

Beyond the Grandiose and the Seductive: Marie Thompson on Noise

Sounding Out! Authors

Blog post published April 10, 2017 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/3xm4d-1cv76>

Abstract

Dr. Marie Thompson is currently a Lecturer at the Lincoln School of Film and Media, University of Lincoln. Her new book *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* has just been published by Bloomsbury.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Acts Of Sonic Intervention, Book Review, Classical Music, Environmental Issues



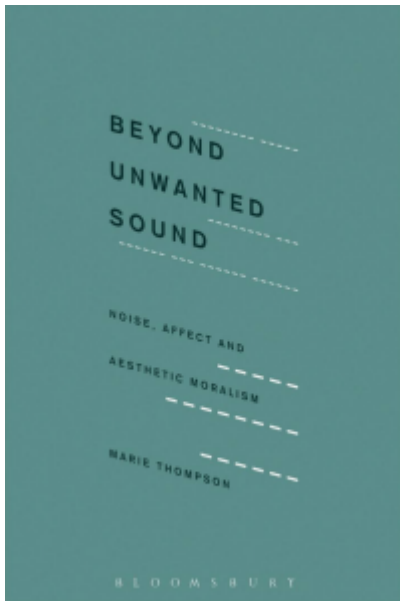
Recommended citation

Authors, S. O. (2017, April 10). Beyond the Grandiose and the Seductive: Marie Thompson on Noise. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/3xm4d-1cv76>

Copyright

Copyright © Sounding Out! Authors 2017. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

[Dr. Marie Thompson](#) is currently a Lecturer at the Lincoln School of Film and Media, University of Lincoln. Her new book *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* has just been published by Bloomsbury. We've been following each other on Twitter for a while ([@DrMarieThompson](#) and [@AbstractTruth](#)) and I have become very interested in her ideas on noise. I'm [David Menestres](#), double bassist, writer, radio host, and leader of the [Polyorchard](#) ensemble ("a vital and wonderfully vexing force of the area's sonic fringes") currently living in the Piedmont region of North Carolina.



Cover of "Beyond Unwanted Sound *Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism*," By Dr. Marie Thompson

In her new book, Dr. Thompson covers a wide variety of ideas from Spinoza to Michel Serres's cybernetic theory, acoustic ecology and the politics of silence to the transgressiveness of noise music, and many other concepts to show how we are affected by noise. Thompson is also the co-editor of *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience* (Bloomsbury, 2013). Here is a conversation we had over email in February 2017 about *Beyond Unwanted Sound*.

David Menestres (DM): Why now? Why did you feel compelled to write this book? What do you hope this book will accomplish?

Marie Thompson (MT): I think my 'academic' interest in noise began as an undergraduate music student – I was interested in thinking 'beyond' distinctions of avant-gardism and popular culture and noise, as something that traverses such separations became an evermore appealing concept. So I've been circling some of these ideas for quite a while.

I felt compelled to write the book partly due to what I perceived as a gap between some of my ‘everyday’ experiences of noise and how noise was represented in discourse – particularly noise’s representation as an essentially negative phenomenon; or as a shocking, sublime, radical, overwhelming, transgressive force. Noise seems to be one of those topics that makes ordinarily quite progressive thinkers revert to quite uncritical and reactionary tropes – there’s something about it that ‘touches a nerve’. Consequently, much of the discourse around noise is underlined by an often-unacknowledged conservatism. I’ve always found the grandiose rhetoric of noise comparatively quite seductive but at the same time, more often than not, noise is quotidian and banal rather than overwhelming or sublime (which isn’t to say it can’t also be those things). Likewise, I felt like this grandiose rhetoric resulted in an amplification of certain sonic arts practices, while silencing others. I guess I was compelled by a desire to expand the (material and discursive) universe of noise while also trying to maintain some consistency in definition.

Quite simply, I hope the book will contribute something helpful to the recent discussions around noise in media theory, acoustic ecology and music.

DM: What is the difference between a subjective-oriented definition of noise vs. an object-oriented definition and how do both lead to the ethico-affective approach that you champion in the book?

MT: When I refer to subject- and object-oriented definitions I’m referring, quite simply, to noise being defined either in relation to the ear of the beholder, or in relation to the sound-itself. [MT also defines her “ethico-affective approach” as a perspective that “recognises the entanglement of the ethical and the affective: affective relations are also ethical relations.” –ed.]

What I think is useful about a subject-oriented definition is that it remains open to what noise might be, what form it might take – it might be your neighbour hoovering, it might be a fellow travelers mobile phone, or it might be a buzzing wasp. However, subject-oriented definitions of noise are typically wedded to liberal notions of subjectivity and the politics that carries. Noise becomes an issue of personal taste – one person’s music is another’s noise etc. Subject-oriented definitions also struggle to account for noise that isn’t ‘unwanted’, ‘bad’, ‘negative’, and so on; and for noise that might not be perceptible, or noticeable.



