...TICK-TICK-TICK-TICK-TICK...
OVAL, THE GLITCH AND THE UTOPIAN POLITICS
OF NOISE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a theoretical understanding of noise qua music in the popular domain as an allegory in the critical exploration of the present-day capitalism. Noise is defined through a multiplex and constant dialectic of interrelated aesthetic, cultural, social, political, economic, and historical factors. The allegory of noise is speculative, a proposition for a possible utopian culture, engendered by a radical democratic impulse, instantiated in the creative production of countless “bedroom-based” experimental electronic music producers. The ideas of Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Zizek, and Jacques Attali are employed in this exploration, including a case study of the work of Oval, a German popular experimental electronic music producer. The “tick-tick-tick” glitch sound of skipping CDs is the hallmark of Oval’s sound, derived from audible errors in the technological means of production and reproduction. The aesthetics of the glitch uniquely introduces noise into music, which provokes the negatively generative development of the dialectic of noise. Noise radicalises music, the limits of which are the precondition for the very
noise that invigorates it, facilitating the dialectic of noise qua music.

The effectuation of the negatively generative dialectic of noise in terms of the creative work of artists and musicians is a valuable model of a radical democratic process already existing in contemporary everyday life—it is a source of immanent critique and critical inspiration, an echo of a redemptive utopia at the threshold of perception and understanding.
DEDICATION

To the new noise and the new music.
I realized the place was awash in noise. The toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children. And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension.

Don Delillo

No justifying reason could rediscover itself in a reality whose order and form suppresses every claim to reason; only polemically does reason present itself to the knower as total reality, while only in traces and ruins is it prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality.

Theodor Adorno

Thus the shriek, the caterwaul, the chainsaw gnarlgnashing, the yowl and the whizz that decapitates may be reheard by the adventurous or emotionally damaged as mellifluous bursts of unarguable affirmation.

Lester Bangs

The new noise theology is a resistant force of violence and seduction. Since the spectacle of the modern ways of production are killing the true creativity we would like to bring about a new beat that we can scream along to, disguised in the guise of popular culture. Within the sphere of capitalist alienation every aspect of our lives is controlled and manipulated and we need to use the powers invested in us to bring about the total destruction of the industry that supports us with uncreative and lame sounds. Scraped from the walls of Rude de Asas, the unknown poet could have designed the impeccable essay of linguistic anarchy and we need within the musical medium to redesign the thoughts and ways supplied to us by the perverted music industry. Turning the focus from the producer/consumer relationship into communication and dialectics, we need to challenge and to become more than nostalgia items. We need to obey our own laws and desires, those of revolution and those of change and unpredictability. We need to apply the new noise into our everyday lives to make it a truly inspiring force.

Refused
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Angelus Novus................................................................. Frontispiece
Approval................................................................. ii
Abstract .................................................................. iii
Dedication.................................................................. v
Quotation .................................................................. vi
Acknowledgements................................................... vii
Table of Contents...................................................... viii
Chapter One.............................................................. 1
Chapter Two ............................................................ 13
Chapter Three .......................................................... 34
Chapter Four ............................................................ 52
Chapter Five ............................................................. 65
Works Cited............................................................... 75
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In his manifesto, *The Art of Noises*, begun in 1913, the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo called for an expansion of the “limited circle of sounds” accepted by modern composition to include the “infinite variety of noise-sounds” (25). Critical of the limitations of the typical orchestra, Russolo created new musical devices called intonarumori, or noise instruments, to create the sounds he judged missing, as well as to become the tools necessary to perform entirely noised-based compositions. Russolo’s devices produced rattles, buzz sounds, and howls inspired by the changing sounds of war, industry, and modern city life he experienced. Later artists shared Russolo’s desire for noise, such as Edgard Varèse and John Cage, who further imagined new sounds and forms of musical organisation, particularly involving electronic instruments. Varèse demanded a “liberation” of sound, describing his own work in terms of “organized sound” rather than as music, and sought new electronic instruments to achieve his goal (207). Cage produced a manifesto, “The Future of Music: Credo,”
stating the same desire: “I believe that the use of noise to make music will continue and increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard” (3-4). Marking a break with the past, Cage again echoed Varèse, arguing, “If this word ‘music’ is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: organization of sound” (3).

The want for new sounds and new sound-making technologies has continued ever since the distinctly modern-era proclamations of Russolo, Varèse, and Cage, and it is flush with the same utopian desire. Many composers, musicians, artists, and electrical engineers have worked over the years to achieve the total sonic inclusiveness imagined by Russolo, Varèse, and Cage (Chadabe 1997; Holmes 2002; Paul Théberge 1997). From clicks, crackles, warbles, and interference, to feedback, distortion, and the innumerable curious accidental artefacts of digital processing, the number and variety of sounds available for use in music making are forever growing, particularly in terms of noise-sounds, a special component of a possible total organization of sound. More and more, however, an
interest in noise is not limited to academic or so-called serious forms of electronic and electroacoustic composition, descended from the likes of Russolo, Varèse, and Cage. Instead, the field of popular music is a welcome and productive environment for such acoustic explorations, from rock to the ever-enlarging domain of popular experimental electronic music. Noise is most often approached in this field in the spirit of the *bricoleur*, of using what’s on hand (Hebdige 100-112). Yet, what is considered “on hand” in terms of noise has changed historically, from a time marked by the early emergence of electrical technology, to one defined by the rapid advancement and all-pervasiveness of digital technology. If Russolo, Varèse, and Cage were responding to their changing historical moment, reflecting a maturing modernity, contemporary composers and musicians equally respond to theirs.

The musical use of noise, as a historical phenomenon, reveals much more than the constitution of the realm of music. It sheds light on the interrelated social, political and economic factors of popular culture and cultural production as well. This thesis examines the confluence of these interconnected factors in terms of the use of noise in music in the popular domain. Noise functions allegorically in a
critical exploration of the present-day global form of capitalism, offering a utopian alternative: a “radical democracy” based on the fruitful, permanent, and complex articulation of differences (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Angus 2001). The political allegory of noise is critically analytical as well as speculative, based in the present moment in history as well as offering a proposition for a possible better future.

The thoughts of Jacques Attali, Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Zizek, and especially Walter Benjamin are employed in this critical allegorical exploration, which culminates in a case study of the work of the German popular experimental electronic music producer, Marcus Popp, made under the alias Oval.¹ The “tick-tick-tick” sound of skipping CDs is the hallmark of Oval’s noise-music, establishing an aesthetic of the “glitch,” which Kim Cascone calls an “aesthetics of failure,” derived from audible errors or flaws in the technological means of production and reproduction (12-18). A noteworthy subset of noise, the glitch is an allegorical meeting point for the notions of noise, totality, and utopia: a narrative that resonates in many different registers of social, political and economic life, from music making and

¹ For critical introductions to Jameson see Roberts 2000 and Homer 1998; for Zizek see Kay 2003 and Myers 2003; and for Benjamin see Eagleton 1981 and Gilloch 2002
technology to the multiplex of political structures and the global influence of capitalism, often all at once.

My use of allegory for the critical exploration of noise is a response to the world formed by the paradoxical structure of capitalism. Capitalism both fragments and unifies the world in the transformational logic of commodification, fixing the heterogeneity of all things according to the homogeneity of the marketplace (Marx 1990). Surveying this transformation, Jameson notes in *Marxism and Form*, "allegory is precisely the dominant mode of expression of a world in which things have been for whatever reason utterly sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence" (71).

Commonly understood, allegory is a literary form in which one subject is portrayed *via* another, as a moral opinion or political critique can be expressed in the guise of a fairy tale (Macey 8-9). As allegorical images, everyday objects become complex metaphors. Benjamin understands allegory historically, both analytically and as a product, acknowledging the possibility of multiple, simultaneous interpretations (Buck-Morss, Dialectics chap. 6). Allegory serves a critical methodological purpose for Benjamin, holding the profane and the transcendent in quasi-religious suspension, as a kind of “ruin,” a
hieroglyph to be studied. The allegory of noise replicates the logic of capitalism, but provides resources for putting such logic into critical view, as a demonstration or didactic critique. Allegory works like commodification, according to Benjamin’s position, supplanting the meaning of things, granting a new appraisal of value (Buck-Morss, Dialectics 179). The allegory of noise elevates noise to the value of music, just as the marketplace is able to grant commercial value to all things, including noise—indeed noise is in this sense the aesthetic expression of contemporary capitalism par excellence. Yet, the allegory of noise pushes this process to an extreme: it introduces unwanted sounds into the vocabulary of music, including the “excluded” in the aesthetics of noise, but without reconciling noise and music, instead perpetuating their critical articulation. This degree of critical inclusion and continued articulation surpasses that permitted by capitalism. Capitalism depends structurally on a hierarchy of different values, leveraged into an ever-expanding profit margin. This hierarchy of values is constitutive and foundational, a basic dynamic persisting at the core of the heterogeneity in which capitalism thrives. By emptying and replacing the meaning of things, both allegory and commodification render things as empty vessels.
Yet, the critical difference is the meaning put back into these vessels. By filling them with raucous sound, the aesthetics of noise presents a glimpse of a utopian democracy not available via capitalism, teaching us what a vigorous and pluralistic democracy should be like.

