

[Ebook free] Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation (Sign, Storage, Transmission)

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David Novak

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David Novak : Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation (Sign, Storage, Transmission) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation (Sign, Storage, Transmission):

8 of 10 people found the following review helpful. The Most Extreme Music in the World By Etienne RPI am an adept of extreme audio practices. From teenage youth to adult age, I went all the way from progressive rock to experimental music to various forms of electronica and to sound art. I explored the universe of sound with an open mind and a taste

for novelty. But when I encountered harsh Noise, also known as Japanoise, I hit a wall. Here was something completely unexpected. There was no precedent to what I experienced, and there was no beyond. Here was a music without beat, drum or rhythm, without tone, tune or pitch. Noise music is exceedingly difficult to describe. Its components - extreme volume static, amp distortion, Larsen effects, audio feedback, industrial hissing and screeching, only give an idea of the bits and pieces that enter its composition, but their description cannot convey the impression made on the auditor. Here I have to borrow the words of David Novak, an ethnographer and long-time observant of the Noise scene, listening to a piece by Merzbow. "The track begins with a one-second blast of sound, which shifts sharply downward in pitch before abruptly cutting out, as if taking a breath before releasing the long, harsh, continuous scream of Noise that follows. Sounds are split between the left and right speakers, creating two separate but interrelated layers of texture; other sounds are quickly panned between the two speakers to create a sense of movement in the flat landscape of the stereo field. Filters sweep across the distorted sound field, rippling through a stream of harsh frequencies. Beneath these timbral changes, there is another loop of sound, which repeats a two-second fragment of muted static. The distorted feedback begins to break up as some amplifier in the chain reaches the limit of its capacity. A microphone feedback is introduced in the background, and the sound begins to short out as a thin hissing sound momentarily fills both channels. A new loop lurches into both channels at once, emitting a spitting chatter for two seconds and then submerging into a low hum. A vocal sound, like a moan, appears underneath the layers of feedback; it is unclear to me whether this is actually the sound of a human voice or some resonance created in the feedback process, or by a filter, or another pedal. Suddenly the Noise just ends, leaving me suspended in the buzzing stillness. A final burst blasts through the system, as if I've been unplugged from myself." If Noise music is difficult to describe (you have to hear it to believe it), Noise performances make for vivid descriptions. Here again, are some excerpts from David Novak's *Japanoise*. "The performance seems to emerge from within the technical arrangement of the gear: sounds just begin to emanate from the pile as Greenwood (the Noise musician) reaches around, plugging things in and turning knobs. He straps on a rubber military gas mask containing microphones, concealing his face entirely, and attaches other electronic pieces onto his body. He dashes back and forth in front of the equipment he has amassed in the center of the floor, turning on switches, pushing buttons, pulling cords out of one area and pushing them into another, pulling things apart. Occasionally he bends forward at the waist, drops to his knees, reels backward, or falls to the floor in front of the heap of gear, a shout becoming audible from inside the mask. Holding onto some piece of the assemblage, Greenwood jerks his body back and forth violently in front of his machines. It is unclear how the machines function--which pieces are altering the sound, which are not, and which are disconnected or never worked at all. As the performance builds, sections of the pile of gear collapse or are pulled out and thrown to the side of the stage. Somehow, this dismantling process doesn't seem deliberate--though it must be--as he smashes things together, punching parts, grabbing cords, and moving the telephone receiver around in a buzzing feedback loop." The origins of Japanoise are shrouded in obscurity and have since become the stuff of legend. Hijokaidan, a Kyoto group, became infamous for their early performances during which they augmented their Noise by smashing up stage equipment, shattering floorboards and attacking the audience with fire extinguishers. Yamataka Eye, another performer, was also known for his extreme practices. During one performance, he cut his leg open with a chainsaw and terrorized the audience with flying chunks of metal. In the most infamous episode, in 1985, Eye destroyed a Tokyo club by driving an abandoned backhoe through the room. Enticed by rumors of blood and auto-destruction, audiences grew in number and in determination to be assaulted by sound. Artist profiles and mythologized tales of performances were disseminated in fanzines while cassette tapes documenting live recordings and bedroom studio experiments were bartered across oceans. These artifacts were quickly consumed by like-minded listeners in America, Europe and elsewhere, prompting the moniker "Japanoise." North American tours, especially by Merzbow and Masonna in the mid-1990s, allowed select fans to experience Japanese Noise live and relate legendary stories for those who missed the chance. In the following decade, videos of Noise concerts began to circulate on the internet, and materials as well as information about the genre and its key performers began widely available. As live Noise became extinct, discourse began to proliferate on the dead body of sounds, including academic treatises and movie documentaries. As other late converts, I encountered Japanoise in a Japanese context, and for me there was no question that Noise was a Japanese genre. Of course, I knew it had branched into other countries and cultures - like many devoted fans, I acquired the "US-Japan Noise Treaty" CD, and I heard of extreme sounding practices coming from post-soviet Russia. Through Youtube videos and the *Sub Rosa* anthology, I also discovered Chinese Noise, which bears a direct influence from Japan's--one founding member of Torturing Nurse, one of my favorite act on the Shanghaiese avant-garde scene, is from Japan. But what I discovered in Novak's book is that "Japanoise" was in fact an American invention, which became Japanese through a familiar process of *gyaku-yunyu* or "reverse importation". Japanoise surfaced in North America from within a larger framework of reception that included not just Noise but "noisy" Japanese music. Many recordings picked up by North American audiences in the 1980s were by punk, hard rock, and hardcore groups from the Kansai region, especially Kyoto and Osaka. Overseas networks of independent music distribution began to magnify some aspects of the local underground scene. The invention of the term Japanoise further supported the North American belief that the distant Japanese Noise scene was bigger, more popular, and more definitive of the genre. Learning that they had

