

Genre is Obsolete*

Ray Brassier

*An earlier version of this article was originally published in *Multitudes*, No. 28, Spring 2007

'Noise' has become the expedient moniker for a motley array of sonic practices – academic, artistic, counter-cultural – with little in common besides their perceived recalcitrance with respect to the conventions governing classical and popular musics. 'Noise' not only designates the no-man's-land between electro-acoustic investigation, free improvisation, avant-garde experiment, and sound art; more interestingly, it refers to anomalous zones of interference between genres: between post-punk and free jazz; between musique concrète and folk; between stochastic composition and art brut. Yet in being used to categorise all forms of sonic experimentation that ostensibly defy musico-logical classification – be they para-musical, anti-musical, or post-musical – 'noise' has become a generic label for anything deemed to subvert established genre. It is at once a specific sub-genre of musical vanguardism and a name for what refuses to be subsumed by genre. As a result, the functioning of the term 'noise' oscillates between that of a proper name and that of a concept; it equivocates between nominal anomaly and conceptual interference. Far from being stymied by such paradox, the more adventurous practitioners of this pseudo-genre have harnessed and transformed this indeterminacy into an enabling condition for work which effectively realises 'noise's' subversive pretensions by ruthlessly identifying and pulverising those generic tropes and gestures through which confrontation so quickly atrophies into convention. Two groups are exemplary in this regard: To Live and Shave in L.A., led by assiduous American iconoclast Tom Smith, whose dictum 'genre is obsolete' provides the modus operandi for a body of work characterised by its fastidious dementia; and Runzelstirn & Gurgelstock, headed by the enigmatic Swiss deviant and 'evil Kung-Fu troll'^[1] Rudolf Eb.er, whose hallucinatory audiovisual concoctions amplify the long dimmed psychotic potencies of actionism. Significantly, both men disavow the label 'noise' as a description of their work – explicitly in Smith's case, implicitly in Eb.er's.^[2] This is not coincidental; each recognises the debilitating stereotypy engendered by the failure to recognise the paradoxes attendant upon the existence of a genre predicated upon the negation of genre.

[1] See the interview with Smith online at <http://www.toliveandshaveinla.com/bio.htm>

[2] Smith's own description of Eb.er in an interview available at <http://pragueindustrial.org/interviews/ohne>. Eb.er is a qualified martial arts instructor.

Like the 'industrial' subculture of the late 1970s which spawned it, the emergence of 'noise' as a recognisable genre during the 1980s entailed a rapid accumulation of stock gestures, slackening the criteria for discriminating between innovation and cliché to the point where experiment threatened to become indistinguishable from platitude.^[3] Fastening onto this intellectual slackness, avant-garde aesthetes who advertised their disdain for the perceived vulgarity of the industrial genre voiced a similar aversion toward the formulaic tendencies of its noisy progeny. But in flaunting its artistic credentials, experimental aestheticism ends up resorting to the self-conscious strategies of reflexive distancing which have long since become automatism of conceptual art practice – the knee-jerk reflexivity which academic commentary has consecrated as the privileged guarantor of sophistication. This is the art that 'raises questions' and 'interrogates' while reinforcing the norms of critical consumption. In this regard, noise's lucid anti-aestheticism and its affinity with rock's knowing unselfconsciousness are among its most invigorating aspects. Embracing the analeptic fury of noise's post-punk roots but refusing its coalescence into a catalogue of stock mannerisms, Smith and Eb.er have produced work that marries conceptual stringency and anti-aestheticist bile while rejecting sub-academic cliché as vehemently as hackneyed expressions of alienation. Each implicates delirious lucidity within libidinal derangement – 'intellect and libido simultaneously tweaked' – allowing analysis and indulgence to interpenetrate.^[4]