Totality and utopia can also be understood as allegorical tropes for use in analysis. I understand totality as a “vanishing mediator” in Jameson’s sense: a structure that links and mediates the entirety of a historical moment (Ideologies 3-34). Jameson understands capitalism, as a mode of production, as a totality (Postmodernism 399-418). According to Best, Jameson also employs totality methodologically, requiring analysis to “move past the detailed scrutiny of a particular object” to examine “the relationships between that object and all other objects and phenomena” (49). Totality in this sense is methodological as well as analytical, both a critical tool and model for analysis.

Utopia means literally “nowhere,” an imaginary ideal place. In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Herbert Marcuse sees utopia as a critical spur for revolutionary change: it envisions “a universe which, while originating in the given social relationships, also liberates individuals from these relationships. This vision appears as the permanent future of revolutionary praxis” (71). Introducing a compendium of different
utopias, John Carey sums up the idea: “to count as a utopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of desire” (xi). Framed by the critical impulse of Benjamin and Jameson, utopia signals a desire for progressive change: although impossible, the imaginary of a better place inspires and sustains practicable human action, working towards a better world, a desire expressed in the aesthetics of noise.

Echoing the utopian sonic inclusiveness anticipated by Russolo, Varèse, and Cage, noise is a vanishing mediator. Understanding noise means embracing pliability, divergence and change as methodological guides, tracking each change in the dialectic of noise. By dialectic I mean an ever-moving, historically demarcated dynamic of interrelated, often contradictory cultural, social, political, economic and material factors. Many extra-musical influences affect the dialectic of noise. It is a product of signifying systems other than music alone. What is noise and what is music depends greatly on an expansive circuit of external references for meaning. With respect to this circuit, larger social, political and economic forces are enacted aesthetically in the dialectic of noise and music. The multiple forces that shape the definition of noise form a dense “constellation,” including commodification, high technology, and the changing
constitution of global capitalism (Buck-Morss, Origin 90-110).

Elaborated by Benjamin, as with the notion of totality, the notion of constellation expresses both an analytical method as well as an explanation of the fragmented yet interrelated subjects studied, like stars in the sky; the notion is itself allegorical. As an important cultural artefact, a luminous star in a larger constellation, and the mode of my allegory, noise requires critical scrutiny.

Noise is not alone in its multiplex significance. Cultural production is significant in numerous ways, including politically. As both Raymond Williams and especially Terry Eagleton point out, the notion of culture is hardly independent from politics in the conventional sense. The relationship between culture and politics is increasingly complicated when culture becomes “popular,” a part and parcel of everyday life (Duncombe 1-15). “Politics” can be taken in its broadest sense to include the reality of political organising, parties and policies, from voting to taxes to demonstrations. What is found to be present in an examination of noise as a popular cultural phenomenon, however, are more ambiguous and less coherent kinds of political behaviour, expressed often indirectly in and as cultural production, from art to music to literature, and especially the products of popular
culture. Popular culture is where noise is most readily embraced today. This *milieu* must be taken seriously politically, even if its overt political character is at first not apparent (Giroux 16-38). In our living rooms, our work places, in department stores, on street corners—the everyday level of social life is where popular culture is most present and important, manifesting political conduct in indirect, often unintentional form.

Rather than looking at political choices in a cultural universe, I am interested in cultural choices in a political universe. This change in conceptual and methodological approach re-focuses the allegorical understanding of the interconnections between noise, totality, and the possible utopian politics of aesthetic production. Yet, noise is literally something material, not just conceptual; it includes the specificity of certain sounds as well as the practices that create them. This materialisation is grounded in the creative work of musicians and producers who enlist available and emerging technologies in their sonic exploration of noise, from Russolo’s *intonarumori* to Oval’s skipping CDs. Constituted in multiple ways, noise equally bears the marks of its changing historical circumstances as an idea as it does materially, in both the aural and acoustical dimensions of sound. And
because noise is a kind of acoustic refuse—the sounds that are unwanted—it illuminates the normative structures that reject it, as Laporte discusses in his historical examination of shit in French society. It is this rejection that sets the dialectic of noise in motion. Always a symptom of the normative moment it inhabits, noise is an allegorical symbol for its historical circumstances par excellence.

If cultural production is “a way of thinking invested in a way of acting,” as Michel de Certeau describes, its ambit is everyday life (xv). The crackles of deteriorating stereo wires, the pops and snaps of old vinyl records, the fuzz of an un-tuned radio, the persistent hum of the refrigerator, the washy ebb and flow of traffic, the versatile bombast of loud electric guitars, the incredible noise-making capacity of even the simplest home computer—employed in the creation of popular experimental electronic music by a multitude of bedroom producers, this noisy aural substance of everyday life is worth examining critically. The multifaceted notion of noise is elaborated in detail in the next chapter. An immanent utopianism is revealed in noise by way of the work of Attali. The ideas of Benjamin are critically examined in the third chapter, and applied to noise. With the support of the work of Jameson and Zizek, I reinterpret Benjamin’s
metaphor of the “angel of history,” transforming it into a particular type of noise: the glitch. The study of Oval’s use of the glitch in the fourth chapter returns the allegory of noise to the everyday context of popular culture. I conclude by reintroducing the realm of everyday life as an important site for the sonic exploration of noise, demonstrating a model of radical democracy in action.
CHAPTER TWO

Noise

Noise is a “cipher,” a question mark, forever eluding fixed definitions. So elusive is noise, Douglas Kahn muses in *Noise Water Meat*, in knowing noise as noise “we already know too much for noise to exist as such” (21). Kahn’s point is that noise is decentred, circumstantial, always referring to a context beyond itself. This chapter presents a theoretical examination of noise. As noise is elaborated and examined, the complexity of the dialectical context around noise is increasingly exposed to critical scrutiny. Noise “mediates” this complexity. Mediation means the “process by which things come to be what they are through their relations to other things” (Osborne 341). In the *Political Unconscious*, Jameson argues that aesthetic production mediates the totality of capitalism, expressing it indirectly (chap. 1). Mediation can take place not only in terms of outright political content, such as in manifestly critiquing capitalism, but also, as Theodor Adorno insists in *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, in terms of political form, enacting critique
constitutively, such as how Arnold Schönberg's "key-less" atonality critiques "key-bound" western tonality along with the precepts of western rationality it embodies. For Benjamin, politically progressive art is also innovative art (Author 220-238). Its political dimension is elaborated through both form and content, which are intertwined aspects of cultural production. Crossing form and content, noise bestrides the gap between its materiality and its interpretation, between what it is in material terms and what it expresses culturally.

Although I am elaborating an allegory of noise at a theoretical level, it is based on a material foundation, on real practices and cultural production, not to mention the physicality of sound and the actual bodies of listeners. Drawing these factors together, studying cultural production, like the use of noise in music, can provide critical insight into the structuring effects of global capitalism. As Karl Marx emphasises, "phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material premises" (47). Sublimation of this kind is true for the basic act of listening, which transforms "material premises" into audible "phantoms." A closer inspection of the dialectic of noise complicates the process of sublimation, traversing the gap it mediates.
The Dialectic of Noise

Noise is provocative and difficult, exceeding all attempts to comprehend it exclusively. The difficulty of noise, its multiplicity and outright confusion, is fundamental. Noise is the focus for an interrelated, often self-conflicting constellation of social, political, economic, cultural, aesthetic and historical factors, which cross, overlay and combine in inter-dynamic relations. In other words, akin to the elementary semiotic sign, which resides in a circuit of signification, the possible meaning of noise arises in relation to the large and complicated evaluative framework around it; this is what constitutes the dialectic of noise. Also like the sign, where the signifier (an object), is split from the signified (what the object conveys), the meaning of noise is related but ultimately unconnected to specific noises, be it Jimi Hendrix’s supple guitar distortion, Aphex Twin’s screwed-up drum and bass, Kid606’s hyperactive gabber-cum-dancehall, or DJ Vadim’s musique concrète-like turntable style. Yet, each definite example of noise establishes that noise is also grounded in specific human practices. Grounded like this, the dynamism of the dialectic of noise does not result in a total noise, some absolute and deafening rumpus that can finally lay waste to all music, as though a
destructive form of Hegel’s “absolute knowledge,” the terminus of his dialectic (Marcuse, Reason chap. 2). Rather, the dialectic of noise is perpetual and contingent, defining an ongoing complex relationship with music. New noises arise and recede in the dialectic, distributed across the sound field of noise and music. These noises are at first confrontational, then normalised in terms of music, such as made evident by Bob Dylan’s infamous “electrification” at the Newport Folk Music Festival in 1964, which was first rejected, now celebrated. In other words, the dialectic of noise is a permanent problematic, the conditions for the definition and redefinition of noise and music are continually changing.

The dialectic of noise moves in particular through the critical capacity of the “negative.” Yet, despite its negativity, noise is generative, “a creative-destructive force that engenders as well as ruins positive forms” (Coole 6). In Negativity and Politics, Coole describes the notion of generativity in terms of the political value of the concept of negativity. As Coole argues, “politics has historically been precisely a means for controlling negativity: for disciplining desire, regulating excess and controlling nature, legitimising sacrifice” (244). Against the restrictions of the status quo, negativity promotes
the incessant movement of “forces, flow, flux; contingency, adversity, difference; opposition, resistance, conflict” (Coole 10). Thus, the “critically negative” generates alternatives to the prevailing order, of music and society both. Marcuse underlines Coole’s point: the notion of the “dialectic in its entirety is linked to the conception that all forms of being are permeated by an essential negativity, and that this negativity determines their content and movement” (Reason 27).

