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CAN SOUND BE NOISE?

SOME THOUGHTS ON POP MUSIC, RESISTANCE AND
NATIONALISM

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The motto *Krisis* chose for its 30th birthday is, with a playful reference to Wittgenstein, ‘waarover men niet spreken kan, daarover moet men zingen’. Following this wonderful idea to creatively investigate connections between music and thinking in the course of a celebration, I nevertheless would like to add a question mark after the night’s motto.

In my contribution to the reflections on entanglements of philosophy and music, or the music of philosophy, I propose (and will not answer) the question of sound as ‘noise’. Can sound be ‘noise’? I will explore the issue of im/possible sonic resistance by looking at a case of music that does indeed try to break with a silence (the ‘unspeakable’) yet not by *singing* about it, but rather with *sound* as a means of subversion. To make it more concrete: the example I will give for exploring the issue of sound as noise and resistance is West Germany in the late 1960’s.

For an understanding of the concrete resistance at hand, it is essential to know (at least) two specific contexts: the denazification project of the western Allies in post-war Germany has proved to be rather unsuccessful, many key positions in society, like teachers and judges, were still (or again) occupied by former Nazi leaders; generally speaking history and

particularly the past war, was left unmentioned, a society mostly dominated by silence. In terms of popular music two paradigms were prevalent: the sound of light-hearted, inoffensive German Schlager music on the one hand and (often rather poor) imitations of Anglo-American genres like Rock’n’Roll in the fifties and UK Beat music in the sixties on the other. Think for instance of Peter Kraus as the ‘German Elvis’ and The Lords as the ‘German Beatles’.

Against this backdrop different groups of people and musicians felt increasingly dissatisfied with the folk’s persistent refusal to address the nation’s past and with the generic constraints of Anglo-American popular music structures. In different places all over Germany they started to explore the possibility of making music and use sound as a means of expressing their discontent with the contemporary social conditions in terms of silencing the past and ignoring the fact that the nation was still partly run by Nazis. John Weinzierl, founder of the band Amon Düül II explains: ‘We didn’t have the guns or tools to chase (the old Nazis) away. But we could make music and draw (an) audience; we could draw more people with the same understanding, the same desires’¹. Simultaneously, the limitations of Anglophone pop music were perceived as highly constrictive. I quote Irmin Schmidt (of the band CAN): ‘The point was, that here in Germany the dominant belief was that one has to play like the English or the Americans in order to be taken seriously as a Rock-, Pop-, or Beat musician. When we started out, the critics said: ‘they cannot play properly’. We said: right! We don’t want to play like the English or the Americans. We also don’t destroy structures, we just create our own.’² The intended resistance was therefore a double one: they wanted to subvert a silenced Germany with the means of sound, and simultaneously transgress the restricted understanding of an Anglo-American dominated concept of pop music. John Weinzierl sums it up as follows: ‘We tried very hard not to be Anglophonic and not to be German’.

But what is meant by ‘create new structures’? In musical terms, they experimented with sounds, with creative uses of traditional – and inventions of new (electronic) – instruments such as synthesisers or objects that would not be regarded as musical instruments in the narrower sense. They refused to follow traditional pop musical structures like the sec-

tional form of verse and chorus and the common length of a song of, say, three minutes. Their songs could be ten, twenty minutes long; even one entire side of an LP could consist of one single song. Many of their experiments were based on improvisation and chance, and hence the songs could differ with every performance. Finally, many musicians would explore the margins of music, sound and literal noise.

Before proceeding with elaborating on the success of their anti-nationalist project, I want to take a step back and quickly question the very possibility of resistance in the first place. Therefore I would like to briefly introduce some ideas of French philosopher Michel Serres about 'noise'. Serres refers to resistance as noise and describes it as chaos, as disturbing the order but therefore also as the source of the new. ('noise is always there to invent a new music and new harmonies'³). When Serres refers to a new music he speaks in metaphorical terms, but since I am interested in the possibility of sound as a medium of resistance, his take on noise is very interesting. According to Serres, noise is the unpredictable element that constantly destabilizes a system; it interrupts and corrupts it. But because noise is part of communication, it can never be eliminated from the system entirely⁴. Since noise (resistance) is an integral part of any working system, in fact a necessary element, Serres concludes that dysfunctioning is essential for functioning and that the system actually only works because it does not, as he phrases it. So one could say that noise is an inherent part of that, which it aims to resist.