The sound conjured by To Live and Shave in L.A. is unprecedented: where noise orthodoxy too often identifies sonic extremity with an uninterrupted continuum of distorted screeching, Shave fashion what are ostensibly discrete 'songs' into explosive twisters of writhing sound. On a song like '5 Seconds Off Your Ass', the bracing opener from 1995's demented *Vedder, Vedder, Bedwetter*^[5] (whose 'oafish bluster' Smith has since partly disavowed), the music seethes forth in a relentless cacophonous blare that

[3] For an overview of industrial culture see the *Industrial Culture Handbook*, Re# 6/7, edited by V. Vale and A. Juno, San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1983. The best insight into the nascent noise scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s is provided by the magazine *Bananafish*, edited by Seymour Glass, which has only recently ceased publication with issue 18 (2006). An anthology of issues 1-4 was published by Tedium House Publication, San Francisco, in 1994.

[4] *Vedder, Vedder, Bedwetter*, Fifth Column Records, 1995

[5] <http://www.toliveandshaveinla.com/bio.htm>

seems to mimic the Gestus of noise. Yet barely discernible just beneath its smeared surfaces and saturated textures lies an intricately layered structure coupling scrambled speech, keening oscillator, and disfigured bass shards, intermittently punctuated by mangled pop hooks, absurdly disembodied metallic arpeggios and sporadic electronic roars, over which Smith spews out reams of splenetic invective. Where orthodox noise compresses information, obliterating detail in a torrential deluge, Shave constructs songs around an overwhelming plethora of sonic data, counterweighing noise's form-destroying entropy through a negentropic overload that destroys noise-as-genre and challenges the listener to engage with a surfeit of information. There is always too much rather than too little to hear at once; an excess which invites repeated listens. The aural fascination exerted by the songs is accentuated by Smith's remarkable libretti, featuring verbal conundrums whose allusiveness baffles and delights in equal measure. Typically cross-splicing scenarios from obscure 1970s pornography with Augustan rhetoric, Smith's ravings resist decipherment through a surplus rather than deficit of sense.^[6] And just as Shave's sound usurps formlessness by incorporating an unformalizable surplus of sonic material, Smith's words embody a semantic hypertrophy which can only be transmitted by a vocal that mimes the senseless eructations of glossolalia. Refusing to yield to interpretation, his declamation cannot be separated from the sound within which it is nested. Yet it would be a mistake to confuse Shave's refusal to signify and their methodical subtractions from genre for a concession to postmodern polysemia and eclecticism. Far from the agreeable pastiche of a John Barth or an Alfred Schnittke, the proper analogue would be the total materialization of linguistic form exemplified in the 'written matter' of Pierre Guyotat or Iannis Xenakis' stochastic syntheses of musical structure and substance. Indeed, the only banner which Smith is willing to affix to Shave's work is that of what he calls the 'PRE' aesthetic. PRE is 'a negation of the errant supposition that spiffed-up or newly hatched movements supplant others fit for

[6] Smith: 'My libretti are not random, owe nothing to stochastic or aleatory operations, and in their specificity are rigidly fixed to character. My approach is strictly cinematic.' <http://www.toliveandshaveinla.com/bio.htm>

retirement [...] PRE? As in: all possibilities extant, even the disastrous ones.^[7] PRE could be understood as Smith's response to a quandary concerning musical innovation. The imperative to innovate engenders an antinomy for any given genre. Either one keeps repeating the form of innovation; in which case it becomes formulaic and retroactively negates its own novelty. Or one seeks constantly new types of innovation; in which case the challenge consists in identifying novel forms which will not merely reiterate the old. But one must assume an infinite, hence unactualisable set of forms in order not to repeat, and the limits of finite imagination invariably determine the exhaustion of possibility. It is never enough to keep multiplying forms of invention; one must also produce new genres within which to generate new forms. Noise becomes generic as the form of invention which is obliged to substitute the abstract negation of genre for the production of hitherto unknown genres.^[8] Generic noise is condemned to reiterate its abstract negation of genre ad infinitum. The results are not necessarily uninteresting. But 'PRE' intimates an alternative paradigm. Since the totality of possibility is a synonym for God, whom we must renounce, the only available (uncompromisingly secular) totality is that of impossibles. If all possibilities are extant, this can only be a totality of impossibles, which harbours as yet unactualised and incommensurable genres. The imperative to actualise impossibles leads not to eclecticism but to an ascesis of perpetual invention which strives to ward off pastiche by forging previously unimaginable links between currently inexistent genres. It is the injunction to produce the conditions for the actualisation of impossibles that staves off regression into generic repetition. In *The Wigmaker in 18th Century Williamsburg* (Menlo Park, 2001), this imperative to actualisation results in a music of unparalleled structural complexity, where each song indexes a sound-world whose density defies abbreviation. Here at last dub, glam-rock, musique concrète and electro-acoustic composition are conjoined in a monstrous but exhilarating hybrid.