Embodying the negative, noise imitates Hegel’s dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, in which dialectical motion is initiated by the antithesis (Singer, 99-103). In the dialectic of noise, noise pushes music to redefine its boundaries, to accept, for example, atonality and guitar feedback into its scope. By embracing some noises, music also “pushes back” against noise, which ends up re-radicalising noise, compelling its boundaries to be redefined, designating new noises in opposition to music. Because of this dialectic, the creative pursuit of noise fosters a larger “negative” epistemological impulse: this distortion or that distortion, this style or that style, Big Muff or Rat guitar pedals, acid house or dark ambient, noise expands the aesthetic field overall, not just along a particular aesthetic deployment or trajectory.
In expanding the overall aesthetic field, noise surpasses narrower designations as embodying only nihilism and destruction. A first listen to noise often stops at an impression of noise as only a loud Dionysian blast of brute refusal, a gesture evident in the violent, harsh, and ear-splitting work of the Japanese producer, Maso Yamazaki, under the name Masonna. But the philosophical notion of nihilism has more subtlety that it is often granted colloquially, the basis more for critique that mute antipathy. As Ansell-Pearson defines it, “nihilism describes a condition in which there is a disjunction between our experience of the world and the conceptual apparatus at our disposal, which we have inherited, to interpret it” (35). As negatively generative, noise is a productive influence, adding on to the context that first defines its specific manifestation, carrying this context forward, now changed, not signalling its nullity. Noise again reflects the Hegelian dialectic in this respect, retaining elements of the thesis and antithesis as they are carried forward and overcome in the “determinate negation” of synthesis: it is a creative process as well as negative (Rosen, 30-35). This dialectical notion of noise also retains Ansell-Pearson’s critical and self-reflective definition of nihilism, saving noise from a brutal and unproductive stature, the complete
subsumption to the negative, initiating the possibility of progressive political uses of noise instead: a mode for critique.

Coole (2000) disparages as “apolitical” systems that plunge too far into the negative (12). Although I celebrate the negativity of noise, I argue it helps produce progressive change, not just destroy positive structures, either in terms of music or politics. This is not to suggest that noise is therefore never used usefully and intentionally in popular music for its disruptive capacity. Anyone who has ever seen any worthy garage punk band, from The Sonics to The Smugglers to The Hives, has first-hand and often ear-splitting experience with what might be called a popular rhetoric of noise. A well-worn trope, the tactical use of noise is a common and all-purpose gesture of refusal in all kinds of popular music, from Albert Ayler’s expressive jazz to Radiohead’s expansive rock. Used in this way, noise is a form of political expression, such as the inspirational feminist punk caterwauling of Riot Grrl in the 1990s. Yet, noise does not need to be caterwauling to be political. For example, Heble describes how Duke Ellington’s use of dissonant “blue” chords expresses “the African-American struggle to achieve identity and self-representation” (20). Ellington poignantly describes this: “Hear that chord. That’s us.
Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part” (qtd. in Heble 20). It is important to note that the rhetoric of noise is open to all political positions, from Rage Against the Machine’s socially conscious noise to Slipknot’s apolitical angst-noise to the racist skinhead noise of Skrewdriver. As with the idea of “freedom of expression,” noise opens music up to sounds that many people do not want to hear. This does not change the nature of the dialectic of noise, but it does require constant debate, at both a musical and political level. I argue that music is worth retaining for this reason: like politics, music instantiates the debate around noise, it is a framework for the dialectic of noise—it is the complex and often-antagonistic interplay of both together that is the crucial motor for change, not the privileging of one over the other.

No matter the political orientation, the specifically political use of noise blurs the line between aesthetics, cultural production, and politics. In Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson argues this kind of blurring is indicative of postmodernism, the cultural expression of what he calls “late capitalism,” for him the existing form of global capitalism (chap. 1). As such, noise is not merely abstract or theoretical; it reflects the material reality of real
world situations, the concrete specificity of the many contingent expressions of noise. For example, mindful of continuing racism, it is not for nothing that Public Enemy wanted to “Bring the Noise” on their 1988 album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back*. Their rhythms a dense assembly of shouting, sirens, urban noise, scratched records, bass, and drums, Public Enemy used both the metaphor and the sonic reality of noise to make their views known with this album. There are many other instances of a politicised use of noise, from the MC5’s working class “anti-system” rock-noise in 1960s Detroit, to the anti-conformist “digital hardcore” of Berlin’s Atari Teenage Riot in the 1990s. For example, under the metaphor of noise, Fela Kuti’s afro-beat synthesis of American funk with traditional forms of African music possessed a powerful political character in Nigeria during the 1970s and 80s (Lipsitz chap. 2). In the Nigerian context, in other words, the “westernised” sound of afro-beat was noise, a threat to the prevailing order, both musically and politically.

As Fela Kuti’s music illustrates, depending on the context, music can be noise, and vice versa, while the dialectic of noise persists amidst this contingency, following an inner impetus. Put another way, although the dialectic of noise surpasses the specific
instantiation of noises, it is only in everyday situations that it begins to obtain meaningfulness, musically, politically or otherwise. Because the dialectic of noise is multiply situated, with examination it provides valuable critical access back into the environment that surrounds and defines its use, the dynamic where noise is expressed and debated qua music. A quick going over of some definitions of noise demonstrates its situated referentiality: as Paulson observes, it is “appropriate to consider a given kind or magnitude of noise as specific to a given channel or means of transmission” (68); Link suggests that the history of recorded sound is also in a sense the history of the reduction of noise (34-47); Gracyk argues, “to categorize sound as noise is to assign it a status relative to the established norms for allowable and proscribed sounds” (101); Kahn proposes, “noises are never just sounds and the sounds they mask are never just sounds: they are also ideas of noise” (20); while Truax pragmatically notes of noise, “the generally accepted subjective definition is that it is ‘unwanted sound’” (86). The agreement of these definitions shows that any attempt to understand the dialectic of noise in its specific instantiation is also a process of reflexive evaluation, feeding back to its wider context. To examine noise means to go beyond noise into the complexity of
conditions leading up to and defining the historical present in which music versus noise is classified. In this larger historical context, noise is a generative impulse, pushing the definition of what we know, even serving as a herald for imminent change, and thus suggesting a possible utopian future.

The Noise of Utopia

Jacques Attali’s historiography of music and non-music, *Noise*, shows the complicated and changing relationship between music *contra* noise and political organisation, while reaching for a utopian alternative. Attali’s politicisation of noise is explicit: “Listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political” (6). According to Gracyk, Attali “regards all musical organization as political organization” (101). For Attali, “the code of music simulates the accepted rules of society” (Gracyk 101). Transgression of this code embodies resistance to the status quo, not only of what constitutes music, but also the social context that delimits music. Indeed, “every noise evokes an image of subversion,” for Attali (122). More than subversion, Attali claims the changing relationship between noise and music actually anticipates social change, like a
messenger. As Attali argues, the relationship between noise and music is one place “where mutations first arise” (6). Music marks change, according to Attali, because its “styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society;” music explores, “much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code” (11). Noise defines the promise of utopia, “the emergence of a truly new society” (Attali 133). Utopia stands off from the limitations of the present, a dream of radical difference. A critical sense of utopia is illustrative and contrastive, as with noise contra music. Although the frame of music ultimately limits noise, the force of noise is most critical exactly within this limiting, fostering a dialectic. From the dialectic of noise comes the utopian echo of an enriched music, which reverberates politically. Attali defends his utopianism with a similar position: “In the tumult of time, in the Manichaeism of a political debate stupidly trapped in a facile and sterile economism, opportunities to grasp an aspect of utopia, reality under construction, are too rare not to use this scanty clue to reconstruct that reality in its totality” (133).

Jameson refers favourably to Attali’s reinvigoration of “an enfeebled Utopian thought” in his foreword to Attali’s historiography
Jameson sees critical value in the notion of utopia, noting that this notion “keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is” (Marxism 111). Although unreal, by definition alluding to a “non-place,” the notion of utopia turns back on the present with all the critical negativity of noise quo music. The critical value of utopia is derived from its radical impossibility. As Jameson explains, “The Utopian moment is indeed in one sense quite impossible for us to imagine, except as the unimaginable; thus a kind of allegorical structure is built into the very forward movement of the Utopian impulse itself, which always points to something other, which can never reveal itself directly but must always speak in figures, which always calls out structurally for completion and exegesis” (Marxism 142). Noise is allegorical in the way that Jameson describes utopia, dialectically moving past specific instantiations.

Roberts notes that Jameson has linked the idea of a “utopia impulse” to his notion of a “political unconscious,” which combines Marxian and Freudian paradigms into a critical historicism (106-110). Jameson sums up his position in The Political Unconscious: “always historicize!” (9). According to Jameson’s historicism, cultural
production expresses often-unconscious fidelity to its historical moment, which needs to be deciphered critically. As I have argued, the dialectic of noise necessitates a critical historicism in the way Jameson suggests, as does the notion of utopia. As Ernst Bloch puts it plainly: “the content of the utopian changes according to the social situation” (5). Yet, what endures is the “form” of utopia, the basic desire for a better world, which, in the structure of the dialectic of noise, negates the limitations of music, and invokes the radical democratisation of all sound.