Noise as Negative. Sound Cancelling

Object-oriented definitions which treat noise as a type of sound are helpful insofar as there is a consistency of definition and it does not assume noise to be a solely negative phenomenon; however, to my mind, they risk losing sight of context: a particular sound is noise irrespective of how it is heard, what it does.

The ethico-affective approach I develop can be understood to maintain aspects of both these definitional approaches. It maintains the separation created by an object-oriented definition of noise between noise and negativity, so that noise's 'unwantedness' becomes secondary and contingent. It also maintains the contextual focus of a subject-oriented definition, so that noise is not tethered to particular types of sound or sound sources.

DM: I've been very interested in the idea of noise as a weapon: the use of sound cannons to silence and sicken protestors, the use of the "Mosquito" device (which produces high frequency pitches thought to be audible only to teenagers in order to keep them from loitering), or the use of classical music to annoy young people.



https://youtu.be/QSMY3_dmrM

You talk in one section about the noise of neighbors and the “policed silence of the suburbs.” I am also interested in the use of noise as protest. At the Women’s March in Raleigh on January 21, there were so many fascinating sounds: the sounds of thousands of voices bouncing off tall buildings, drummers, people leading chants with the crowd shouting back, the singing of classic protest songs (“A Change is Gonna Come,” “This Land Is Your Land,” etc.).

What do you think the role of noise will be in our current political climate? I can definitely see noise being used as a weapon by both sides: the government trying to use it as a weapon against the people and the people using noise to amplify their voice against the government. But there is a stark difference between these two sides: the use of sound weapons is clearly for their intended negative affect on people (both the physical effects of sound weapons and the psychological effects of the endless noise that comes from Trump’s press conferences and general bullshit), but I see the protestors intending to use sound in a positive way, to amplify their message, to make sure those in charge hear their voices, to ensure the message arrives intact.



<https://youtu.be/zLviw8J8sWE>

MT: As a concept, noise seems evocative of much about our current political climate: be it the ‘noise’ of ‘fake news’, and ‘alternative facts’ (how does one determine ‘signal’ from ‘noise’, and who gets to determine that distinction); be it the ‘white noise’ of the Trump campaign administration (I recently saw a performance lecture with Barby Asante which effectively performed the ‘tuning out’ the noise of recently-bolstered white supremacy); or be it the collective noise of protest against the brutality of borders, white supremacy and police-state violence.

That noise can be both a force of domination and resistance is revealing of its ambiguity more generally – what I refer to as the ‘both-and’ of noise. Of course, that is not to conflate these uses of sonic force. One of the ways in which I’ve thought about this ethico-political difference in sonic forces is through the Spinozist distinction of power-over/power-to. The ethico-political entangles ethical questions (good-bad) with political questions (power over/power to).

So, when sound is weaponized to exert authority, to bring people into line, by diminishing their capacity to act and do, then this can be thought of as an exertion of power-over. Likewise, when sound becomes a means of collective resistance, or of connectivity (I’m thinking partly here of various ‘noise-protests’ at prisons and detentions centres, where sound is used to traverse walls and borders) then it might be understood as an expression of ‘power-to’ – a (collectivized) body’s capacity to act, to be, to do.



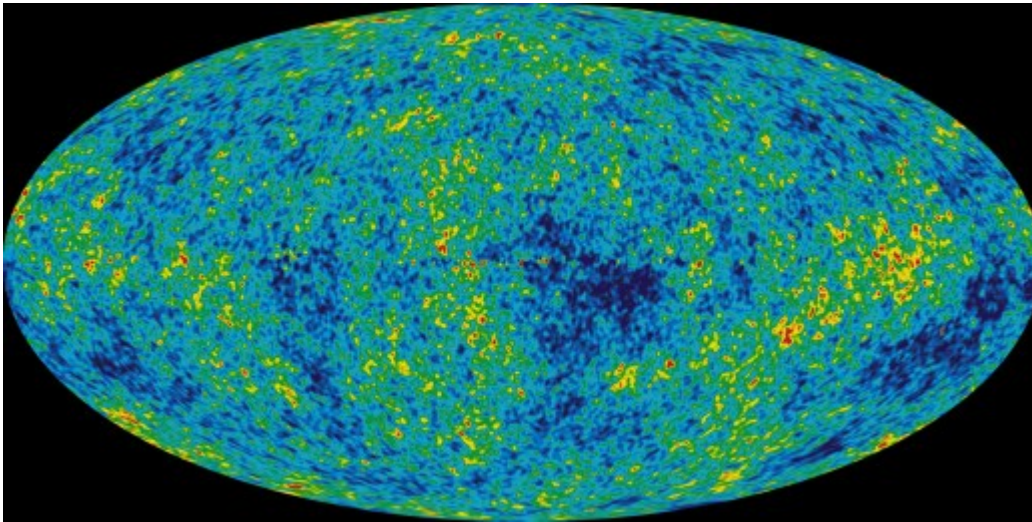
<https://youtu.be/fCC0n4fBwkc>

DM: You talk in the book of the “conservative politics of silence.” How does this conservatism affect both how people perceive sound and how we relate to it? Is there something at the other end of the scale, a “liberal politics of silence” so to speak?

