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## Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism

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### Abstract

Why does sound art remain so profoundly undertheorized, and why has it failed to generate a rich and compelling critical literature? It is because the prevailing theoretical models are inadequate to it. Developed to account for the textual and the visual, they fail to capture the nature of the sonic. In this article, the author proposes an alternative theoretical framework, a materialist account able to grasp the nature of sound and to enable analysis of the sonic arts. He suggests, moreover, that this theoretical account can provide a model for rethinking the arts in general and for avoiding the pitfalls encountered in theories of representation and signification.

### Keywords

materialism • music • realism • representation • signification • sound art  
• the virtual

Sound art emerged in the late 1960s as a confluence of experimental strategies in music with Postminimalist installation practices in the visual arts (see Cox, 2009b). From the outset, the spatial and temporal concerns of sound artists such as Max Neuhaus, La Monte Young, and Alvin Lucier resonated richly with the work of visual artists such as Robert Morris, Michael Asher, and Bruce Nauman, who, around the same time, began to experiment with sound. Yet, while these visual artists have attracted an enormous amount of scholarly attention, their sonic output has gone almost unnoticed; and the broader field of sound art has been ignored by musicologists, art historians, and aesthetic theorists. The open-ended sonic forms and often site-specific location of sound installations thwart artists' musicological analysis, which remains oriented to the formal examination of

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discrete sound structures and performances, while the purely visual purview of art history allows its practitioners not only to disregard sound art but also to gloss over the sonic strategies of Postminimalism and Conceptualism.

The increasing prominence of sound art over the past decade has done little to alter this situation. Why does sound art remain so profoundly undertheorized, and why has it failed to generate a rich and compelling critical literature? The primary reason, I suggest, is that the prevailing theoretical models are inadequate to it. Developed to account for the textual and the visual, they fail to capture the nature of the sonic. In this article, I propose an alternative theoretical framework, a materialist account able to grasp the nature of sound and to enable analysis of the sonic arts. I suggest, moreover, that this theoretical account can provide a model for rethinking the arts in general and for avoiding the pitfalls encountered in theories of representation and signification. More broadly still, this article aims to contribute to the general revival of realism in contemporary philosophy and its challenge to the idealism and humanism that have characterized philosophy and cultural theory since the 'linguistic turn'.<sup>1</sup>

## Representation, Signification, and Materialism

For the past few decades, aesthetic theory has been dominated by a set of critical approaches (most prominently, semiotics, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and deconstruction) concerned with signification, representation, and mediation. Epistemologically, these approaches reject naive conceptions of representation and signification that construe images and signs as picturing or designating a pre-given world. Ontologically, they reject essentialism, which construes the world as manifesting fixed conceptual or material essences to which images and signs would refer. In contrast with the fixity and inflexibility of essentialism, contemporary cultural theory aims to account for and foster the contingency of meaning, the multiplicity of interpretation, and the possibility of change. Culture is construed as a field or system of signs that operate in complex relations of referral to other signs, subjects, and objects. Cultural criticism and theory is taken to be an interpretive enterprise that consists in tracking signs or representations (images, texts, symptoms, etc.) through the associative networks that give them meaning, networks that are always in flux, thus ensuring that meaning is never fixed or stable. Rejecting realism, which would claim direct access to reality, contemporary cultural theory and criticism tends to maintain that experience is always mediated by the symbolic field. Indeed, these approaches often have a deep suspicion of the extra-symbolic, extra-textual, or extra-discursive, viewing such a domain as either inaccessible or non-existent. Thus, for example, Ferdinand de Saussure (1983[1916]: 116–17) banishes from semiotics the physical stuff of sound; Jacques Lacan (1998[1972–3]) declares that 'there is no such thing as a prediscursive reality' and casts aside the material substrate of culture that 'resists all symbolization' (pp. 32, 66);<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida (1976[1967]) maintains that 'there is nothing outside of the text' (p. 158); and Stuart Hall (2002) maintains that 'nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse'.<sup>3</sup>

These theoretical approaches are philosophically rich and have proven to be powerful tools for cultural analysis. They rightly reject essentialism and insist on the contingency and indeterminacy of meaning and being. Yet the price of this freedom has often been an epistemological and ontological insularity.<sup>4</sup> Theories of textuality or discursivity implicitly support a separation between culture (the domain of signification, representation, and meaning) and nature (the domain of inert, dumb matter). Nature is either cast aside as insignificant or deemed a cultural projection, a social construction. Contemporary cultural theory often falls prey to a provincial and chauvinistic anthropocentrism as well, for it treats human symbolic interaction as a unique and privileged endowment from which the rest of nature is excluded. It thus accords with the deep-seated metaphysics and theology it aims to challenge, joining Platonism, Christianity, and Kantianism in maintaining that, by virtue of some special endowment (soul, spirit, mind, reason, language, etc.), human beings inhabit a privileged ontological position elevated above the natural world. Contemporary cultural theory thus manifests a problematic Kantian epistemology and ontology, a dualistic program that divides the world into two domains, a phenomenal domain of symbolic discourse that marks the limits of the knowable, and a noumenal domain of nature and materiality that excludes knowledge and intelligible discourse.