Attali’s utopian historiography provides a useful account of the historical moment that the contemporary use of noise delineates, as well as the utopia it anticipates, socially, politically and musically. Attali describes a future time of “composition,” “a radically new form of the insertion of music into communication,” in which the technological means to make music are diversified and domesticated, and music is produced for smaller, contingent audiences with personalised interests, often using new instruments (134). Furthermore, the line between audiences and producers is removed during this time, negating “the division of roles and labour as constructed by the old codes” (Attali 135). Attali’s future vision
describes the basics of contemporary experimental electronic music production, distribution and consumption. Now, the bedroom-bound home computer replaces the “garage” as the primary site of music production, micro-audiences negotiate an ever-expanding proliferation of nit-picky sub-genres within genres, and the Internet serves as a busy conduit for sharing information, cracked programs, and all manner of files. Concurrently, the number and variety of electronic music producers grew dramatically throughout the 1990s with the increased availability and processing power of home computers.

Thoroughly lodged in everyday life like this, contemporary experimental electronic music has a political character, expressing its historical time, charting the same computer-mediated networks as global capitalism, which reach to the smallest areas of everyday life.

In both business and music, the personal laptop computer is the paradigmatic tool of the historical moment, emblematic of the mobile yet connected contemporary individual, surfing the networked flow of everyday life.

Noise offers a distorted sense of this network, beyond the “proper” signals it carries otherwise. In an allegorical sense, the noise produced by the musical use of these laptops expresses the discord
between what could be and what actually is, between the possible and the existing. Discord exists both in terms of noise *qua* music and in the larger social reality that defines noise and music. Once a sound is designated as noise over another sound, noise enters the realm of culture, and therefore the realm of politics. This process of negotiation resonates throughout the social totality allegorically, but also in terms of real changes in music and popular culture, expressed in popular tastes and trends concerning acceptable sounds, the noises that become commonly appreciated aesthetically. Most indicative of the overall change in music versus noise is the overcoming and subsequent replacement of some sounds with others, by musicians and audiences alike, defining a new acoustic standard, a renewed division of noise *qua* music. This process of appropriation and renewal is key to the dialectic of music and noise, where the negativity of noise is most active, as I have argued above. As noise is normalised *vis-à-vis* music, the problematic of noise becomes reconstituted by virtue of that normalisation: new noise is identified as the negative other of the noises since accepted into music. Indeed, the more emphatically music is defined, the more resolutely noise is also produced, which is
a response to music by producers of noise as much as it is a structural result of the dialectic of noise, its inner push.

If noise is acknowledged in commercial mainstream tastes and values, such as when Madonna herself uses the aesthetics of the glitch on her 2000 album *Music* (the skipping CD-type sound at the start of “What It Feels Like For A Girl” is similar to Oval’s use of the glitch), then something has indeed changed. This is more than an aesthetic change: it is a real change at the level of culture. Underlying this change is a utopian impulse, a desire to embrace all noise. This urge, evident in the movement from the safe smoothness of Babyface to the tight syncopation of Timbaland in contemporary rhythm and blues production, for example, pertains to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call an “immanent, revolutionary, libertarian” utopia—a kind of radical democracy in which all sounds are deliberated on within the field of music without exclusion (100). Careful to differentiate their use from what they see as authoritarian utopias, Deleuze and Guattari see utopia as immanent to the “here and now in the struggle against capitalism, relaunching new struggles whenever the earlier one is betrayed” (100). Similarly, the dialogue between noise and music is an allegory for rigorous democratic political debate in the “here and
now.” Noise as allegory is an important mediator, translating actual political structures into manageable coded forms, such as noise in music, which in turn have an impact on our lives. Maybe all we can do is improve the code, embrace noise, and push music to change. Yet, by changing music, popular culture is changed, becoming a concrete political influence. As Bewes argues in *Reification, or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, this kind of change is “not a matter of penetrating through the ‘layers’ of mediation, of ‘false consciousness,’ but of precisely *mediating* ‘immediate reality,’ which is untrue” (italics his) (164). Bewes’ point comes from his analysis of Lukács’ notion of reification, which defines the extension of the commodity form into all aspects of life, where everyone and everything has assumed a functional “thing-like” character. Reification is an ideological impression of the world, against which a revolutionary mediation attempts to intercede on behalf of progressive social change. The problem is less the existence of ideology, *tout court*, than it is that the influence of capitalist ideology needs to be overcome by something better: some new noise in music.

The disjunction Bewes describes is at the centre of the dialectic of noise I am elaborating, where the shuffling politics of this music
over that noise is ultimately based on something material, on real human practices. It is this confluence with real practices that infuses noise with a critical sense of utopia. Noise holds open the total field of sound as a radical possibility, which is audible in the conflicting, ever-changing terms of music versus noise, from John Cage’s 4’33’’ of “silence” to Charlie Parker’s jumping bebop to Neil Young’s free-ranging solos to Merzbow’s atonal feedback storms to Fennesz’ laptop-processed guitar to Maryanne Amacher’s “third-ear” noise-drones. As the negative, the unwanted, noise has the potential to challenge the status quo, to be critical of accepted sound as music, and the social system that makes such codifications. Noise affirms some negative space, an echo of utopia, something that is excluded and repressed. This utopian sound is at the threshold of hearing, fostering an endless questioning of the established norms. Any musical stability or standard is undermined, made liminal from within by noise. The inherent ambiguity of noise intrinsically maintains this critical distance, feeding back into music with the critical force of utopia. In this sense, noise is the negative inspiration for the improvement of music as an expressive medium, not the ruin of that medium. Although noise is a generative force, music is the place of articulation,
where the potentially destructive nature of noise becomes constructive.

In the allegory of noise, music correlates to the realm of politics: it is where the conflicting forces of noise and music are debated. This is not an attempt to stunt the radicalism of noise in terms of some bland liberalising parity. Rather, the greater challenge comes with using noise to radicalise music, counterpoising the utopia of noise with the limits of music. The political value of noise always pertains to the machinations of noise qua music within music, the limits of which are the precondition for the very noise that invigorates it. The dialectic may begin with the negativity of the antithesis, yet it is the synthesis that reinitiates the process. Music, in this case, represents both music as it is, the thesis, as well as what it becomes, the synthesis, because of the negativity of noise, the antithesis. Noise thus expands the field of music overall. The utopian push of noise is materialised in everyday practices, grounding the dialectic of noise, from Sonic Youth’s guitar workouts to Pan Sonic’s sinetone and white noise minimalism to the Anticon collective’s abstract hip-hop. Most powerfully of all, noise exists in the bedroom production of countless home computer jockeys, exploring the outer limits of acceptable
sound. This multiplicity constitutes the real politics of sound in action, the invigorating utopian blast of a self-defining radical democracy. In Kevin Drumm’s tabletop guitar playing, Jason Forrest’s hyperkinetic mash-ups, Christian Marclays’ abused vinyl turntable art, Pauline Oliviers’ deep-listening drones, Sachiko M’s eerie empty sampler, Akufen’s cut-up house—chasing the untoward reverberation leads to an expanded sense of music from the position of noise, and this is how noise pushes dialectically towards a better future world. If only the re-enchantment of the spirit is accomplished by chasing noise, this alone provides an invaluable sense of utopia. New cultural and political practices can grow from this faint trace. That so much noise is welcomed in popular music is a mark of positive cultural change, and by this alone, noise in music is truly a herald of utopia.
CHAPTER THREE

Angelus Novus

Walter Benjamin is an important German-Jewish thinker affiliated with the Frankfurt School, crossing Marxism with Jewish mysticism. His critical examinations of allegory, commodification, technological change, the "aura" of art, new media, the passage of history, and the illuminating quality of the traces and ruins of urban life, make his ideas uniquely useful for my examination of noise. In particular, a critical rereading of Benjamin’s compelling "dialectical image" of the "angel of history" condenses the allegory of noise into a new and illuminating form: a glitch. Benjamin’s use of allegory is grounded in his employment of constellations as a critical methodology, bringing theory and material examples together in a non-hierarchical montage. Dialectical images are allegories to be studied as constellations: like stars in the night’s sky, some nearer than others, the multiple possible associations between the points in a constellation help generate critical insight (Buck-Morss, Dialectics chap. 3 and 4). But constellations are not defined only in the heavens;
they are constructed out of the smallest earthly “empirical fragments” (Buck-Morss, Origin 92). For example, Benjamin’s unfinished investigation of nineteenth-century Parisian shopping arcades “was committed to a graphic, concrete representation of truth” (Buck-Morss, Dialectics 55). This investigation was made by way of panoplies of everyday stuff, especially including detritus. Postcards, derelict storefronts, old photographs, obsolete fashion accessories, passé design motifs—Benjamin saw them as “ur-phenomena” of the modern era: “concrete, ‘small, particular moments’ in which the ‘total historical event’ was to be discovered” (Buck-Morss, Dialectics 71). A glitch is the paradigmatic contemporary small and unintentional element, an unwanted bit of digital detritus, the ur-phenomena of the computer age. By focusing on the traces and ruins of the material world, Benjamin asserts a material and historical specificity to the construction of ideas, knowledge and truth, mediated by human interpretation and cultural production, while promoting the possibility of political activity and change. Defining a similar constellation as Benjamin, the allegory of noise shares his critical objective.
Noise is a Work of Art for the Author as Producer

Benjamin concludes his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” with a multifaceted observation, and a warning that resounds in the aesthetics of noise:

‘Fiat ars—pereat mundus,’ says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of ‘l’art pour l’art.’ Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art (242).