become "big in America", Japanese artists reacted differently. Some, such as the underground rock band The Boredoms, rejected the Noise moniker and went on to produce progressive rock or "puro-gure". Others, such as Yamataka Eye, emphasized the avant-garde aspect of their production and accented the defining features of the genre. Yet others went on unaffected by the noise surrounding them, continuing their dogged pursuit of antisocial, antihistorical, anti musical obscurity. There may be cultural explanations for Japanese. It is said that the Japanese brain is wired differently, and that Japanese speakers process certain sounds such as insect noises using the left brain, which is also the dominant language hemisphere of the brain, whereas most humans use the right brain, which also serves to interpret music. And indeed, the sound of an insect is as much appreciated as the song of a bird, and the Japanese language has many words (gitaigo: mimetic words) to describe sounds from nature. On a hot summer evening, the roar of thousands of cicadas screeching together can be as deafening as a steaming machine. Similarly, the crystal echo of a glass bell softly ringed by a soft breeze brings a sense of freshness in hot summer days. Japanese traditional music also comes into a category of its own. Gagaku, the imperial court orchestral music, is strangely dissonant and may sound like noise to the newcomer. Many sounds from Japanese traditional instruments fall outside the realm of music: the sharp clap of the bachi plucking the shamisen's cords; the wind-like character of the shakuhachi flute; the atonal sounds of drums, gongs and clappers; etc. But again, Japanese comes into a different category, closer to the machinery sounds of industrial Japan than to the sounds from nature or musical expressions. If there is a cultural explanation to be made, it is not by invoking the theories of Japanese distinctiveness or nihonjinron, but rather the idiosyncrasies of the Kansai region and especially from the city of Osaka, where many Noise bands originated. As David Novak notes, "Osaka's citizens have historically been recognized within Japan for their outspoken aggressiveness, direct local language, hedonistic enjoyment of leisure, and outrageous sense of humor. Given this outgoing expressive character, it was not surprising that extreme, intensively performative musical styles were associated with the city." Japanese also finds its origins in the otaku culture of people obsessed with a narrow field of subculture, and who go to great lengths to feed their obsessive interest with all the materials and information they can get. Once he distances himself from the group, the individualist in Japan lives in a self-centered world and maintains only minimal contacts with his peers. Although there are many bands in Japanese, the most striking performances are made by solo performers like Masonna or Otomo Yoshihide. Noisicians also sometimes turn their back to the public, or operate from behind a screen. Nobody can be more distant from the rockstar idol than the Japanese noisician, who avoids media contacts and disseminates his sound recordings through audio cassettes or CDRs that don't enter commercial circuits. Another way to "explain" Japanese is to use the categories of art history and avant-garde aesthetics. As Novak notes, "in the annals of musical history, from Stravinsky, to jazz, to rock, to rap, new musical forms have always first been heard as noise." Modern artists have often taken the exact opposite of accepted norms and conventions, and music is no exception. Claiming that "we don't care about music anyway" (as does the title of a French documentary about the Japanese avant-garde scene) is a sure way to gain entrance into the annals of music history. The music of "no music" only reproduces the "anti-art" slogan of the Dadaists or of Marcel Duchamp, who rejected cultural conformity and devised the opposite of established art forms. And indeed, noise music finds its ancestry in the futurist avant-garde of the early twentieth century, when artists recorded or transcribed the sound and fury of war and industry. At this point, cultural critics often make a reference to Jacques Attali's book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. For the French public intellectual, noise can prophesy social futures and become an oracle of cultural change: "what is noise to the old order is harmony to the new." Social change implies noise: the clamors of revolutions, the hubbub of modern cities, the mechanical blast of industry, are the symphony that accompanies the advancement of mankind. Noise is the foundation of human expression before it becomes absorbed in the forms of cultural production. It is the irreducible element that will forever resist the recuperation by the system of late capitalism. But, although Attali's essay remains popular in Japan, it cannot account for the emergence of Noise as a form of expression. Japanese is not a sound residue or a white noise that exists outside of technological mediation. It circulates along various transnational routes and feeds back into existing musical practices. David Novak's aim in writing *Japanese* is not to offer a history of the genre. As a cultural practice, Noise escapes history. It cultivates anonymity and obscurity, and obfuscates its inscription in stable, unbending supports. Groups frequently change name and lineup, labels eschew publicity, and artists reject technological advances such as computers or digital equipment. Even by the early 2010, many well-known Japanese Noisicians do not yet have websites, and only a handful of Japanese labels have developed web-based sales portals. Noisicians' rejection of digital technology is illustrated by the anachronistic revival of the audiocassette, which has become the token of a mail-based exchange system. In relying on this old media, noisicians are reconnecting with the origins of the Noise culture, antedating the birth of the internet. They are returning Noise to its marginal position at the edge of circulation. For Novak, the figures of the circuit, of the feedback loop, and of the saturated distortion not only define the sonic features of Noise as a musical form. They constitute the theoretical apparatus of his book, and allow him to expose the genre in the same terms that define the sound processes used by Noisicians. Beyond Japanese, the model offered by David Novak can be used to outline a new theory of culture in the global age. Global culture is formed in circulation through feedback, amplified reception, and distorted re-emission. Its fragmented publics are connected through productive mistranslations and biased

