non-existent. The example of Ikeda, whose work is presented in beautiful and/or large spaces as a recognisably categorisable form (post-digital sound art), with elaborate visual accompaniment to the abrasive sound, shows well how many people will happily listen to an hour of the most discontinuous and glitchy noise, if it is presented to them in a particular way – though such large audiences are not of course

necessarily a good thing in and of themselves.

The second redacted chapter, 'Free Improvisation', in contrast to the 'Composely Underground', which sneaked in only with some references to Jennifer Walshe and Ed Bennett, actually provides some important thematics, particularly in Chapter Five. This is due in no small part to the fact that four of my main interviewees, John Butcher, Eddie Prévost, Mattin, and Steve Beresford, all participate directly or tangentially in the Improv scene. I therefore covered, albeit with a deal of concision, some of the points I argue at length in the Improv chapter, notably regarding the micro-networks of self-starting and self-organised concert venues, musicians organisation, and critical publications that for example undergirded the London Improv scene. These micro-networks were shown to constitute precisely the kind of partially subsumed, person-centred scene exemplary on the underground in both the pre-digital and digital eras. Although I addressed aspects of Improv aesthetics in Chapter Five, notably with respect to performative radicalism, laminal and post-laminal Improv, and sonic-allegorical modelling of egalitarian communality, these were explored in much greater length in the redacted chapter, where I argued that Improv, traditionally seen as non-idiomatic, is an intensely idiomatic form, thus suggesting possible contradictions in the common conceptualisation of the practice of Improv. I also explored the current status of Improv within the underground, where I argued that its former centrality has been fundamentally weakened by encroaching forms of Noise and post-Noise, whilst its primary method – formal, personal spontaneity – nevertheless continues to drive the underground as a central animating and anti-capitalist (since it is impossible to commodify something that doesn't yet exist) principle.

In more general terms, it was to be regretted it is to be regretted that no space was available

to consider non-‘metallic’ Drone Music, and the rich variety of examples of music from scenes that were considered that did not make the cut. Whilst I claim that my basic interpretative framework and analytical perspective is representative of the most important tendencies and characteristics of the underground, further examination of different underground musics – and different scenes, for example those in Japan or South American – would of course have thrown up unexpected and unique thematics or their own. The same could be said of the many theoretical topics emerging from the music I did cover, which could not be addressed. Signal amongst these, I think, is the topic of gender, as regards which I actually completed a section for Chapter Eight. where I explored, using the case studies of Noise musician Jessica Rylan and the grindcore band Agoraphic Nosebleed, both the concrete participation of women in the underground, and the representations of gender in Noise music lyrics, sounds, and imagery. I argued that the proportional lack of representation of women on the Noise scene was basically comparable to that found in more mainstream musics, resulting similarly from structural and cultural gendered divisions of labour. More specifically, I argued within the context of what I called the ‘ridiculous abject’, that the possibly misogynistic, abject-focussed lyrics and imagery found in the work of groups such as Agoraphobic Nosebleed is pushed to a kind of ludic excess by the lurid sounds and intensities of the music, is, in short, profaned, to the extent that it is hardly possible to read this music in terms of any stable political context or ideology. This kind of approach, split between aesthetic representation and more concrete activity, would have been typical of more extensive exploration of topics such as gender and ethnicity in the underground.. This is one expansionist avenue down which future research in this area might conceivably go.

Another, to speak more generally again about possible future research directions, relates to the development of the primary research dimensions of the thesis, where interviews with a

more extensive range of musicians, scenes, and underground figures could lead to richer data sets and thus to more wide-ranging cultural analysis and interpretation pertaining both to issues of politics and political economy, and musical design. Alternatively or additionally, more quantitatively-minded research might likewise be carried out on any of my primary dimensions, the political, cultural, or the musical. Finally, a much wider variety of theoretical and other secondary sources could of course be usefully mobilised in discussions of this music.

In any case, as I endeavoured to show, the international underground is full of noises, of which I have only been able to scratch the surface here. It is hoped ultimately that this thesis might, in some small way, catalyse scholarly interest and future research on what is after all an expansive, academically under-explored, and possibly inexhaustible subject.

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I would like to give sincere thanks to all my interviewees for participating in this project, and, similarly, express my appreciation to all the other musicians, promoters, venue owners, festival organisers, critics, writers, and audiences whose energy and enthusiasm, collectively, goes in to making what I have called the ‘underground’, and others know by different names, such an interesting place to be.

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Finally, I’d like to thank my family, all of whom, in their own ways, fundamentally shaped parts of this work.

This thesis, for what it’s worth, is dedicated to my father, Donal Graham, who would have loved to see it in its final state.

List of Interviewees

Artists:

Ed Bennett* - *Via e-mail, July 2011.*

Steve Beresford* - *Via telephone and in person, September 2012.*

John Butcher – *Via e-mail, April 2012.*

Seán Clancy** - *In person, May 2010.*

Paul Hegarty – *Via e-mail, July 2010*

Vicky Langan – *Via e-mail, September 2011.*

Mattin – *Via telephone and e-mail, May 2012.*

Eddie Prévost – *Via e-mail, March 2012.*

Gavin Prior – *Via e-mail, July 2010.*

Jennifer Walshe* - *Via e-mail, February 2012.*

Labels:

Paul Condon (Fort Evil Fruit) – *Via e-mail, October 2011.*

Jonny Mugwump (Exotic Pylon)* - *In person, April 2012.*

‘Stephen’ (Trensmat) – *Via telephone, December 2011.*

Festivals/Venues:

Barry Esson (Arika) – *Via e-mail, August 2011.*

Michael Sippings (Colour out of Space) – *Via e-mail, December 2011.*

John Chantler (Café Oto) – *Via e-mail, February 2012.*

*Denotes interviewees who did not end up being the subject of discrete case studies, but whose answers were dispersed to pertinent points in the thesis. **Clancy’s essentially did not end up being included at all, solely due to considerations of space.

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