Benjamin is responding to the rise of Fascism in Europe in his time: his warning is historically specific. It is also historicising, closing an essay on art that describes a large historical transformation, combining secularisation, technology, aesthetics, and politics. In terms of the aesthetics of noise, the sum of this transformation is the extension of the destruction Benjamin warns against, not only crossing the political spectrum, but also saturating the field of popular culture. If Benjamin’s historiography is to be believed, therefore, his warning is ambivalent. Destruction pervades the history Benjamin describes: as art becomes art in the contemporary sense, changed from cultic symbol, it is stripped of its religiosity, except for its quasi-
mystical aura, a capacity granted by art’s autonomous uniqueness, but even this is finally taken away by mechanical reproduction. Benjamin describes aura as a sense of “distance” from art, “however close it may be” (Benjamin, Work of Art 222). Benjamin attributes the loss of aura to historically changing, socially defined human sense perceptions, which are altered by the advent of prodigious media technologies, such as mass printing, radio, photography, and especially film. As Benjamin recounts, these technologies operate destructively, “cutting,” “shocking,” and “dynamiting” the torpor of everyday life: “in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling” (Work of Art 236).

Read through the allegory of noise, Benjamin’s historiography of art evokes a critical theory of destructive generativity, such as is evident in the dialectic of noise, while retaining the aesthetic dimension of art, even after its aura has been destroyed. In removing aura, Benjamin argues, mechanical reproduction makes art widely available: it is democratised, “meeting the beholder or listener in his [sic] own particular situation,” in theatres and homes not temples and galleries (Work of Art 221). What is singular in art is destroyed with mechanical reproduction: the notion of an original “makes no sense”
Instead, art is “designed for reproducibility,” such as with photography and film, eradicating its “authenticity,” its basis in ritual and tradition (Benjamin, Work of Art 224). Secularised and democratised, shorn of its remote aura, art has a different use value, one derived from its relocation into everyday life: politics. This change is fundamental for art, a “quantitative transformation of its nature” (Benjamin, Work of Art 225). As Benjamin clarifies in the preface to the “Work of Art” essay, emphasising his Marxist political orientation, this transformation is materially based, a response to technological change. Like Marx, Benjamin intends his critique to be prognostic. As Buck-Morss explains, Benjamin’s prognosis is dialectical and utopian: “The technological capacity to produce must be mediated by the utopian capacity to dream—and vice versa” (Dialectics 120).

Benjamin’s politicised utopianism is made concrete in the “Author as Producer,” echoing Attali’s time of “composition.” In this essay, Benjamin explores the relationship between aesthetic form and politics. His focus is literary production, but other media are included, such as photography, music, and especially the “epic theatre” of Bertolt Brecht, which Benjamin claims works like montage in film,
interrupting the flow of its narrative, provoking self-aware critical thought, exposing “what is present” (Author 235). Benjamin is interested in innovative formal techniques that inherently challenge the social and political status quo, like Brecht’s dramaturgy. As Benjamin puts it, “every correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency” (italics his) (Author 221). The changing formal and technical means for cultural production are for Benjamin inherently political. As he explains, “technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of his political progress” (Benjamin, Author 230). This twofold progress is also participatory, turning “consumers” into “producers,” a change fostered by the technologies of production and reproduction themselves (Benjamin, Author 233). Such participatory production is presently evident in the multitude of bedroom producers using their home computers to make new noise, à la Attali’s time of composition. In Benjamin’s view, these bedroom producers need to be considered in terms of their “living social context,” the “function” they have within the “relations of production” of their time (Author 222). Incorporated into the historiography in the “Work of Art” essay, these bedroom producers confirm Benjamin’s prognostication, drawing
form and content together under the banner of generative destruction, employing home computer technology in the aestheticisation of noise.

The Angel of History is a Glitch

Described in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin’s “Angelus Novus” metaphor is a suggestive constellation, “political poetry” (Eagleton, Benjamin 177). Bringing the angel to earth, Benjamin’s critical “microscopic gaze” turns to examine the traces, ruins, and debris of everyday life, which reveal and embody their historical truth as “dialectical images” (Buck-Morss, Origin 74). Dialectical images dissolve “reified” appearances, while remaining “bound to the particular” (Buck-Morss, Origin 74). As Adorno explains, by penetrating “the detail,” it is possible “to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality” (Actuality 38).

Dialectical images permit critique of the historical, social, political, and economic factors they convey allegorically, like a hieroglyph.

The glitch is the contemporary hieroglyph par excellence—a digital fragment, a permanent trace of noise in the system. The glitch is a formal product of the “improper” functioning of productive and reproductive technologies, like skipping CDs. The very processes of mechanical and now digital production and reproduction are
themselves the source of this noise in the system. Built-in, glitches challenge the linear narrative of progress that typically describes technology (Mattelart 2000; Coyne 1999). Faith in this narrative buttresses the pervasiveness and security of global capitalism. The glitch upsets the teleology of progress, haunting the densely wired networks of global capitalism, while embodying the spirit of generative destruction.

Through Benjamin’s microscopic gaze, the glitch occupies the position of the angel of history, which portrays a complex and melancholic image of history:

“A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (Benjamin, Theses 257-258).

Trapped by the storm, the angel views the past, not the future. It is thrust backwards by the ever-mounting rubble of history and the windstorm of progress “blowing from Paradise” (Benjamin, Theses
Despite this theological appearance, however, Benjamin’s angel is secular. It is modern art not cultic symbol, hence political not religious. In light of the “Work of Art” essay, this image suggests both politics as aesthetics and history as destruction. These associations follow from Benjamin’s historical account of the democratising loss of art’s aura. The ruins of history at the feet of the angel must also include the changing means of production and reproduction that Benjamin identifies behind politically progressive historical change. Also, the angel seems “shocked” by what it sees, as though it was watching a montage in film, a technique esteemed by Benjamin. This act of watching is a basic correlate of aestheticisation, its visual basis. In other words, the gaze of the angel itself aestheticises the history it sees as destruction—it is something the angel watches. Benjamin’s ambivalence on destruction comes full circle with this image. As he observes, “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin, Theses 256). This comment is darkly ironic, to be read both ways. By way of allegory, aestheticisation offers redemption, as well. Both the rubble of history and the angel together form an allegorical figure of history as totality. This new figure is condensed into the glitch, which exposes the
problematic of our historical present by means of a short, sharp blast of noise.

A view of history as totality is necessary for the glitch to be effective as critique. The glitch shocks the continuum of history, providing an infinitesimal break from which a larger temporal panorama opens. As Benjamin argues, history is “time filled by the presence of the now” (Theses 261). He calls this frozen immediacy “Jetztzeit.” It is a “chip of Messianic time” (Theses 263) in which “time stands still and has come to a stop” (Theses 262). As Osborne explains, Jetztzeit defines “the point of contact between a specific past and an equally specific present as a fleeting experience of the ‘legibility’ of history as a whole” (69). Filled by the immediate present, Benjamin’s Jetztzeit grants an overall view of the historical moment in a redemptive flash. Despite Benjamin’s religious language, these flashes do not take place for God. Instead, they provide illumination for the critique of history as progress. And in order for historical change to be truly progressive, according to Benjamin, it needs to change “in its totality” (italics his)(qtd. Buck-Morss, Dialectics 80). Not only redemptive, Jetztzeit is also a moment of politicised remembrance, in which the “last enslaved class” redeems
the exploitation of the past in the present for the future (Benjamin, Theses 260). Benjamin says this “leap in the open air of history” is dialectical, citing it as the basis for radical political change (Theses 261). Yet, it is unclear how change restarts this frozen time. One clue is in Benjamin’s exhortation to “materialist historians” to “brush history against the grain” (Theses 257). Not only historians, but also the home producers making noise realise Benjamin’s political ambition. They illuminate the totality of history by innumerable points, redefining the technologically networked organization of global capitalism from the inside, aesthetically using the noise the network produces but disavows. A deus ex machina, the glitch is borne by this destructive generativity, shimmering and glowing with electrified digital flow, not God’s light, generating untoward surges and broken circuits.

**Mapping the Glitch in a Gap of the Real**

If the angel of our Jetztzeit is the glitch, the glitch is grit for critique. It is a negative ur-phenomenon, expressing historical truth by its particular materiality. A built-in imperfection in the system, the glitch portrays the structure of history allegorically from the perspective of its excluded other: noise. Irremediable, the glitch
debunks the narrative of flawless progress, halting it with an abrupt tick-sound. This tick-sound presents the \textit{Jetztzeit} of contemporary global capitalism in quick relief, its networked expanse frozen in a microsecond. The redemptive flash the glitch produces is sonar: a blast of sound that reveals the total environment by way of echoes and reverberations. Like Benjamin’s angel, the glitch also exposes a legacy of sublimated noises at its feet, building into a torrent of unrepentant discord. Seen backwards, western musical history is less the development of melody and tonality than it is the subsequent introduction of noise into music, from atonality to guitar feedback to the digital glitch. This sublimated “negative” history is an ill-behaved utopian impulse for dialectical change, from the earliest electric Chicago blues of Muddy Waters to the darkest Norwegian death metal of Burzum. The inverted progress the glitch defines is the noise always in the system. An inherent capacity of the system, the dialectic of noise provides critical access to the structures that define it negatively.

