

JOSEPH NECHVATAL (2011) *IMMERSION INTO NOISE*. ANN ARBOR: OPEN HUMANITIES PRESS.

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In an early footnote to his *Immersion Into Noise*, digital artist and theoretician Joseph Nechvatal reminds us that the word 'noise' comes from the Greek *nausea*, referring both to the feeling of seasickness and to the roar of the roiling ocean, that formidable vastness that is the source of life as well as the paradigmatic symbol of a fecund and portentous unity-before-differentiation. It is this two-fold sense of noise as both agent of upset and vehicle for self-transcendence that drives Nechvatal's expansive exploration of what he calls 'noise consciousness', as he traces the history of 'art noise' – not just audio but also visual, cognitive, spatial, and digitally networked – through a broad range of cultural spheres, including music, the visual arts, architecture, philosophy, and consciousness studies. Stretching as far back as what Nechvatal cites as the 'genesis of immersive noise art,' the cave art of Paleolithic Man, and taking us through to today's technologically hyper-mediated culture, what emerges is a comprehensive theory of art noise that uproots our conventional assumptions about its subject – i.e. noise as meaningless irritant – and replaces them with a dazzling vision of the transformative possibilities of ecstatic consciousness.

To better understand what Nechvatal means by noise in this generative sense, it is helpful to consider the context in which (or against which) it operates. In broad cultural terms, the backdrop against which noise functions is conventional culture; with its sense-deadening and mind-narrowing homogeneity, its pop-media ideology, and its desperate grip on the *status quo*, conventional culture is by definition disturbance-averse (and thus anti-noise). In

cognitive terms, noise imposes itself on our conventional habits of thought, our everyday utilitarian mindset that seeks pre-established patterns and norms the better and more efficiently to achieve ends. In art, particularly in visual art, but also in the others by extension, this hewing to conventional habits is embodied by the enduring legacy of Renaissance linear perspective – i.e. the picture-as-window approach to images – with its orderly, rational, and geometricized vision of the world whose *sine qua non* is the fixed, singular viewpoint of an ‘objective’ observer gazing through a pre-established window. Nechvatal points out that this sense of space has become the unconscious habit of our post-industrial culture, one that is perpetually reinforced by the proliferation of photographic images. ‘Behind this pre-established window,’ he writes, ‘human sensitivity has become increasingly bored, neutral, distant, detached, separated, and narrowed’ (225). With the reigning paradigm of linear perspective, of course, comes the implicit epistemology that underlies and sustains it: that of the detached subject observing the world at a distance – i.e. the fundamental Cartesian dualism at the core of the modernist worldview and the positivist ideal of a fully rational, knowable, and explainable world. It is against this lingering dualism/positivism (‘a paradigm under which we continue to toil unconsciously’ (79)) and the multitude of conventions it gives rise to that noise operates as rupture by imposing a shattering dissonance on repressive frames. Art noise, then, is a medium of artistic creation that destroys conceptual frames by means of sensory and/or cognitive excess, and by means of this destruction creates new spaces for more complex, more ambivalent, non-signifying, non-representational meanings to emerge.

Also central to Nechvatal’s theory of noise is his concept of immersion, a subject he has explored extensively in a previous book (2009). As he movingly demonstrates in a chapter recounting his experience inside the Lascaux Cave in France, immersive consciousness is fundamentally participatory and holistic rather than detached and analytical, and as such it is the antithesis of linear perspective vision. Immersive experience is one in which the subject/object distinction that governs ordinary consciousness dissolves and cognitive boundaries and distinctions collapse as the ‘immersant’ becomes sensorially enfolded into a world that is no longer ‘out there’ but both deeply interior to and spatially expanded from the self. At its core an instance of profound awareness of a fundamental connectedness, the immersive state of consciousness ‘contains a condition in which reality is perceived as consisting of more than that which everyday vision brings to light’ (89) – both

literally and figuratively. It is a state of ‘psychic openness’ in which, as the author recalls of his experience inside the cave, ‘sex, art, and death meet in an aesthetic discharge’ (72). Nechvatal’s account of his immersion into the cave’s noisily adorned chambers and labyrinthine passageways is so vividly rendered and so laden with psycho-sexual associations that for the reader the cave becomes both paragon of and metaphor for immersive consciousness itself. Indeed, the copious other examples of noise art explored here – ranging from the cybernetic music of Jimi Hendrix to the dissonant piano jazz of Cecil Taylor, from the viscerally opulent masterworks of Baroque architecture to the infinity-alluding drip paintings of Jackson Pollock – all call to mind the same ecstatic movement into the depths of the cave, where one becomes enveloped by a ‘hyper-totality’ charged with spiritual and aesthetic significance, and from which one emerges altered.