[7] <http://www.toliveandshaveinla.com/bio.htm>

[8] Interestingly enough, recent years have seen the emergence of sub-categories within the 'noise' genre: 'harsh'; 'quiet'; 'free'; 'ambient', etc. Noise seems to be in the process of subdividing much as metal did in the 1980s and 1990s ('thrash'; 'speed'; 'black'; 'glam'; 'power'; 'doom', etc). Nevertheless, the proliferation of qualifying adjectives within an existing genre is not quite the same as the actualisation of previously inexistent genres. Whether these sub-categories will yield anything truly startling remains to be seen.

Eb.er squarely situates Runzelstirn & Gurgelstock under the aegis of actionism. Their performances are not concerts but rather 'psycho-physical tests and training', where both the testing and the training are directed toward the performer as much as the audience. The rationale is not shock and confrontation but rather discipline and concentration, yoked to an unswerving will to perplex. Eb.er and accomplice Dave Phillips slam their faces at accelerating pace into contact-miked plates of spaghetti. Eb.er pounds and gurgles at a piano pausing only to discharge a shotgun which the audience is relieved to learn is loaded with blanks. A woman with a tube inserted into her anus screams in misery as Eb.er blows into it to the strains of an elegiac string accompaniment. Eb.er struggles arduously to extract sounds from contact-miked fish lying dead upon a table. Three Japanese women are filmed imbibing colour-coded liquids which they then vomit into bowls in orchestrated sequence. Or less ostentatiously, but more perplexing still, Eb.er perches upon a stool sporting a woman's wig and chewing anxiously on an electric cable while a latex-masked Joke Lanz stands guard menacingly beside him, balancing what seems to be an antique wireless on his shoulder while the sound of buzzing flies issues around them. These experiments in contrived absurdity, of brief duration but invariably poised at the tipping point between comedic entertainment and intolerable provocation, have earned Eb.er the opprobrium of 'serious' experimental musicians, who are wont to dismiss them as sensation-mongering stunts. But the extraordinary lengths to which Eb.er is prepared to go in conceiving and executing these 'stunts', not to mention the inordinate difficulties he often generates for himself in doing so, immediately contradict the accusation of facileness. What is being ridiculed here is the facile mysticism of those who would sanctify musical experience – more specifically, the experience of listening to 'experimental music', whether composed or improvised – as a pure end in itself: this is the specious mystique of aesthetic experience as ethico-political edification. Far from being a mere pretext, the

auditory component of these actions is as important as their visual aspect and provides the raw material for R&G recordings. These are meticulously edited exercises in discontinuous variation which are constantly re-cycled for further performances. As with Shave, R&G's music is characterized by intricately structured sequences of discrete sonic events strung together in diverging series: sighs, gasps, burps, groans, retchings, barks, growls; dogs, roosters, accordions, yodels, strings, pianos, brass; shouts, roars, thuds, shrieks, and sawings; each series punctuated by precisely defined intervals of silence, which are in turn periodically shattered by crescendos of processed wails that morph into choruses of mournful ululation. The sound of gagging is followed by the sound of bludgeoned flesh and cracking bone; gentle acoustic rustlings are cross-stitched with violent blasts of synthesised blare. The perpetual oscillation between cartoon mischief and psychotic malevolence is at once comic and uncanny. Eb.er describes his editing procedure thus:

In Switzerland I used open reels and scalpels, almost surgical. Cutting, cutting, cutting, sewing back. I dig a hole and stay in there with all those blades, tapes, and scissors. I didn't want to mix things up, but to put the knife into the sound of what I did and recorded, inside and outside. What you hear on R&G is real. The action and its body. I just cut the body parts, sew them wrong and cut again – in that timing, 15 years of R&G sounds get divided and divided, grow and grow. I grow my sounds 'biologically', like dividing cells. Cut and let grow.^[9]

This surgical metastasis finds an echo in Eb.er's paintings: oneiric depictions of psychic abjection in which organic and inorganic forms are subjected to cancerous metamorphoses. A transsexual Mickey Mouse sporting disfigured genitalia sprawls in pornographic abandon. A Japanese schoolgirl with a fissured head and single prominent nipple gapes blankly while a diseased landscape yawns through the hole in her face. Some of these an-organic anomalies are redolent of the sexual dysmorphias

[9] From an interview with Drew Daniel, 'Aktion Time Vision', published in *The Wire* 227, January 2003, pp.21-25.

drawn by Hans Bellmer, but Eb.er's paintings are executed with a technical proficiency worthy of artists like Nigel Cooke. Are these contrived and consequently inauthentic tokens of derangement? Or genuinely psychotic but therefore stereotypical symptoms? Over-familiarity has rendered the iconography of Viennese actionism banal: blood, gore, and sexual transgression are now tawdry staples of entertainment. Ironically, even *art brut* looks formulaic to us now. But Eb.er's judicious leavening of the freakish with the cartoonish and his disquieting transpositions of psychic distress into infantile slapstick betray a suspicion of stereotype and a lucidity about the ineliminable complicity between wilfulness and compulsion, perversity and pathology. The embrace of such ambiguity is the voluntary risk undertaken by a man acutely aware of the paradoxes attendant upon his own *mot d'ordre*: 'art not crime'. In this regard, Eb.er's approach is the symptom of a tactical rather than psychiatric dilemma: How to produce art that confronts without sham; art that is unequivocal in its refusal to placate or appease? 'We do not care about any behaviours, standards or civilisation. I don't want new ones. Just none. Bye bye.'^[10] Such an exemplary refusal is as likely to be chastised for its irresponsibility as to be patronized for its aberrant, pathological character. It abjures moral condemnations of social psychosis as well as pathetic revendications of victimhood. But perhaps a psychotic who is lucid about the degree to which his estrangement is socially manufactured is a more dangerous political animal than any engaged artist or authentic lunatic?

Debates about noise's subversive or 'critical' potency unfold in a cultural domain whose relationship to the capitalist economy is at once transparent and opaque. Socio-economic factors are obviously relevant here; but their role is easier to invoke than to understand precisely and in the absence of detailed socio-economic analyses,

[10] From an interview with Drew Daniel, 'Aktion Time Vision', published in *The Wire* 227, January 2003, pp.21-25.