These presuppositions and conclusions are fully evident in one of the very few sustained theoretical examinations of sound art and kindred musical forms, Seth Kim-Cohen's recent book *In the Blink of an Ear* (2009).<sup>5</sup> Kim-Cohen attributes the absence of a rich theoretical discourse on sound art to the tendency of composers, such as John Cage and Pierre Schaeffer, and sound artists, such as Francisco López and Christina Kubisch, to treat sound as a material substance external to signification and discursivity. Committed to raising sound art discourse to the level of theoretical analyses of the visual arts and literature, Kim-Cohen sees no other way than to adopt the textualist paradigm of those fields. On Kim-Cohen's account, realist claims concerning the materiality of sound can only be essentialist, since they posit a domain outside discourse, a substance the existence and nature of which is not determined by the field of signification. Such a substance and domain, Kim-Cohen concludes, is meaningless at best and non-existent at worst. 'Since being human is a state inexorably tied to language', he remarks, 'then, presumably, linguisticity is the order that obtains.' He continues:

The suggestion of an unadulterated, untainted purity of experience prior to linguistic capture seeks a return to a never-present, Romanticized, pre-Enlightenment darkness ... if some stimuli actually convey an experiential effect that precedes linguistic processing, what are we to do with such experiences? ... If there is such a strata of experience, we must accept it mutely. It finds no voice in thought or discourse. Since there is nothing we can do with it, it seems wise to put it aside and concern ourselves with that of which we can speak. (p. 112)

Attempting to bring sound art discourse within the neo-Kantian conceptual purview of contemporary cultural theory, Kim-Cohen accepts the presuppositions of textualism and discursivity, affirming a distinction between phenomena and

noumena rendered as the distinction between language and the extra-linguistic, culture and nature, text and matter. The limits of discourse are the limits of meaning and being, affirms Kim-Cohen. If the sonic arts are to be meaningfully examined, we will need to conceive them within the realm of representation and signification.

Yet, as Kim-Cohen rightly notes, the sonic arts are resistant to description and analysis via theories of textuality and representation, which accounts for the near silence about sound in contemporary aesthetic theory. The sonic arts, I suggest, require a different sort of theoretical analysis – not a theory particular to sound, but one capable of accounting for sound *and* the other arts. The materialist theory I propose here maintains that contemporary cultural theory's critiques of representation and humanism are not thorough enough. A rigorous critique of representation would altogether eliminate the dual planes of culture/nature, human/non-human, sign/world, text/matter, not in the manner of Hegel, toward an idealism that would construe all of being as mental, but in the manner of Nietzsche and Deleuze, toward a thoroughgoing materialism that would construe human symbolic life as a specific instance of the transformative process to be found throughout the natural world – from the chemical reactions of inorganic matter to the rarefied domain of textual interpretation – a process Nietzsche called by various names, among them 'becoming', 'interpretation', and 'will to power'.<sup>6</sup>

## Representation and the Sonic Arts

Musical composition and sound installation are surely historically situated and socially embedded practices that are culturally meaningful. Yet music has always been recognized to be a peculiarly non-representational art, lacking the two-tiered structure of reference characteristic of words and images. Leaving aside instances of *musique concrète* to which I will return later, musical tones and works are not signifiers, not media for the expression of a semantic content. They do not, for the most part, symbolize or stand for some other thing. They are not icons, indices, or symbols, to use C.S. Peirce's tripartite division of signs.<sup>7</sup>

Perception of these various cultural objects highlights this difference as well. Written texts and images require the distance of vision that separates subject from object. By contrast, sound is immersive and proximal, surrounding and passing through the body. And while texts and images involve the spatial juxtaposition of elements, the sonic arts involve a temporal flux in which elements interpenetrate one another. In Henri Bergson's (1960[1889]) terms, texts and images present us with 'discrete multiplicities' while, in the sonic arts, we encounter 'continuous multiplicities' (ch. II).

Music has long eluded analysis in terms of representation and signification and, as a result, has been considered to be purely formal and abstract. However, the most significant sound art work of the past half-century – the work of Max Neuhaus, Alvin Lucier, Christina Kubisch, Christian Marclay, Carsten Nicolai, Francisco Lopez, and Toshiya Tsunoda, for example – has explored the *materiality* of sound: its texture and temporal flow, its palpable effect on, and affection by the

materials through and against which it is transmitted. What these works reveal, I think, is that the sonic arts are not more *abstract* than the visual but rather more *concrete*, and that they require not a *formalist* analysis but a *materialist* one.