Nechvatal’s approach to the art of noise is largely inspired by the rhizomatic theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome is a metaphor for an epistemology that is non-hierarchical, heterogeneous, without beginning or end, and one that spreads outward in all directions simultaneously. For Nechvatal, this epistemology ‘supports... a connectivist approach towards theorizing the noise experience, as rhizomatic theory encourages philosophic non-linear and non-restrictive interdisciplinary thinking and hence reinterpretation’ (36). Also vital to Nechvatal’s noise theory is Deleuze and Guattari’s *body without organs* (BwO), a term the authors use to describe a state of de-spatialized being characterized by a sensed boundlessness and a connectedness with ‘pure becomings’. Other notable influences include Georges Bataille’s notion of excess as passage beyond given limits (1985), Michel Serres’s concept of noise as ‘chaotic parasite’ (1982)¹ and the physicist David Bohm’s theory of the ‘implicate order’ (1980), a unified whole in which all the apparently separate phenomena of the ‘explicit order’ are enfolded. Nechvatal deftly weaves these and countless other extra-artistic references into his narrative, making for an aesthetic theory that is intimately interconnected with domains of human endeavor generally considered beyond the scope of art.

The author’s erudition, which is formidable, is matched by a prose style that embodies the very thing it describes analytically – i.e. immersive complexity, seething heterogeneity, non-linearity, and lavish excess – with a voice that is at turns deeply personal, impishly playful, and rigorously theoretical. Fundamentally dithyrambic (a word Nechvatal often uses to describe his noisy subjects), *Immersion*

Into Noise is a book that shows as much as it tells, making for a reading experience that is exactly what its title suggests, and with all the reward of a consciousness-altering experience.

In his penultimate chapter, Nechvatal turns to today's hyper-networked digital culture, which, he argues, is inherently noisy by virtue of the ubiquitous and ever-expanding circuitry of the Internet. To demonstrate how the art of noise might operate in such an environment, Nechvatal explores the concept of the computer virus – a semi-autonomous piece of code that inserts copies of itself into any number of potential 'hosts' – and its use not as agent of malicious infection but as a creative, parameter-shifting, novelty-inducing force. In considering the potentially beneficial aspects of digital viruses, the reader is reminded of the crucial role played by mutation in biological evolution, where new species emerge only as a consequence of random glitches in the copying of the DNA code – 'mistakes' that result in new traits that are either selected for or against by environmental factors. Viruses, then, are noisy ruptures to the system that spin off new vortices of potential meaning in their path of destruction. With the 'viral paradigm'², Nechvatal deepens what is one of the book's pervasive sub-themes, the increasing convergence of digital code and biological life in contemporary culture, and in this context noise can be seen as an agent of ontological self-reprogramming – i.e. as catalyst for new configurations of the self that emerge from a 're-wiring' of the neural circuitry.

As an epigraph to his concluding chapter, Nechvatal quotes an admonition from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 'To think about existential problems in such a way as to leave out the passion is tantamount to not thinking about them at all, since it is to forget the point' (as cited by Nechvatal, 249). With this Nechvatal reminds the reader of the disingenuousness of claims to 'being scientific' by theorists of both art and consciousness, two subjects with which our subjectivity is too inextricably bound up to achieve any measure of methodological objectivity. In aesthetic theorizing in particular, the absence of passion too often becomes not just self-defeating but also cruelly ironic. *Immersion Into Noise* succumbs to no such fate. Indeed, it is Nechvatal's passion, along with his refusal of a feigned objectivity, that charges this book with a sense of urgency and timeliness that, when present, are what make any theory truly relevant beyond the halls of academia. The questions coursing through the book are ones of considerable urgency to anyone who cares about art and our culture at large: What is the role

of art in a society in which entertainment has become a consummate value? What is art's role in a culture of corporate and government propaganda designed to subjugate us, to render us docile and mute? How can art move beyond its current position of ironic detachment in the face of all that threatens to liquidate our inner freedom? What, indeed, is art's responsibility in this context? Nechvatal answers these questions by showing us that the art of noise can restore to art its role as force of resistance, or as noisy trickster who perpetually exposes the deeper truths covered over by 'the facts.' In this sense, noise culture is emphatically political. But it is first and foremost, as with all aesthetic experience, profoundly interior and personal; it is toward the ultimate end of discovering our inner world that has been long suppressed by epistemological errors and habitual patterns that noise art is directed. And it is in the realization that within our inner world our perceptual circuitry is in fact 're-programmable' – that we can, in a sense, remake ourselves – that we can find our inherent freedom.

Endnotes

1. Michel Serres is one of a number of people Nechvatal cites who have specifically interrogated the concept of noise and its function in culture. In his books *Genèse* and *The Parasite*, Serres proclaims that noise, as chaotic parasite, is the excluded middle that lies between the two poles intrinsic to the structure of modern Western thought.

2. The author's rendering of the 'viral paradigm' is bolstered by his own involvement with viral code as a kind of artificial intelligence in his work as an artist, where viral algorithms eat at and into digital images from the artist's image base. What results are wholly unforeseen and unpredictable forms that emerge and mutate around the 'image world,' always creating new features as they interact with and transform the original image.

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