After briefly sketching the complexity of the (im)possibility (and simultaneous necessity) of noise (resistance) for, against and within a system, I would like to turn back to my music example. The aware reader may have noticed that the musical genre I have been writing about is 'Krautrock', a genre that literally experimented with noise and the constraints of what was traditionally considered to be (good) music. The label 'Kraut' is an invention of the British music press, and of course refers back to the expletive 'Krauts' for German soldiers in the Second World War. Per definition the genre labelling therefore links the music to the nation of its origin: Germany. This illustrates how the music of Krautrock released during its most productive years (roughly 1968-1974) from the very beginning was closely associated with Germany and German-ness, yet mostly out-

side of Germany itself. The strong, monotonous rhythm of a band like CAN was considered, and is often described as 'very German'. Many of the bands combined under the Kraut umbrella became in fact soon successful in Britain or elsewhere, but often remained as underground subculture at home. Particularly due to their international success (and the lack of a domestic break through), Krautrock became internationally known as the most and, only 'original', German genre in pop music (well, maybe with the exception of Schlager). So the Kraut musicians started out objecting to Germany and ended up as icons of German-ness.

Now the question if sound can be noise and therefore a medium of resistance remains unanswered. Is any attempt to disturb a system doomed to end up supporting it? Will every initiative to overcome nationalism automatically result in reinforcing that which it aimed to oppose? And is music a medium that is capable of functioning as resistance? It is understood that within the scope of this text, it is impossible to consider all aspects of the issues at hand. But in order to approach these questions in a more tangible way, I suggest to explore a concrete example of sonic resistance. Therefore I will discuss the song 'Soup' by CAN.

The band CAN formed in 1968 in Cologne, West Germany, and has become known as one of the most influential Kraut rock bands (Joy Division, David Bowie and Sonic Youth are just a few to name CAN as a major influence on their music). This is mostly due to their unique way of transcending the contemporary mainstream and incorporating minimalist and world music elements into their experimental music. Their 'instant compositions' as co-founder Holger Czukay calls their improvisation-based avant-garde-sounding music, are heavily dependent on a monotonous and driven rhythm (created by renowned drummer Jaki Liebezeit) as well as an unconventional sound. While trying to explore new musical structures, they were inspired, amongst others, by Asian and African music, although the band is eager to clarify that they did not try to 'imitate' those styles, but rather to treat them with great respect and acknowledge the distance they actually had from them. Irmin Schmidt explains: '(...) using ethnic music we are not bringing it home like a tourist. We just make clear that we use it but with a distance and the irony because it's irreproachable (...) We just use it with a great respect and the respect

means to respect the distance you have to it.’ And ‘we are not born in the jungle of Borneo and we are not born somewhere in Asia or in Africa. We are German.’ (...) ‘With all the consciousness and all the memory and all the knowledge that we were born in a country like Germany where the whole cultural development had been cut with the Nazi time and the whole tradition had been destroyed, like the towns, culture was destroyed and you had to start with something totally different. So we had to start from somewhere else so our music was maybe the first German music which truly referred to our situation – born in a field of ruins.’⁵ Although CAN’s music contains vocals, they consider themselves to have been an instrumental group. The lyrics were mostly ‘associations rather than straight storytelling’ and singer Damo Suzuki ‘has his own kind of strange personal Dada language (...) the singer’s voice was used as another instrument and not to tell you a story and get a message to the people via lyrics.’

So explicitly being rooted in a post-war German context CAN incorporate international influences without adapting to the Anglo-American standards of pop music. They refuse to tell a linear story, musically and lyrically. CAN’s narration of German-ness is contrapuntal; they sonically deconstruct Anglo-American pop music traditions, a lineal German-ness and even their own music. Their third studio album, released in 1972, is called *Ege Bamyasi*, a reference to the influence of Turkish musical elements on their sound. The album (like all the other ones) is not a coherent piece of music; it is rather a fractured, multifaceted product that repeatedly contradicts its own rules. The song ‘Soup’ is a fine and telling example. It is the fifth on the album, the second song on the B-side of the LP as it was originally released. In its full version the song is 10:25 minutes long and marks a radical break in the flow of *Ege Bamyasi*. Without wanting to imply that the preceding songs form a homogeneous entity, it is nevertheless this song which most radically ruptures the album’s fragile consistency. ‘Soup’ begins with what sounds like fizzling sounds and a soft drum rhythm before incomprehensible vocals fade in and shape a fuzzy intro of 1:30 minutes length, before the song moves into its second phase, more resembling a ‘traditional’ rock song including guitars, drums, bass, vocals and electronic sounds. Another two minutes into the song most instruments fade out and only the rhythm section and spherical synthe-