Historically, music's non-representational status has led it to be construed in two distinct ways. The composer and theorist R. Murray Schafer (1994[1977]: 6) traces these to the two Greek myths concerning the origin of music. Pindar's 12th Pythian Ode, writes Schafer, locates the origin of music in Athena's invention of aulos playing to honor the wailing sisters of the beheaded Medusa. The Homeric hymn to Hermes, by contrast, accounts for the origin of music in Hermes' discovery that the shell of a tortoise could be used to form the resonant chamber for a lyre. The first myth celebrates music as the subjective eruption of raw emotion, while the second construes it as the discovery of the objective sonic properties of the universe. Music is thus conceived to be either sub-representational, a primitive eruption of desire and emotion (hence its suppression by moral conservatives from Plato to the Taliban), or super-representational, pure mathematics. Thus, Descartes (1961[1618]) could write of music that 'its aim is to please and to arouse various emotions in us' (p. 11) while Leibniz (1989[1714]) could claim that the beauty of music 'consists only in the harmonies of numbers and in a calculation that we are not aware of, but which the soul nevertheless carries out' (p. 212).

## Schopenhauer: Beneath Representation

Two important 19th-century theories of art, those of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, richly combine these two poles in ways that are instructive for building a materialist theory of music and sound. Schopenhauer's metaphysics is explicitly Kantian and, as Kant distinguishes between the world of phenomena and world of noumena, appearance and things-in-themselves, so Schopenhauer (1969[1819]) distinguishes between the world of 'representation' and the world of 'will'.<sup>8</sup> In essence, argues Schopenhauer, the world is will: an undifferentiated, propulsive energy or force. Yet, for the most part, will is manifested and experienced only indirectly, through the mediation of the representations that make up the familiar world of appearance, which consists of discrete entities that inhabit time and space and are subject to natural laws. For Kant, the thing-in-itself was a theoretical posit, a necessary supposition of his epistemological and moral system. Schopenhauer, however, argues that each of us has a direct internal experience of the will as the force of desire, action, and movement that animates us and distinguishes our experience of ourselves from our experience of other human beings, who, for us, remain objects among objects, representations among representations. Through scientific study of these representations, we can see (though not feel) such internal forces at work throughout the natural world, from gravity, electricity, and magnetism to organic growth, animal desire, and human knowing and willing.

Awareness of the fact that the natural world is pervaded and driven by a blind, irrational force is, for Schopenhauer, cause for despair, vitiating any specifically human or individual projects or purpose. Art, however, is able to offer temporary

relief from this despair, since it presents us with what Schopenhauer calls 'Platonic Ideas', pure formal types disconnected from the practical concerns of everyday life. Contemplation of such aesthetic Ideas allows us, momentarily, to transcend the life of desire and struggle to become, in Schopenhauer's famous phrase, '*pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject[s] of knowledge*' (p. 179, emphases in original).

Schopenhauer notably distinguishes music from the visual and literary arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, and poetry), according it a special status. For Schopenhauer, music has nothing to do with the world of representation or with the presentation of Platonic Ideas. In an astonishing passage, he writes that music is 'quite independent of the apparent world, positively ignores it, and to a certain extent, could still exist even if there were no world at all, which cannot be said of the other arts' (p. 257). This would seem to be the most hyperbolic declaration of musical autonomy. But it is precisely the opposite. Schopenhauer liberates music from the world of appearance, the world of representation, only to plunge it into the world of things-in-themselves, the world of will. For music, he argues, is a direct expression of the will.

Music differs from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of appearance, or, more exactly, of the will's adequate objectivity, but is directly a copy of the will itself, and therefore expresses the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, the thing-in-itself to every appearance. Accordingly, we could just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will. (pp. 262-3; cf. p. 257)

For Schopenhauer, then, music is still, in some sense, a copy. What it renders, however, is not the world of objects and things that make up the apparent world, but the primary forces of which those objects and things are composed. That is, it offers an audible expression of nature in all its dynamic power.

Schopenhauer's theory of music is constrained by his Kantian metaphysics and by the Kantian language of representation, appearance, and thing-in-itself. Yet it offers an important start toward the construction of a materialist philosophy of sound and music. It acknowledges the non-representational character of music and accommodates both its Pindaric connection to emotion and desire and its Homeric grasp of fundamental truths about nature.<sup>9</sup> Yet its rejection of musical representation is not an assertion of musical autonomy but an argument for the groundedness of music in the patterns of becoming immanent to nature.