Placing these structures in perspective, Jameson’s (1995) notion of “cognitive mapping” characterises the allegorical image of totality the glitch provides. Cognitive mapping is an attempt to realize the
involvedness of contemporary global capitalism, as one might invoke an imaginary map. This map is "a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (Jameson, Postmodernism 51). Jameson identifies a real substance vis-à-vis totality, but one that exceeds representation.

Global capitalism is a structure that structures, but it is ultimately split from the world it redefines. As Homer explains, cognitive mapping "hinges on a dialectic of immediate perception and imaginative or imaginary conception" (139). The interior of this "imaginary conception" of the real world is revealed through cognitive mapping. This inside view is an aestheticised more than a literal recognition, however. Actual totality is "ultimately unrepresentable," portrayed only in "distorted and symbolic ways" (Jameson, Postmodernism 411). But even these portrayals are circumspect. Aestheticisation itself is substantiated by the logic of the marketplace. As Jameson explains, contemporary capitalism "assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" (Postmodernism 4-5). Both image and its substrate are of the same structure: "The ideology of the market" is "generated by the thing
itself, as its objectively necessary afterimage” (Jameson, Postmodernism 260).

Illuminating this afterimage, the *Jetztzeit* defined by the glitch mediates the gap Jameson describes between the image of totality and the real world. Although implacable, this gap does not remove the value of cognitive mapping as critique. Rather, the glitch holds open the gap between noise and the system that defines it: it not only embodies the “Angelus Novus” and the rubble of history, but also the difference between them. These three elements together are suspended in a constellation by the glitch. The impression gleaned by cognitive mapping happens in this ephemeral gap: the *Jetztzeit*. The glitch traverses the gap, oscillating quickly between the real world and its representation, providing what Hal Foster describes as “running room:” space for critique (17).

By means of Lacanian theory, Zizek contends this gap is fundamental to our relationship with the “Real” (Sublime chap. 5). The Real is the unrepresentable core around which our sense of reality circulates, but never encounters (Sublime chap. 5). Instead, the Real is apparent in its absence: it is a constitutive “lack,” causing distortions and displacements in our perception of reality—echoes without a
source (Looking chap. 1). According to Zizek, a sense of reality is a necessary fictionalisation of the excessive and elusive Real it covers (Looking chap. 5). Direct interaction with the Real is psychopathological: it means surrendering the sense-giving framework of the “Symbolic Order,” the domain of language, which provides agency in the form of subjectivity (Zizek, Looking chap 1). Politicising his theory, Zizek describes the totality of capitalism as “the Real of our age” (Ticklish 276).

Zizek’s account reopens the tripartite form of the glitch. Noise functions as the Real in terms of music. Music is a kind of “language of sound,” hence the Symbolic. A place of deliberation, music develops in terms of the negative generativity of noise. Stimulated by noise, music returns anew, prompting noise to maturate and reply. The glitch is crucial to this dialectic. The glitch is not only a sign for a utopian impulse, but also for the present social totality. Both are revealed in the sonic burst of Jetztzeit. Yet, the glitch is also a prosaic bit of the Real, a senseless tick-sound. This sound is a disruptive instantiation of the Real within social reality, like a tear or stain. As Zizek explains, Lacan calls this instantiation the objet petit a (roughly, the “little other”), a “little piece of the real” (Looking 31). The
Symbolic circulates around this small bit of the Real—indeed, this circulation is fostered by the objet petit a—but it cannot represent it (Looking chap. 1). As a result, the objet petit a presents the Real as a “lack” (Looking chap. 1). This lack is held open by the glitch. The glitch is able to “sustain the Place as such,” as Zizek puts it (Fragile 27). But the glitch never fully occupies the gap, either. The desire for wholeness, to become one with the Real, is never satisfied, only temporarily satiated through recourse to the objet petit a, a “symptom” of the constitutive lack (Sublime 69-75). As by inoculation, exhibiting this symptom staves off descent into the Real, which would produce insanity (Sublime 69-75). Similarly, the glitch brings noise into music as an incitement, so that music is not entirely lost to the havoc of absolute noise. This maintains the gap where the dialectic of noise and music unfolds. Noise resists full symbolisation into music as much as music depends on the exclusion of noise to maintain its own symbolising boundaries. They co-exist as opposites along the same threshold. This dialectical threshold is what the glitch reveals in a shot of redemptive sound.

Because the glitch is also noise, it paradoxically defends against full collapse into the overpowering Real of noise, maintaining the gap
of the objet petit a. As Zizek explains, “the paradox is that only an element which is thoroughly ‘out of place’ (an excremental object, a piece of ‘trash’ or leftover) can sustain the void of an empty place” (italics his) (Fragile 27). Without this stopgap, the unyielding negativity of the Real as noise would kill the Symbolic as music. If noise in music is a herald for social change, as Attali argues, then the total collapse of music into noise threatens the end of society, not its salvation. Even a revolutionary and emancipated society, the topos of Benjamin’s work, is a society. The political challenge is to recognise the heralding of this better or utopian society, making it real. Returning to music is not a capitulation to the status quo of permissible sound, but a political choice to attempt to bring the negative utopia of noise into music. This sets off the generativity of noise, which protrudes into music as the objet petit a does into social reality. Using noise to make music provokes the negative development of the dialectic of noise. The inherent generativity of noise condensed into the glitch is here akin to an inoculating shot of venom that can otherwise take life. Instead of death and madness, the glitch permits “a liveable relation” with noise, “without being swallowed up by it” (Zizek, Fragile 20). In an interminable tick-
sound, the glitch enables the negotiation of the Real of noise in terms of music as the Symbolic, but it also reaches out to the utopian noise that music struggles to define. This struggle is politics by analogy.
CHAPTER FOUR

Oval and the Politics of Digital Audio

With a persistent tick-tick-tick-ticking of skipping CDs, Oval’s noise music discloses the shape of global capitalism in negative relief. The edges of this shape graze the edges of a utopian future, both sides fragmenting into small audible particles. These particles assume fleeting designs as they fall in timeless space, and then split off along idiosyncratic pitches, flickering to the darkest reaches of the complexity around them. Gathering again, new configurations spin and vibrate, only to mutate into something else, equally animated and confounding, before disintegrating altogether, leaving silence, like a hole in time. The continuum of history is fast-fixed in this brief space, like an electrified diorama made of decayed wires and digital data. Abruptly, this landscape comes on in the dark, illuminating our imagination with a jolt of sound. Emanating from an indefinite source, this bombast reduces to a low rumble, which turns into a stuttering whisper, washed over by hiss. Interrupting, the tick-tick-tick-ticking returns by unknown sequence, cutting left and right, then stops in
silence, having irreparably changed the listener’s perception of the world.

Provocative, unique, and often beautiful, Oval’s work enacts the allegory of noise: it is theory and critique by demonstration. This work is more significant to examine than the biographical details of Marcus Popp, the main and lasting person behind Oval (begun in Berlin as an art project with Frank Metzger and Sebastian Oschatz, who both left after three recordings). Such details are scant: Popp’s public persona is iconoclastic, yet retiring. This is intentional. Ambiguity is essential to the Oval aesthetic. Self-effacing, Popp refers to Oval impersonally as “an interface” (qtd. in Lee 53). Like a robot, Oval enacts an autonomous intentionality, correlative to the media “it” employs: it is what it does. The digital glitch is Oval’s main utility, the ur-phenomenon from which the Oval aesthetic is articulated. The glitch is both a key material element and an oblique compositional strategy.

Oval’s recordings seem designed for CD playback, which recalls the site of their inspiration. The skip-sound of a stuck CD trapped on a nanosecond of digital sound-data: this is the glitch incarnate. Playing an Oval CD at home comes on like a broken stereo,
jumping into a flurry of inchoate skipping noise. This noise is generated by marking and scratching CDs, sampling and editing the result, augmented with digital synthesis and processing. The familiar and the unfamiliar vacillate constantly because of the use of domestic digital technologies: CDs, CD players, and home computers. Commonplace CD skips are abstracted, and then re-familiarised as music, albeit in alien form.

Oval’s primary instrument is the personal laptop computer, not only the tool of choice for most contemporary experimental electronic music producers and performers, but also an ordinary thing in many homes and offices. But Oval is a critical user of digital technology. His aesthetic is based on the inevitable failure of the teleology of technological progress, exploiting the inexorable “glitch in the system.” Glitches disrupt the rationalised digital order of “ones and zeros,” the sequence a signal adopts as it courses over satellite transmissions, telephone lines, computer networks, personal music file players, and in the interminable spinning of CD players everywhere. Glitches circulate through the global network these transmissions define from within, as an electrical grid defines the limits of a city. This grid extends into the home as well, providing an invisible web
around the human occupants of this domestic space. The everyday CD skip-sound, the paradigmatic glitch, is the signature of Oval’s work. It is also a prosaic “unwanted” sound, an everyday example of technological failure. Aestheticised, this sound is the common ground where Oval’s sonic abstractions meet listeners half way.

Held between perspectives, the skip-sound is uncanny by Freud’s definition: “something familiar which has been repressed” (89). The notion of the uncanny also gives an alternative understanding of Benjamin’s Jetztzeit, which briefly reveals a spatial-temporal locus in a flash of Messianic light. Barely unconscious, the uncanny permeates the contemporary state of mind: the marks of global capitalism are everywhere as hieroglyphs, but the whole is absent. An intermediary, the glitch serves as the stopgap objet petit a, bridging between the Real and the Symbolic, between noise and music, and between the totality of global capitalism and its aestheticised representation.