siser sounds are audible, accelerating until a hysterical ‘heartbeat’ and hyperventilating ‘breath’ seem to be left, a sonic state of panic that finally tumbles and collapses in the exact middle of the song. A moment of silence follows before the song breaks out into a monstrous, disturbing noise accompanied by moaning vocals (transforming into gibberish sounds) by Suzuki, continued by a few minutes of what seems to be pure, unstructured, un-rhythmic electronic noise, at times resembling screams of fear, pain or panic. At 7:25, so two-thirds into the song (just like ‘Soup’ is two-thirds into the album), a silence appears, again, then filled by a siren (or chainsaw?)-resembling sound leading into a dark explosive noise (again, gibberish vocals). Slowly the song seems to be re-build (drum beats like hammer strokes), it is speeding up until resulting in what sounds like glass breaking- the song reaches another moment of radical fracture, followed by seconds of silence. Finally, partly exotic sounding instruments are reintroduced without a clear structure, rather chaotic noises and cryptic gibberish sounds, intonated as if telling a story or energetic preaching, but without comprehensible content. Shortly before the ending synthesizer sounds distantly resemble the sounds of a distorted (church?) organ and finally a few seconds before the end the song seems to ‘be dropped’ yet again (marked by singular drum beat) and finally completed with a sonic punch line and a concluding drum/high-hat beat fanfare.

The song clearly breaks with Anglo-American pop musical structures and at times seems to resemble literal noise more than actual music. It sounds like an outcry, at times desperate and angry, yet always energetic in its rhythm. When thinking back to Serres’s comments about noise and its necessity for a system to function, a short investigation into the ‘journey’ of CAN’s music is insightful. At first sight, the fact that Krautrock became ‘the most German genre of all’, per definition German and therefore obviously failed at its attempt to be ‘not German’. But, when taking a closer look at the aftermath and the bigger picture, things look different. It is pretty unanimously declared that Krautrock as a genre was pioneering and therefore became, as mentioned before, profoundly influential on modern music, including German and international pop music. The fact that CAN is named as inspiration by bands like Talk Talk and Brian Eno, serves as an indication of having succeeded in one way at least: Krautrock may not have overcome German-ness, but it has succeeded in (partly)

changing popular music structures; its innovative ideas travelled worldwide and can still be traced in many of today's (Anglo-American!) productions. Following the Kraut's traces of influence a bit further, their noise in the system of international pop music actually travelled far and finally returned back to Germany. Sonic Youth singer Thurston Moore declares that 'CAN were our clarion call, our initiation to our future'⁶. Sonic Youth, in turn, are often referred to as influence on younger, German, bands. Tocotronic for example, a contemporary rock band from Hamburg, repeatedly name them as one of their major inspirations. In 2005 Tocotronic release a single called 'Aber hier leben, nein Danke!' ('But living here, no thank you'), which is a deliberate reaction against a new popular German nationalism emerging in the first half of the 2000's. The song is a rock song, heavily monotonous and repetitive in its sound and rhythm (both the Krautrock trace of monotonic beat, repetitive loops and experiments with song structures as well as Sonic Youth's sound are evident). Tocotronic's intention with 'Aber hier leben, nein Danke!' is in fact very similar to that of the Krautrockers: they want to express their discontent with ongoing silencing of the German war crimes and a celebration of a new positive self-confidence (a novel light-hearted happy-go-lucky German-ness was frequently promoted during the early 2000's), by means of music. It seems like Kraut has come a long way back to its origin – sound experiments against nationalism.

Now finally the question if sound can be noise is admittedly still not sufficiently answered. Yet, after looking into concrete manifestations of sound intended as resistance, and so in Serres's terms as noise, within different systems, (pop music and nationalism), an answer seems to be postponing itself. It should probably focus on the result of resistance, the effects it brought about – did the sound of Krautrock break with the silence in Germany regarding the recent war history? Did it create new musical structures? But then again, it is inherent in Serres's concept of noise that its effects are unpredictable. Therefore a clearly intended resistance that fully succeeds in its objectives may not be qualified as noise because it would in fact lack the element of chaos. Therefore, in order to decrease the presupposed definitiveness as implied in my original question 'CAN sound be noise?', I suggest to rephrase it in a way that the question itself

leaves more space for the unpredictable, chaotic ways in which sound may travel, and end with the question 'CAN sound *become* noise?'.

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¹ *Krautrock: The Rebirth of Germany*. Dir: Ben Whalley, 2009.

² *ibid.*

³ Michel Serres, Lawrence R. Schehr. 'Noise'. *SubStance*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Issue 40: Determinism (1983), University of Wisconsin Press. p. 58

⁴ Michel Serres. *The Parasite*. Trans. Lawrence R. Schehr. John Hopkins University Press, 1982. p. 12.

⁵ Interview with Irmin Schmidt by Chris Hollow. *Sand Pebbles' fanzine*, 2004: (<http://www.brella.org/sandpebbles/Can.htm>).

⁶ Thurston Moore in: *CAN – The Documentary*. Dir: Rudi Dolezal, Hannes Rossacher, 1999.