## Nietzsche: The Naturalization of Music

Nietzsche takes us considerably further toward a materialist theory of music and sound. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (1992a[1872]), draws on Schopenhauer's account while divesting it of its Kantian metaphysical baggage.<sup>10</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy* is, in the first place, a philological investigation into the origins of tragic drama and its profound importance for the Attic Greeks. Yet Nietzsche gives this study a wider significance, construing



it as a critique of late 19th-century culture and an account of art and music in general. The Greeks, argues Nietzsche, distinguished between the visual, plastic arts, on the one hand, and music, on the other – the discrete forms and serene composure of visual art honoring the god Apollo, the wild fluidity of music honoring Dionysus. *The Birth of Tragedy* presents this opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian as isomorphic with Schopenhauer's distinctions between representation and will, appearance and the thing-in-itself. Yet, as Nietzsche himself recognized, the account of art and music presented in the *Birth of Tragedy* departs considerably from Schopenhauer.<sup>11</sup> Schopenhauer's Kantianism led him to subsume the natural, physical world within the world of appearance, and to situate the will in a metaphysical domain outside of space and time and not subject to natural laws such as that of causality. For Nietzsche, however, both the Apollonian and the Dionysian are thoroughly immanent to nature. Indeed he describes them first and foremost as 'artistic energies [*Mächte*] which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist* – energies in which nature's art impulses [*Kunsttriebe*] are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way' (p. 38, emphases in original).

What Nietzsche is offering here is a deeply naturalistic theory of art. Art is not some unique achievement of human beings that defines a province of 'culture' distinct from, and elevated above, 'nature'. On the contrary, for Nietzsche, nature itself is artistic, creative, productive; and we human beings 'have our highest dignity in our significance as [one of nature's] works of art'. Human beings themselves are artists, Nietzsche concludes, only insofar as they 'coalesce' with nature as the 'Ur-artist of the world' (p. 52, translation modified).

It is not difficult to see that nature is extravagantly creative, endlessly generating an immense variety of inorganic and organic forms: from crystals and canyons to biological species of the most astonishing variety within which no two individuals are identical – a vast proliferation of material difference. Yet we are likely to take Nietzsche's rhapsodic celebration of nature's creative powers as rhetorical, for we generally believe that art and creativity require conscious agency. Nietzsche's assertion of the nature-as-artist, then, will be read as metaphorical at best and theological at worst, since 'the creativity of nature' seems to imply a divine creator.

Nietzsche (1974[1882/1887]), however, operates in the wake of the 'death of God' and commits himself to tracking down and eliminating all the vestiges of theological thought (pp. 167–9, 279–82). Among these is the ancient and venerable *hylomorphic* model according to which the genesis of entities requires the external imposition of form upon an inert matter. Such is the account of formation in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Plato, and Aristotle; and it continues its grip on the scientific and aesthetic imagination today. Nietzsche anticipates contemporary scientific and philosophical materialists – among them Gilbert Simondon (1992[1964]), Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers (1984[1979]: 7, 9), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987[1980]: 329, 408ff), and Manuel DeLanda (1997a, 1997b) – in rejecting hylomorphism, opting instead for a theory of self-organization. For Nietzsche (2003[1885–8]), matter itself is creative and transformative without external agency, a ceaseless becoming and overcoming that temporarily congeals into forms and beings only to dissolve them back into

the natural flux, an 'eternal self-creating' and 'eternal self-destroying ... monster of force, without beginning, without end' (p. 38). Nietzsche's name for this flux is 'will to power', his effort to formulate a theory of natural causality and effectivity internal to matter and proceeding without any external agency. For Nietzsche (1992c[1887]), 'there is no "being" behind doing, effecting, becoming; the "doer" is only a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything' (p. 481); and there exist only 'dynamic quanta in a relationship of tension with all other dynamic quanta, whose essence consists in their relation to all other quanta' (Nietzsche, 2003[1885–8]: 247).<sup>12</sup> Natural change, then, is the result of intensive forces that generate new configurations and assemblages. As a thoroughgoing naturalist and materialist, Nietzsche draws no fundamental distinctions between inorganic and organic nature, or between nature and culture. The operations of will to power are as evident in the procedures of chemical reaction and bonding as they are in organic growth and competition, artistic creation and interpretation. (Indeed, Nietzsche often polemically extends the term 'interpretation' to cover all natural processes.)<sup>13</sup> For Nietzsche (1992b[1886]: 238, 2003[1885–8]: 39), then, 'the world viewed from inside' is 'will to power and nothing besides', and 'you yourselves are also this will to power — and nothing besides!'

## Dionysus, or The Virtual

The world as will to power is described by Nietzsche (2003[1885–8]: 38) as a '*Dionysian* world', which brings us back to music and to the dichotomy proposed in *The Birth of Tragedy* between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Nietzsche's description of these two modalities as 'art impulses of nature' shows how little they have in common with Kant's distinctions between phenomena and noumena, appearance and thing-in-itself, or with Schopenhauer's distinction between representation and will. Instead, they anticipate a distinction that naturalizes these Schopenhauerian and Kantian oppositions: Gilles Deleuze's distinction between 'the actual' and 'the virtual'.<sup>14</sup> This pair of terms marks the difference, within the flux of nature, between empirical individuals and the forces, powers, differences, and intensities that give rise to them. Deleuze (1994[1968]) writes:

Difference is not diversity. Diversity is given, but difference is that by which the given is given, that by which the given is given as diverse. Difference is not the phenomenon but the noumenon closest to the phenomenon ... Every phenomenon refers to an inequality by which it is conditioned. Every diversity and every change refers to a difference which is its sufficient reason. Everything which happens and everything which appears is correlated with orders of differences: differences of level, temperature, pressure, tension, potential, *difference of intensity* ... Disparity – in other words, difference or intensity (difference of intensity) – is the sufficient reason of all phenomena, the condition of that which appears. (p. 222, emphasis in original)

Deleuze uses Kantian language, here, to express a thoroughly non-Kantian point.<sup>15</sup> It is true, Deleuze argues, that an important distinction must be drawn



between *what appears* and the *conditions for the possibility of this appearance*; but those conditions of possibility are not conceptual or cognitive, as they are for Kant; they are thoroughly material, immanent in nature itself. 'That which appears' (the diversity of the actual, empirical individuals that populate the world of our experience) are the products or manifestations of material intensive 'differences' that operate at the micro-level of physical, chemical, and biological matter but that remain virtual, unapparent at the level of actual, extensive things. This emphasis on the constitutive nature of difference has allowed Deleuze to be linked with theorists of difference such as Saussure, Derrida, Lacan, Irigaray, and Levinas. Yet Deleuze's differences are not linguistic, conceptual, or cultural in origin. Operating beneath the level of representation and signification, these differences subsist in nature itself.

Beneath representation and signification, music and sound manifest this virtuality, which both Deleuze and Nietzsche term 'Dionysian' (Deleuze 1994[1968]: 214). 'This primordial phenomenon of Dionysian art is difficult to grasp', writes Nietzsche (1992a[1872]), 'and there is only one direct way to make it intelligible and grasp it immediately: through the wonderful significance of *musical dissonance*' (p. 141). Music makes audible the dynamic, differential, discordant flux of becoming that precedes and exceeds empirical individuals and the *principium individuationis*. Representing and symbolizing nothing, it presents a play of sonic forces and intensities. 'This [Dionysian] world [of music] has a coloring, a causality, and a velocity quite different from those of the world of the plastic artist and the epic poet', Nietzsche writes (p. 50). Yet it is also the condition of possibility for empirical individuals and the stable forms of the visual and textual arts. The relationship between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, music and the visual and textual arts is not one of opposition but of transcendental conditioning. For just as the virtual world of will to power or difference is manifested in actual entities, so too does the 'inchoate', 'intangible' world of music, for Nietzsche, 'discharge itself in images', 'emit image sparks', manifest itself 'as a specific symbol or example' (pp. 49, 50, 54).

## The Auditory Real

On Nietzsche's account, Greek tragedy is born 'out of the spirit of music'. Its essence lies in the tragic insight that the flux of becoming forms empirical individuals – dramatic poems, the figure of the hero on stage, the stage itself, we spectators – and equally dissolves them back into its cauldron of forces and intensities. Beyond its analysis of classical drama, *The Birth of Tragedy* offers a theory of music and art in general. Nietzsche asks us to forgo talk of representation and signification in favor of an account of heterogeneous forces in complex relations of attraction and repulsion, consistency, and dissolution.

Of course, the world of music has its own forms of representation and signification, its own imaginary and symbolic. Since the late Middle Ages, music has appeared in the form of staff notation, its fluidity arrested into a set of alphabetically-named pitches distributed on five parallel lines. Musical notation

was a form of recording, but a static one, and one that privileged the eye over the ear. Standardized and codified by the 16th century, the musical score is an exemplary instance of the reification characteristic of capitalism, in which *processes* are transformed into exchangeable, saleable *products* and *objects* (see Lukács, 1971[1923]: 83ff). Thrust onto the open market by the decline of feudal patronage, the composer was confronted by the problem of how to commodify the inherently transitory nature of sound and the fluid matter of music. Musical notation arose as a solution to that problem. Unable to capture music itself, the score came to stand in for the musical work, both legally and conceptually. What began as a mnemonic aid for performance – the score – became an autonomous entity that governed performances and to which they were held accountable. This is precisely the Platonist move that both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein warn us against: the pre-post-erous inversion by which the concept ‘leaf’ becomes the cause of actual, particular leaves – or, in the musical case, an abstract, silent entity becomes the cause of actual sonic events (see Nietzsche, 1979[1873]: 83; and Wittgenstein, 1958: 17–18).