In response to the Real of capitalism, as Zizek calls it, Popp identifies Oval’s output as “audio” rather than “music” (qtd. in Lee 53-54). Audio is both technical and aesthetic. It is too specific to mean sound in general, but it is also too general to mean music. In a film
soundtrack, audio describes the sound design other than the music and the foreground sound effects, the ambient textures that provide extra emphasis, even establishing scenes. This understanding of audio corresponds to Michel Chion’s notion of “rendu.” Zizek describes rendu as a film audio technique that defines and underscores a scene before recourse to a visual: it “is” what is heard (Looking 40). Audio has a rendering power that is connotative, a “second order” above simple signification, slipping back and forth between the Real as noise and the Symbolic as music (Silverman 25-32). As the uncanny of sound, audio takes place in the Jetztzeit, reorganising the binary noise and music into a trio: noise, music, and audio.

Audio Portrait

The audio of Oval is a potent political material, disclosed with engaged listening, bringing critique to life in the form of sound. “The Politics of Digital Audio,” a track on Systemisch, Oval’s second release, contains Oval’s mature aesthetic in embryonic form—manifesto-like. Degraded, it resembles a transmission from another time, its code arcane. The audio swoops in and plateaus briefly as an uncertain ambience, ill defined and tense. Layers of distorted sound prevent each other from distinct audibility, jostling
roughly. Instead, the combination can only be heard as an unstable whole: it includes its conflicts and contradictions. Cut-up melodic elements provide a tentative forward thrust. The glitch comes in suddenly overtop, a ticking, jittery pulse. A larger design purpose clarifies as the track progresses. What was once confusing becomes a compelling interrelationship, but still complicated. Grainy drones and howls resonate across an ever-shifting field of ruined digital sound. Blocks of atonal noise reposition in the distance then disintegrate. New sounds arise, looping irregularly, then stutter and halt, leaving a pocket of calm. This is temporarily filled by another combination of sounds, slow and pitched low, which quickly degrades into a pixilated outline. Starting up again, new layers of distortion build over the old. Turbulent, each layer is a busy universe, struggling against the collective din. Global cycles come and go, segmenting the whole, each one a slight mutation. But somehow, amongst the wreckage and blare, a feeling of warmth subsists, a hopeful sense of life in the ruins of data. Reinforcing this trace of humanity, the end comes with a surprising embellishment: a gently lilting melodic phrase over a complimentary bass pad to fadeout.
The tension between this enduring but faded trace of humanity and the transformative ability of technology is especially apparent in Dok, the fourth Oval release. Dok most resembles the imaginary landscape lit-up in the flash of Jetztzeit audio. This illuminated view is melancholic in Dok, the vista of the “Angelus Novus.” The “real world” is usually obfuscated in Oval’s work, but this time it remains in “traces and ruins.” Field-recordings of bell-sounds from churches, supplied by the sound artist, Christophe Charles, are transformed into a spooky digital atmosphere, marked by Oval’s signature CD skip-sound. This skip-sound is less percussive than usual, more a leitmotif, organizing the whole. The original field-recordings are still audible underneath Oval’s processing, but as figments of their former fullness. Birds, human voices, and bell sounds are discernable in passing, but garbled and ghostlike, reconstituted as digital fog. Listening to Dok invokes the uncanny feeling produced by hearing a familiar voice mediated through long-distance digital telephony. Although recognisable, the warm body of the voice is lost in transmission. Digitally filtered and compressed, what is received is a bit-reduced robot copy of the living original, a series of icy binary numbers. Although degenerated, the enduring audibility of the field recordings
highlights the digital processing Oval applies. This is an instance of open self-reflection: the technology is obviated. But the result is ironic: it is an attempt to make sense of something structurally indifferent that is also remarkably tranquilising, like the slow purr of a refrigerator at night. By returning to the real in *Dok*, rendering it through the *leitmotif* of the “glitch,” Oval comes closest to the logic of commodification: the world endures in place, but transformed.

*Ovalprocess* and *Ovalcommers*, Oval’s fifth and sixth (and final) release are complimentary. Oval’s aesthetic is presented across both in its most dramatic form, amplified in contrast, intensity, and volume. They are also completely indeterminate recordings, dispensing with titles and track listings. Even the authorial “Oval” is conjoined with each title, no longer privileged. With *Ovalprocess* and *Ovalcommers*, Oval becomes thoroughly technology, an “interface.” The point of mediation between the two recordings is especially beguiling, even alienating. The literal gap between the two is re-enacted in sequences of false endings, long pauses, and renewed audio on the concluding “data track” of each disc. *Ovalprocess* ends with a refrain after an extended silence, a blank data space. The audio begins and ends with no discernable reference. *Ovalcommers* plays like the
imaginary remaining audio chopped at the end of *Ovalprocess*, only further degraded for the cut. Noise occasionally overcomes the audio on *Ovalcommers*, muting it through sheer volume, attempting to make something ultimately unrepresentable audible: the full noise of the Real. The last track on *Ovalcommers* is especially evocative, with indistinct voice-like sounds, distorted as if by years of decay, fading slowly to silence. The track continues soundless until the audio returns, now a sombre refrain. Unexpectedly, the audio cuts for a second time with a rude tick-sound, but still not the data track. A third audio signal begins soon after the tick-sound, one remarkably like the opening of *Ovalprocess*, as if returning figuratively to this other recording. These starts and stops are divorced from any human sense of purpose. They are the robotic operations of an indifferent system, the circulation and compartmentalisation of data. Recursive, this process obeys an inner logic: it is like global capitalism in spirit and action. Oval’s work recreates this transformative order in concise form, parcelling audio like “value” in a bank account. More damning, the total breakdown of the Symbolic is intimated in the overloads that kill the audio, the inverse of the *Jetztzeit*, leaving “no running room”
for the politics of music. But even here, although nearly eradicated, the glitch sustains a utopian space.

**The Politics of the Glitch**

At extreme moments like this, Oval’s audio is at most a cipher, a riddle figure. It is like Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*, only audible: an incredible, teeming, glitchy soundscape of data transfers and noise, producing an ambient field of immense, ever-moving complexity. Conditional on digital technology, indeed immanent to it, Oval’s audio is an acoustic symbolisation of the seeming totality of global capitalism. But it also includes the innumerable micro-places where capitalism falters and struggles to maintain hegemony, its breaks and losses. Such breakdowns are exemplified by the glitch, which cuts through even when the signal attempts to overpower it. The precarious limits of this totality show up in negative relief in the interminable digital tick-sound of the glitch: it is the point where the system literally stops working. As the objet petit a, this intrusion of the Real can be seen to invert the appearance of the social totality. This inversion enables the possibility of imagining a new configuration in a shot of utopian noise. The glitch is able to do this because it bridges the gap between the functioning and malfunctioning of the system. It
is a disruption precisely within digital code. Ultimately unavoidable, the glitch always upsets stable listening.

Thus, the glitch is a paradoxical cipher. The riddle it presents is not disguised. Instead, like an exoskeleton, the constitutive logic of the glitch is on its surface, its very form. The glitch is both obvious and obviating. What the glitch means is a result of what it is, materially and contextually speaking. Most of all, the glitch is a bit of digital garbage—excremental noise. This form itself is significant. It is what makes the glitch critical, and comprises its most important implication. The material substance and the aesthetic connotations of the glitch coincide—it is the cipher par excellence. By virtue of the glitch, Oval’s work obviates digital technology, calling it into question, and by extension, global capitalism, which depends on it. For Marx, the “elementary form” of capitalism is apparent in the basic commodity form, a revelation that sets off his analysis in Capital (125). The glitch is an elementary form vis-à-vis the social totality. The glitch is a “real abstraction,” something material and symbolic, like the simple commodity form Marx critiques. It is a “real abstraction” because it is an actual structure that presents a reinterpretation of the world. The glitch is the materialisation of the
negative generativity of noise, which produces an effect precisely because of the structure that delimits it. This is not because of what noise "means," but because of what it "is." In the case of the glitch, this delimiting is doubled, from both the social totality and from music. Locked in a perpetual dialectic with the noise they reject, both social totality and the structure of music are rendered open for critique, changeable with effort.

Capturing this complex dialectic in an infinitesimal tick-sound, Oval’s audio is a critical constellation. It presents an outline comprised of the real material it includes aesthetically, with the glitch-sound of skipping CDs its central feature. In music, the glitch is a symbol for our effort to comprehend and deal with the larger problematic it stands for, both in terms of noise and global capitalism. Like a hieroglyph, the glitch mediates the gap of the Real, staying collapse into it, as well as providing a glimpse of what this collapse might involve. In this sense, the prima facie of aestheticisation is to present the Real symbolically, and vice versa. Once aesthetised, the Real is interpretable, made useable, placed precariously in the domain of human action. Oval uses the glitch creatively within music exactly for what it stands for in terms of the social totality. Oval uses the
As a sonic allegory of politics, Oval and the glitch together provide a model for progressive social change, intimating radical democracy. What Oval’s use of the glitch demonstrates is not the implacability of the impact of the social totality and its absolute reach, but rather that the social totality’s immanent flaws always subvert its operational ambitions— and that its reach is always compromised. By using the glitch in music, by bringing noise into our social reality, we are given the opportunity to redefine its boundaries. Indeed, this opportunity arises immanently from the dialectical push of noise. Once the glitch is made musical and brought into the Symbolic realm, it is rendered both aesthetic and utopian. Like Benjamin’s “Angelus Novus,” we must face the noise that propels us into the future. But sundered from the absolute, brought into music as the objet petit a, the Real of noise does not leave us powerless— this shot of sonic venom makes us more resilient. Our negotiations with the Real of noise are the purview of our agency. Choosing to accept the glitch motivates change, setting off the dialectic of noise. This is the challenge Oval presents: music and our future are what we make of them.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

I started my allegory of noise by describing the usefulness of studying popular culture. I argued that popular culture should be regarded as a political phenomenon, even if the political values it expresses are indirect and coded. I pointed out that the centrality of popular culture in everyday life justified taking its political aspects seriously. As a part of popular culture, I argued, experimental electronic music could be studied for the political character it uniquely expresses. This kind of production indicates a new sensibility that corresponds to contemporary global capitalism. The study of popular experimental electronic music therefore provides critical access to contemporary global capitalism: it is a mediator.