the stakes of such debates continue to be largely played out in cultural terms. In this regard, the 'noise' genre is undoubtedly a cultural commodity, albeit of a particularly rarefied sort. But so is its theorization. And the familiar gestures that vitiate the radicality of the former are paralleled by the reactionary tropes which sap the critical potency of the latter. Much contemporary critical theory of a vaguely *marxisant* bent is compromised by conceptual anachronisms whose untruth in the current social context is every bit as politically debilitating as that of the reactionary cultural forms it purports to unmask. Just as 'noise' is neither more nor less inherently subversive than any other commodifiable musical genre, so the categories invoked in order to decipher its political potency cannot be construed as inherently 'critical' while they remain fatally freighted with neo-romantic clichés about the transformative power of aesthetic experience. The invocation of somatic and psychological factors in accounts of the (supposedly) viscerally liberating properties of 'noise' reiterates the privileging of subjective (or inter-subjective) experience in attempts to justify the edificatory virtues of making and listening to experimental music. But neither playing nor listening can continue to be privileged in this way as loci of political subjectivation. The myth of 'experience', whether subjectively or inter-subjectively construed, whether individual or collective, was consecrated by the culture of early bourgeois modernity and continues to loom large in cultural theory.^[11] Yet its elevation by idealist philosophers who uphold the primacy of human subjectivity, understood in terms of the interdependency between individual and social consciousness, impedes our understanding of the ways in which the very nature of consciousness is currently being transformed by a culture in which technological operators function as intrinsically determining factors of social being. Technology is now an invasive component of agency. Neurotechnologies, including cognitive enhancers such as modafinil, brain fingerprinting, neural lie-detectors, and nascent brain-computer interfaces, are giving rise to phenotechnologies which will

[11] See for instance Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

eventually usher in the literal manufacturing of consciousness in a way that promises to redraw existing boundaries between personal and collective experience and recast not only extant categories of personal and collective identity, but also those of personal and collective agency. The commodification of experience is not a metaphor played out at the level of ideology and combatable with ideological means, but a concrete neurophysiological reality which can only be confronted with neurobiological resources.^[12] Although still ensconced at the cultural rather than neurobiological level, the dissolution of genre prefigures the dissolution of the forms and structure of social existence. If the substantialization of 'experience' is an anachronistic gesture with as little contemporary critical salience as its 'aesthetic' complement, why not jettison it along with the latter and find other ways of articulating whatever critical and political potency music might retain? In this regard, the negation of generic categories exemplified by Shave and Runzelstirn bears a cognitive import which invites us to embrace the eradication of experience as an opportunity to re-fashion the relationship between the social, psychological, and neurobiological factors in the determination of culture. Since experience is a myth, what do we have to lose? To eradicate experience would be to begin to intervene in the sociological determination of neurobiology as well as in the neurobiological determination of culture. Here, the cognitive and cultural import of art cannot be separated from its formal and structural resources: the radicality of the latter must be concomitant with the radicality of the former. Shave and Runzelstirn not only mean something different than other experimental musics; they *mean* differently. Where noise orthodoxy substantialises its putative negation of genre into an easily digestible sonic stereotype, which simply furnishes a novel experience – the hapless but nevertheless entertaining roar of feedback – Shave and Runzelstirn construct the sound of generic anomaly – a hiatus in what is recognizable *as* experience – by fusing hitherto incommensurable sonic categories in a way that draws attention to the synthetic

[12] For a discussion of the scientific and philosophical ramification of these developments, see Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (New York: Basic Books, forthcoming 2009). For a vivid fictional dramatization of this predicament, see *Scott Bakker's Neuropath* (Orion Books, 2008).

character of all experience: dub cut-up, free-glam, and electro-acoustic punk for Shave; cartoon *musique concrète* and slapstick art brut for Runzelstirn. Both groups deploy an analytical delirium which steadfastly refuses the inane clichés of subcultural 'transgression' on one hand, while obviating the stilted mannerisms of academic conceptualism on the other. Neither sounds like 'noise'; yet it is their refusal to substantiate the negation of musical genre that has led them to produce music which sounds like nothing else before it. The abstract negation of genre issues in the sterile orthodoxies of 'noise' as pseudonym for experimental vanguardism, and the result is either the stifling preciousness of officially sanctioned art music or (worse) the dreary machinations of a 'sound art' which merely accentuates and hypostatizes 'listening experience'. But by forcefully short-circuiting incommensurable genres, Shave and Runzelstirn engender the noise of generic anomaly. It is the noise that is not 'noise', the noise of *sui generis*, that actualises the disorientating potencies long claimed for 'noise'.^[13]

Anti-copyright

[13] Further information about both groups can be found on their respective websites: <http://www.toliveandshaveinla.com/> and <http://www.artnotcrime.net/r+g/>