Yet, five years after Nietzsche published *The Birth of Tragedy*, Thomas Edison and Charles Cros inaugurated a revolution that subverted this symbolic and imaginary realm. The invention of the phonograph challenged musical notation as a recording apparatus, replacing the mute, static score with a form of recording that restored the aurality and temporality of sound. It captured not an idealized visual representation but actual musical performances. But it did much more than this. For, as Friedrich Kittler (1999[1986]) notes:

The phonograph does not hear as do ears that have been trained immediately to filter voices, words, and sounds out of noise; *it registers acoustic events as such*. Articulateness becomes a second-order exception in a spectrum of noise. (p. 23, emphasis added; cf. Cutler, 1993[1980])

Beyond music, audio recording opened up what John Cage (1961) termed ‘the entire field of sound’ (p. 4), leaving the rarefied world of pitch, interval, and meter for the infinitely broader world of frequency, vibration, and physical time (Kittler, 1999[1986]: 24). Audio recording registers the messy, asignifying noise of the world that, for Kittler, in a heterodox, materialist rendering of Lacan, corresponds to ‘the real’ – the perceptible plenitude of matter that obstinately resists the symbolic and imaginary orders. ‘The real’, Kittler concludes, ‘has the status of phonography’ (p. 16).

On Kittler’s account, Richard Wagner – musical hero of *The Birth of Tragedy* – was the first to affirm this world of noise beyond articulate sound. Exploration of the auditory real – the virtual, Dionysian domain of sound – has marked the entire history of the sonic arts ever since. Sound poetry from Aleksei Kruchenyk and Hugo Ball through Henri Chopin and François Dufrêne withdrew language from representation and signification, shifting it, in poet Steve McCaffery’s (1996) words, ‘from phonic to sonic’. The stuff of sound poetry is precisely what Saussure (1983[1916]) banished from the realm of signification (pp. 116–17), what Kittler (1999[1986]) calls ‘the waste or residue that neither the mirror of

the imaginary nor the grid of the symbolic can catch: the physiological accidents and stochastic order of bodies' (p. 16). Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète* relinquished the traditional apparatus of musical culture – traditional musical instruments, musicians, live performance – in favor of worldly sound recorded onto disk and tape. John Cage even more directly celebrated worldly sound in *4'33"*, the so-called 'silent' composition that invites audiences to perceive environmental noise as an aesthetic field. Cage collapsed the distinction between 'silence' and 'noise' – the dense virtual field that subtends all signal and meaning; and, for the past hundred years, 'noise' has been a constant resource for the sonic arts, from Luigi Russolo's *intonarumori* and Schaeffer's *Étude de Bruits* through Merzbow and Zbigniew Karkowski, whose series of recordings titled *The World as Will* explicitly acknowledges the debt to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche's account of the sonic as a flow of forces and intensities is matched by the composer Edgard Varèse (2004[1936–62]), who discarded the term 'music' in favor of 'organized sound' and described his own compositions as presenting 'the movement of sound-masses, of shifting planes ... moving at different speeds and at different angles' and engaged in relationships of 'penetration and repulsion' (p. 20). Varèse's conception of music anticipated electronic music, which, since its arrival in the 1950s, has worked with nothing but flows of electrons run through filters and modulators that contract, dilate, and otherwise transform them to produce a deeply physical and elemental form of music that belies the epithet 'abstract' often applied to it.

## Sound as an Anonymous Flux

'Music is continuous; only listening is intermittent', remarked John Cage (2004[1982]: 224), paraphrasing Henry David Thoreau. That is, for Cage, sound is an anonymous flux akin to the flows of minerals, biomass, and language examined by Manuel DeLanda in *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (1997b). Making no discrimination on the basis of the sources of these sounds (inorganic, biological, human, technological), Cage conceives this flux as a ceaseless production of heterogeneous sonic matter, the components of which move at different speeds and with different intensities, and involve complex relationships of simultaneity, interference, conflict, concord, and parallelism. This flux precedes and exceeds individual listeners and, indeed, composers, whom Cage came to conceive less as *creators* than as *curators* of this sonic flux.<sup>17</sup> This Cagean conception of music and composition recalls Nietzsche's notion of the creative powers of nature and of the artist as one who coalesces with this flux. In a brief but suggestive passage, Deleuze (1998[1980]) concurs: 'One can ... conceive of a continuous acoustic flow ... that traverses the world and that even encompasses silence', he writes. 'A musician is someone who appropriates something from this flow' (p. 78).

One might object to this notion on the grounds that sound is not an independent entity but a product of human hearing. Were this the case, any analysis of sound would, from the start, be committed to an unbridgeable divide between phenomenal apprehension and noumenal emission. Yet this orthodoxy is

undermined by a number of arguments ably presented by the philosopher Casey O'Callaghan in his recent book *Sounds* (2007), which argues for a sonic realism. Philosophical accounts of perception, O'Callaghan notes, have typically treated vision as the primary sense and objects of vision as paradigmatic objects of sensory perception. Visual experience encounters physical objects with attributes (or properties) such as color, shape, and size. From Descartes and Locke on, it has been customary to distinguish between primary and secondary qualities, the former (for example, size and shape) taken to be qualities objects have independent of observers, the latter (for example, color and taste) qualities that objects have only relative to observers and their perceptual capacities. Invisible, intangible, and ephemeral entities, sounds have little in common with ordinary visual objects and substances. Hence, philosophers have been inclined to regard them as secondary attributes of the objects we see: the sound *of* a bird, the sound *of* an air conditioner by analogy with the color *of* a door or the smell *of* a flower. On this view, then, sounds exist only relative to their apprehension and are, at least partially, products of our minds.