perceptions. Like noise in information theory, cultural products that circulate through global channels can be very loud, but they do not convey a useful signal.⁶ of 10 people found the following review helpful. Kind of disappointing

By Kevin J. O'Conner

Having followed the Japanese noise scene pretty closely from 1995 to around 1998, including seeing Merzbow and Masonna live in Seattle in 1996, I was pretty excited to see that someone had written a book about the subject. Unfortunately, from my perspective, this book is too academic; reading it thus becomes kind of a slog at times. Context is great, but there's not enough about the main figures involved. In some cases, anecdotes that would have made the book's narrative more interesting are relegated to the footnotes. I routinely found myself skipping pages in search of the next paragraph where the "story" continued, since the more academic passages seemed so dry. It's not a bad book, but, considering the subject matter, could have been much more dynamic.⁵

of 5 people found the following review helpful. Japanese is excellent

By twinkle

Japanese: Music at the Edge of Circulation by David Novak is excellent. It is the perfect blending of theory with specific field reports. Hence both reflective and informative. Anyone interested in how culture echoes the general social conditions of circulation will benefit from this fine book. As will those involved in transcendental black metal, experimental electronica, psychoacoustic drone and difficult noise music.

Noise, an underground music made through an amalgam of feedback, distortion, and electronic effects, first emerged as a genre in the 1980s, circulating on cassette tapes traded between fans in Japan, Europe, and North America. With its cultivated obscurity, ear-shattering sound, and over-the-top performances, Noise has captured the imagination of a small but passionate transnational audience. For its scattered listeners, Noise always seems to be new and to come from somewhere else: in North America, it was called "Japanese." But does Noise really belong to Japan? Is it even music at all? And why has Noise become such a compelling metaphor for the complexities of globalization and participatory media at the turn of the millennium?

In Japanese, David Novak draws on more than a decade of research in Japan and the United States to trace the "cultural feedback" that generates and sustains Noise. He provides a rich ethnographic account of live performances, the circulation of recordings, and the lives and creative practices of musicians and listeners. He explores the technologies of Noise and the productive distortions of its networks. Capturing the textures of feedback—its sonic and cultural layers and vibrations—Novak describes musical circulation through sound and listening, recording and performance, international exchange, and the social interpretations of media.

"David Novak goes inside the Noise scene and presents an astounding perspective: historically astute, inspired, and completely shell-shocked."