MT: To my mind, the conservative politics of silence informs a number of assumptions that are frequently made about what are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sonic environments; it relates to a preference for the simple over the complex, sameness over difference, past over present, predictability over unpredictability, the ‘synthetic’ over the ‘natural’ (whatever that might mean) and, ultimately, quietude over noise. This ideological framework underlines much ‘common sense’ about auditory experience, however it frequently remains unacknowledged.

We might consider a liberal politics in opposition to this conservative politics of silence, which recognises responses to sonic environments as ‘personal’ and therefore refuses overarching moral judgements about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sound. However, I’m also wary of endorsing a politics that treats the individual, autonomous subject as the primary site of the political. Indeed, the conservative politics of silence that we see in the work of figures such as R. Murray Schafer is often indebted to a liberalism that prioritises control and the freedoms and rights of the individual – I’m thinking here of Schafer’s complaint that you can rid your private property of a physical intruder but not an aural one: “A property-owner is permitted by law to restrict entry to his private garden or bedroom. What rights does he have against a sonic intruder?” (1993, 214)

DM: One of the sections I particularly liked was the “What does noise do?” section where you delved into information theory through the work of Claude Shannon to show how noise was an essential part of a communications system, how noise can be a necessary, amplifying presence, needed to successfully transmit a message (voice over phone lines, data packets over the internet, etc.), how noise can enrich a system. I found myself thinking about this section a lot, often in relation to R. Murray Schaffer’s Platonic ideal state of silence. (“a Platonic, transcendent realm of a pure and ideal sonority, which paradoxically exists as undisturbed and eternal silence”).



Cosmic Radiation from the Big Bang- Sound Makes Up Our Universe

I was also thinking about Cosmic Microwave Background radiation, the residual signature of the Big Bang, the background noise that carried all the information that formed our universe. It seems like noise is an intrinsic part of our world, both human made and naturally occurring, and fighting against it seems like such a waste of energy.

MT: It strikes me that when Schafer and other acoustic ecologists talk about fighting noise, they're fighting a symptom rather than a cause. In these discourses, there is much talk of noise and environmental destruction but very little on how these processes relate to capitalism and settler-colonialism. In that regard, while I don't think fighting against noise in absolute terms is futile, I do maintain that there are still fights to be had against high levels of noise. While I am critical of liberal notions of privacy and control and the 'right' to silence, I do also recognise that noise can feel oppressive in some contexts. That said, more often than not high levels of noise is a symptom of bigger social and political problems – for example, of poor quality housing, and a lack of economic choice over where one lives.



Noise Pollution, Sociological Restrictions, Sound Intrusion. From the Hindustan Times

DM: One of the themes explore in the book is the idea of the parasite, based on the work of Michel Serres. How does the parasite relate to your idea of noise?

MT: I take from Serres' figure of the parasite the idea of noise as a relational, transformative and ambiguous in its necessity. In Serres' reading, the parasite changes things, for better or for worse. Either way, the parasite does something, it adds something to the mix. In other words, it is affective. And yet, there is no 'mix' without it. Parasitic noise is the 'excluded middle' that must be included: it is the necessary 'third term', which pertains to the necessity of the material medium/milieu. From this perspective, there is no original state of calm, which is then broken by noise. If there is mediation there is noise, if there is the relation there is the parasite.

DM: Could you talk some about “the poetics of transgression” as you call it? How does this “transgression” relate to your ethico-affective approach?

MT: The poetics of transgression refers to the centrality of 'line-crossing' narratives in accounts of noise's use in the sonic arts and art more generally. It's predicated on what Henry Cowell calls the 'time-honoured axiom' that noise and music are opposites. Bringing noise into music, or music into noise relies on the crossing of boundaries, of material and discursive borders. This 'line-crossing' is often accompanied by a rhetoric of extremity and radicalism, shock and awe.

While different notions of transgression have certainly been influential for various noise music practitioners, I seek to decentre it as a way rather than the way of understanding noise's use as an artistic resource. I argue that the dominance of the poetics of transgression has risked reducing noise music to its most 'extreme' manifestations. In light of the ethico-affective approach to noise that I develop throughout the book, which understands noise as a transformative force and necessary component of mediation, I suggest that noise music can be understood as an act of

exposure, which, rather than bringing noise into music (or vice versa) exposes, extends and foregrounds the noise that is within the techno-musical system so as to generate new sonic sensations. With this approach, I hope to make more space for noise music practices that do not fit comfortably with the poetics of transgression and its aesthetics and rhetoric of extremity.

—

Featured Image: [Noise Music](#)

—



REWIND! . . . If you liked this post, you may also dig:

[Sounding Out! Podcast #60: Standing Rock, Protest, Sound and Power \(Part 1\)](#)—Marcella Ernest

[The Noises of Finance](#)—N. Adriana Knouf

[Learning to Listen Beyond Our Ears: Reflecting Upon World Listening Day](#)—Owen Marshall