Such is the idealist, phenomenalist conception of sound that has prevailed in philosophy. But once we stop taking vision as paradigmatic and investigate sound itself, a different ontological conception emerges. Visual objects persist through time and survive the alteration of their properties. (The door, for example, remains when it is painted a different color.) By contrast, properties do not survive in this way. (The redness of the door does not survive its repainting.) In this respect, sounds appear to be much more akin to independently existing objects, since they survive changes to their qualities. A sound that begins as a low rumble may become a high-pitched whine, while remaining a single sound. In such an occurrence, the object that produces it (a car, for example) does not lose one sound and gain another. The sound remains what it is throughout, though its sensible qualities change. Sounds have sources, of course; and these are often relatively durable objects. But we can experience a sound without experiencing its source, and the source without the sound. So while sources *generate* or *cause* sounds, sounds are not bound to their sources as properties. Sounds, then, are distinct individuals or particulars like objects.

This is precisely what – albeit in the idealist language of phenomenology – Pierre Schaeffer (2004[1966]) aimed to show in his analysis of the *objet sonore*, the sonorous object, which, he maintained, has a peculiar existence distinct from both its source and the listening subject. The sonorous object, Schaeffer insisted, is not the instrument that produces it, not the medium in or on which it exists, and not the mind of the listener. Sounds are ontological particulars and individuals rather than qualities of objects or subjects. And this is why works of *musique concrète* are not representations – of objects in the world or of worldly sounds – but presentations of sonorous objects. Yet Schaeffer's language of the 'sonorous *objet*' misses the mark. For sounds are peculiarly temporal and durational, tied to the qualities they exhibit over time. This temporal quality is not incidental but definitive, distinguishing, for example, the call of the cardinal from that of the robin, or the spoken words 'proton' and 'protein'. If sounds are particulars or individuals, then, they are so not as static *objects* but as temporal *events*.

The hegemony of the visual treats sounds as anomalous entities that it exiles to the domain of mind-dependent qualities. If we begin with sound, however, a different ontological conception emerges. For sounds support an ontology of events, what Nietzsche calls ‘becomings’ and Deleuze ‘haecceities’. Indeed to begin with sound is to upset the ontology of ‘objects’ and ‘beings’, suggesting that the latter are themselves events and becomings that, however, operate at relatively slow speeds. The priority of sound and music in Nietzsche’s philosophy, then, is not an aesthetic choice but an ontological commitment: the commitment to the primacy of becoming, time, and change.

This materialist theory of sound, then, suggests a way of rethinking the arts in general. Sound is not a world apart, a unique domain of non-signification and non-representation. Rather, sound and the sonic arts are firmly rooted in the material world and the powers, forces, intensities, and becomings of which it is composed. If we proceed from sound, we will be less inclined to think in terms of representation and signification, and to draw distinctions between culture and nature, human and nonhuman, mind and matter, the symbolic and the real, the textual and the physical, the meaningful and the meaningless. Instead, we might begin to treat artistic productions not as complexes of signs or representations but complexes of forces materially inflected by other forces and force-complexes. We might ask of an image or a text not what it *means* or *represents*, but what it *does*, how it *operates*, what changes it effectuates. This is precisely the sort of analysis Deleuze offers in his books on Proust and Kafka, Francis Bacon and cinema. Of a painting, film, or novel, Deleuze writes: ‘It represents nothing, but it produces. It means nothing, but it works’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983[1972]: 109). In a materialist analysis, notes Deleuze, ‘language is no longer defined by what it says, even less by what makes it a signifying thing, but by what causes it to move, to flow, to explode’ (p. 133). Likewise, for Deleuze, ‘images aren’t in our head, in our brain’; rather, ‘things are themselves images ... The brain’s just one image among others. Images are constantly acting and reacting on each other, producing and consuming. There’s no difference at all between *images*, *things*, and *motion*’ (Deleuze, 1995[1976]: 42, emphases in original).<sup>18</sup>

For a theory of signification and representation, the realist conception of sound as an asignifying material flux will prompt the charge of essentialism (see Kim-Cohen, 2009: 12–13, ch. 5). But the charge is misplaced, for essentialism names a transcendent entity immune from change. On the materialist account I have outlined here, sound is thoroughly immanent, differential, and ever in flux. Indeed, thinking about sound in this way provokes us to conceive difference beyond the domain of ‘culture’, signification, and representation, and to see these as particular manifestations of a broader differential field: the field of nature and matter themselves.<sup>19</sup> Only by way of such a materialist, realist account will we be able to theorize the sonic arts, and to raise such a theory to the level of sophistication characteristic of literary theory and theories of the visual arts. Conversely, such a theory of sound enjoins us to abandon the idealist and humanist language of representation and signification that has characterized theoretical discourses on literature and the visual arts over the past half-century, and to reconceive aesthetic production and reception via a materialist model of force, flow, and capture.