I then moved on to examine the dialectical and utopian character of noise, an aesthetic element in much popular experimental electronic music. I argued that noise always refers to the system that tries to exclude it, which it therefore influences generatively through the negative power of its otherness. I suggested that the dialectic of
noise moves forward via the accommodation of music to noise, causing noise to become redefined. Subsequently, both stages in the dialectic shift into a new configuration, restarting it. For this reason, as Attali argues, bringing noise into music is a political responsibility, a choice to work towards the creative expansion of the field of music from the perspective of noise. This process is comparable to radical democracy, where the whole field of sound is open for debate, an image of utopia for which noise is a herald.

Using the work of Walter Benjamin, my allegory of noise turned to examine the “Angelus Novus,” a figure forced to witness the destruction of “progress,” pushed backwards from paradise through history by the wreckage it surveys. This powerful image enables a unique critical view: a Benjaminian constellation able to consider together both the angel and the deleterious course of history that holds the angel in its thrall. I suggested that this critical view was a facet of Benjamin’s angel image because it is an aesthetic figure, and also because of his notion of Jetztzeit: a shot of redemptive light, critically illuminating the historical present in a flash. Bringing the combination of the angel, the course of history, and the gap between them to light
at once, the notion of *Jetztzeit* is a crucial aspect of the critical practice my allegory of noise aims to foster.

Using the work of Fredric Jameson, I described *Jetztzeit* in terms of the process of cognitive mapping. Cognitive mapping is a critical aesthetic recognition of the totality of global capitalism, which Jameson argues is unable to be discerned except aesthetically. I proposed that a secularised conception of the "Angelus Novus" was a glitch, a piece of digital noise. I argued that the glitch makes the process of cognitive mapping uniquely possible, presenting an impression of the totality from within by way of a tick-sound, like the sonar of a bat revealing the contours of a cave. Equally material and aesthetic, this tick-sound is a critical element in terms of both the social totality and music.

Through the work of Slavoj Zizek, I argued that the glitch is a special instance of noise that is able to hold open a gap between the Real of noise and the Symbolic of music, which parallels the split between the social totality and the utopia it denies. The glitch serves as both a mediator and an inoculating sample of the Real, whose irrepressible form would otherwise swallow the Symbolic, rendering it pathological. As the *objet petit a*, the small piece of the
unrepresentable Real in the Symbolic, the glitch enables the Symbolic
to function: it is a symptom of the problem it also helps to identify
critically. For this reason, I argued that noise needed to be brought
into music, like a preventative shot of venom. Thus, the use of the
glitch provides the basis for the opportunity to develop critical agency
vis-à-vis the Real as noise.

I then examined the audio of the German experimental
electronic producer Oval. I described Oval’s glitchy audio as a fuzzy,
ever-moving jumble of noise, broken melodies, and the interminable
tick-sound of skipping CDs. Oval’s use of the glitch presents a
critique of the totality of global capitalism, which it symbolises in
audio form. The use of the glitch also highlights the extension of this
structure into everyday life: skipping CDs are a prosaic part of
contemporary life, an everyday bit of noise. I argued this glitch sound
embodies a real technological challenge to the controlled and reliable
flow of global capitalism. I suggested that Oval’s use of the glitch
provided a model for radical democracy: in the context of the dialectic
of noise, Oval uses the glitch creatively to broaden the range of
acceptable sound in music from the critical position of noise. I
described this effort as a utopian gesture.
Utopia Redux

Metonymically, the glitch bridges the gap between the Real of noise and the Symbolic of music; also, the glitch bridges the gap between the social totality of global capitalism and the utopian promise of a better future. In both cases, the dialectical shift comes with making the glitch work for music, enlisting the dialectic of noise to herald utopia. To say that there can be no music because of noise or that music must disavow noise to be music, results in the stagnation and death of creativity. For life to continue and creativity to be cultivated, noise needs to be acknowledged. A new constellation needs to be drawn around the glitch, presenting a new view of Benjamin’s Jetztzeit. The structure of music needs to be challenged and reconfigured, provoking the dialectic of noise. In other words, the political choice is to bring noise into music, dealing creatively with the consequences. This is how the utopian promise of noise is made practicable.

The allegory of noise is an attempt to articulate this utopian promise, politicise it, and then place it constructively back into the everyday world of popular cultural production from which it arises. As Lipsitz argues, “culture functions as a social force to the degree
that it gets instantiated in social life and connected to the political aspirations and activities of groups” (38). In basements and bedrooms, in home studios and the acoustic labs of academe, in huge dance clubs and the smallest venues—the exploration of noise in music is instantiated in a multitude of ways and places. The connections are deep, criss-crossing the globe, from Montreal’s Mutek festival, to Sonar in Barcelona, to the Love Parade in Berlin. These connections are carried place-to-place with laptop computers, in the form of CDs, and in files shared over the Internet. Like the mobile communities that make them, these connections are participatory, mobilising and self-generating. The social force of this activity is expressed in and as popular culture. As an aspect of everyday life, the significance of this force is profound.

The utopian promise of noise is palpable and grounded. It is an aspect of the aspirations of the multitude of people engaged in the exploration of noise in music. That the scope of music continues to grow confirms this reaching for utopia, a creative process that inspires itself. By bringing noise back into music, both surge forward dialectically, redefined. But this dialectic depends on the actions of people—bringing noise critically into music. The dialectic of noise
cannot solve problems by virtue of its immanent promise alone. This promise needs to be enlisted in creative work, made to intensify. The dialectic of noise is a problematic, not a solution.

As a problematic, the allegory I construct is a speculative thesis built from the material of the present—a critical constellation, as Benjamin describes. However, there is no guarantee that the critical value I have described will be realised. It is a curious character of our time to expect popular culture to do everything for us, including politically. Always providing an option, it is easy to succumb to the hubris that popular cultural production resolves—or absolves us from—the responsibility of envisioning and making social change in a structural way. But all popular cultural production is human behaviour, and it has an influence on the world, including a political one, if unequally practicable or progressive. As Jameson argues, the blurring of culture and politics is a hallmark of our time in history, an effect of global capitalism. In this sense, popular culture does not replace politics; rather, it is a supplement that mediates the same problematic in different terms. Instead of denying that popular culture is a rarefied institution, at its worst used to perpetuate the status quo, it is exactly this deeply compromised position that can provide popular
culture with its particular influence and power, including political power.

At a most basic level, popular culture promises a better world, a utopia of liberalised comfort and leisure. In a profound sense, this compelling vision of the proverbial "good life" is an incredibly insurrectionary notion, the closest most people have to a working "revolutionary" theory—even more, one actually used in practice. This alone justifies taking popular culture's relationship to the political seriously. However, if we think that the extent of our political choices are contained in our tastes, or if we think these tastes are merely personal, we fail to recognise and make use of the substantial way that popular culture is political. A pressing political challenge, therefore, is critiquing stereotypical views of popular culture as both the boundary where politics end and as the only place left that is actively political. More a set of social and cultural conventions interpreting the world than its literal embodiment, the political writ large presents a normative impression of what ought to be. Imagining a way to live that is equally fair is surely the basic imperative of progressive politics in incipient form. Popular culture has this orientation at its core. This is more than a metaphor: like politics,
popular culture is based on coordinated and self-directed human
action—the basis for change of any kind. This political character is
manifest in popular culture at a formal level, in the very organisation
of its necessary constituent parts.

This brings me back to the ever-growing multitude of bedroom
computer jockeys exploring the utopian value of noise in the field of
popular culture. If not the redemptive return of Eden, a time before
compromise, the politically charged realm of popular culture presents
the possibility of utopia already in earthly form. In its basic form,
popular culture is a field of contestation and debate that grows,
changes, and progresses exactly because of the dispersed yet
collective activities of the multitude engaged with it. This level of
involvement is irrepressible, never fully contained by the profiteering
of the marketplace, which crumbles at the most radical edges of
popular culture. In short, popular culture is a model for radical
democracy *par excellence*—one already in our hands. Yet, the
problematic remains: this model is just a model, utopia is still on the
horizon, and noise is just on the threshold. The political challenge is to
take these pieces and make a new constellation, to recognise the traces
of utopia in the present, and to use this potential to work towards
change. Hopeful, speculative, polemical, utopian, unfinished—the allegory of noise is one attempt to create this critical constellation.
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82