## Notes

1. I have in mind the recent work of DeLanda (2002), Harman (2002, 2005), Grant (2006), and Meillassoux (2008[2006]), despite the differences among them.
2. 'There is no such thing as a prediscursive reality ... Every reality is founded and defined by a discourse', remarks Lacan (1998[1972-3]: 32).
3. Derrida's infamous claim 'there is nothing outside the text' is equivocal in this respect. On the one hand, it can (and often has) been read as the Hegelian, idealist claim that the symbolic field encompasses all there is without remainder or residue. Distancing himself from this position, Derrida himself (1986) construes it along more Nietzschean lines. He writes:  

The text is always a field of forces: heterogeneous, differential, open, and so on. That's why deconstructive readings and writings are concerned not only with library books, with discourses, with conceptual and semantic contents. They are not simply analyses of discourse ... They are also effective or active (as one says) interventions, in particular political or institutional interventions that transform contexts without limiting themselves to theoretical or constative utterances even though they must also produce such utterances. (p. 168, see also note 19)
4. For a critique along these lines, see Massumi (2002) and DeLanda (1999).
5. It is worth mentioning another recent study, LaBelle (2006), which, somewhat like Kim-Cohen, attempts to shift sound art discourse away from the naturalistic interpretation toward a discussion of the embodied, relational, contextual, social, and political nature of sound.
6. For a more extended reading of these notions, see Cox (1999).
7. Since the 1970s, Anglo-American philosophers have engaged in a long debate about whether or not, and to what degree, music can be considered a 'representational' art. For an overview of this debate, see Davies (1994) and Ridley (2004: ch. 2).
8. While Kant used the Greek philosophical term *phenomena* interchangeably with the German *Erscheinung* (appearance), and *noumena* interchangeably with the German *Ding an sich* (thing-in-itself), Schopenhauer rejects the Greek pair in favor of the German pair, though his English translators persisted in rendering *Erscheinung* as 'phenomena'. My quotations from Payne's translation are altered accordingly.
9. Schopenhauer (1969[1819]) grants that 'music is the language of feeling and passion' and, at the same time, that it 'is in the highest degree a universal language ... like geometrical figures and numbers' (pp. 259, 262).
10. In what follows, I draw from the reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* I present in Cox (2005).
11. In his preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche (1992a[1872]) writes that the book 'tried laboriously to express by means of Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulas strange and new valuations which were basically at odds with Kant's and Schopenhauer's spirit and taste!' (p. 24).
12. For an extended examination and interpretation of will to power, see Cox (1999: ch. 5).
13. For examples, see Cox (1999: 239ff). Compare Deleuze's extension of the term 'contemplation' to describe the activities of 'not only people and animals, but plants, the earth, and rocks' (Deleuze, 1994[1968]: 74-5; Deleuze and Guattari, 1994[1991]: 212).
14. Deleuze (1994[1968]: 213-14) himself suggests such a connection.
15. Deleuze also retains Kant's distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, though he divests it of the conceptual and metaphysical framework with which Kant invests this distinction. Kant describes his epistemological position as 'transcendental idealism', which aims to discover the conceptual and cognitive



- 'conditions for all possible experience'. By contrast, Deleuze (1994[1968]: 56–7, 1988[1968]: 23) describes his own philosophical position as 'transcendental empiricism', which aims to describe the material 'conditions for real experience'.
16. On noise as a virtual field, see Cox (2009a).
  17. Cage's '4'33" exemplifies this curatorial relationship to sound insofar as it simply provides a temporal and spatial frame in which 'to let sounds be themselves' (Cage, 1961: 10). Compare the remarks of musical producers Kevin Martin and Brian Eno on music and art in the digital age. In the culture of musical remixing, Martin writes, 'neither the artist nor the remixer are "creators" in the traditional sense'; rather both 'act as "filters" for a sort of cultural flow' (quoted in Reynolds, 1998: 280). Similarly, for Eno (1995): 'An artist is now much more seen as a connector of things, a person who scans the enormous field of possible places for artistic attention, and says, What I am going to do is draw your attention to *this* sequence of things' (p. 207, emphasis in original).
  18. Similarly, in his book on Francis Bacon, Deleuze (2003[1981]) writes: 'In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a question of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. For this reason, no art is figurative' (p. 40). This rejection of representation and signification in favor of a materialist analysis of expression and force runs throughout Deleuze's work.
  19. In some rare passages, Derrida (1982a[1968]) suggests just this; and, where he does, he does so by way of Deleuze and Nietzsche (p. 17ff). Derrida's (1982b[1971]) analysis of the performative also suggests that language might be subsumed under a broader theory of force. For the most part, however, Derrida and Derrideans have remained within the analysis of difference and textuality more narrowly defined.

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