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Noise, neoliberalism and Iain Sinclair

Martin, N.

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Introduction: noises off

It is said, that when living in Amsterdam, the French philosopher René Descartes, cherished his ignorance of the Dutch language because it meant that his meditations would not be disturbed by the prattle of his fellow citizens. Although probably apocryphal, it is an anecdote which speaks directly to the relationship between noise, urban space and the construction of subjectivity explored in this thesis.¹ In refusing to learn the language of his neighbours, the anecdote suggests, Descartes created the space for philosophy: by turning up the noise of the world he found the silence necessary for reflection. And, if this anecdote has legs, it is because that gesture so precisely mimics the dynamics of Descartes' most enduring philosophical creation: *res cogitans*, a subject that knows that it exists because, even if all else is error and confusion, it cannot doubt the evidence of its own thought. This Cartesian cogito whose self-assurance can be achieved only through the reduction of the world to noise functions as a kind of necessary double to the subject which is central to this project - a subject which is articulated through, rather than against, the demon to which communication theory gives the term noise. Where Descartes' demon produces a self-certain subject through a totalizing gesture which gains all by apparently ceding all, the "demon" or "prosopopeia of noise" (Serres, *Hermes* 67, 126) gives rise to a subject constantly formed and re-formed in the recognition of noise as a source of difference and non-identity.

In this thesis I will locate the operation of this subject within the work of Iain Sinclair, a British writer and film-maker, who has, in the past forty years, established himself as both a critical commentator on the transformation of London from a post-imperial metropolis to a node within a neoliberal global economy, and, more generally on the paradoxical place of the city within the late capitalist-world as simultaneously as site

¹ The anecdote closely echoes the sentiments expressed in Descartes' letter to "Balzac" dated 5 May 1631: "You must also excuse my enthusiasm if I invite you to choose Amsterdam as your retreat . . . I take a walk each day among the bustle of the crowd with as much freedom and repose as you could obtain in your leafy groves, and I pay no more attention to the people that I meet than I would to the trees in your woods or the animals that browse there. The bustle of the city no more disturbs my daydreams than does the ripple of a stream" (Descartes *Writings* 31).

of aggregation and dissolution, attraction and repulsion. Sinclair's work I will argue, illustrates and explores a contradiction within classical liberal thought on the constitution of the subject which can be productively formulated in terms suggested by the concept of noise as it emerges from communication theory. Just as the Cartesian subject gains all by apparently ceding all, its political incarnation in the autonomous individual of liberal theory exists in a doubled relationship to the demon of noise. Noise, as that which interferes with and restricts the free circulation of information, is a simple evil which should be eliminated from any system to improve its efficiency. And yet, just as *res cogitans* can call itself into being only by imagining a world of noise in which it alone constitutes signal, so liberalism acknowledges the critical function of noise in the production of value, for example, in the idea of a market mechanism which manages to generate order out of a chaotic situation without recourse to any external, or sovereign authority.

Insofar as noise constitutes the necessary excess or waste, without which a system, whether linguistic or economic, will not function, Sinclair's work is "noisy" in a number of ways which reflect and reflect upon this contradiction. He is, for example, particularly attentive to the importance of the "unresolved" as it manifests itself in the psychological and political geography of the city, and particularly its edgelands, while his neo-modernist poetics exploit the resources of noise in a number of ways at the level of technique. But more generally Sinclair's work is noisy insofar as it is distinguished by its consciousness of its own parasitic relationship to the wider economies it critiques; it is acutely aware of its complicity in that which it denounces, and that its celebration of waste in itself constitutes the kind of excess necessary for the functioning of the neoliberal economy. In this it reflects Sinclair's ambiguous political position apothegmatically described in the title of an article by Ben Watson: "Iain Sinclair: Revolutionary Novelist or Revolting Nihilist?". To which the short answer, to be expanded below is "neither nor". As a member of the counter-culture generation Sinclair's work shows disillusionment with the possibility of the revolutionary transformation of society which Brian Baker suggests is typical of the post-68 generation as a whole (2-3) but it does not embrace the postmodernist relativism adopted by other members of that generation which Watson, as a Socialist Worker, dismisses as nihilism. Rather Sinclair's work is constituted through that contradiction, subscribing, for example to an idea of cultural production as a form of

cultural capital familiar from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and yet maintaining a Romantic idea of the avant-garde artist as a form of compulsive producer whose production can never be reduced to the calculus of self-interest.

This study, then, does not aspire to present a comprehensive account of Sinclair's work. In addition to Robert Bond's (2005) book-length, Adorno-inspired reading of Sinclair's earlier works, there are more recent and more comprehensive guides to his oeuvre by Robert Sheppard and Brian Baker, both published in 2007. Rather, through a reading of key texts, it explores Sinclair's work in relation to liberalism's contradictory investments in economies of noise. It is Sinclair's engagement with this contradiction, I argue, that proves his most valuable critical tool in thinking the paradoxical relations of space and representation in the globalised context of the late-capitalist city. After further developing the principles of noisy reading in a chapter which proceeds from an account of noise theory to consider the noisy aspects of some of the theorists invoked elsewhere in the thesis, I turn in Chapter 2 to an examination of the changing significance of psychogeography as it makes its passage from Paris to London, and from a liberal to a neoliberal context. In the third chapter I look at the ways Sinclair's long poem *Lud Heat* (1975) problematises the notion of an interpretative community by refusing the economy of metaphor thereby demonstrating Sinclair's understanding of communication as a form of risk taking. In the fourth chapter I examine the noise of form in narrative through a reading of Sinclair's deployment of mode and narrative in his satire of Thatcherism in *Downriver* (1991). Chapter five examines the critical place of the road as simultaneously a conduit and an obstacle within Sinclair's engagements with neoliberalism through accounts of his *London Orbital* (2001) project and his exploration of the Great North Road in *Edge of the Orison* (2005). I conclude with a brief account of the recurrence of the figures of noise within Sinclair's most recent work, *Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project* which was published in July 2011.

To briefly rehearse the relationship between space and noise explored below, it is enough here to note simply that where Descartes' subject is articulated against a space - *res extensa* - which is objective, independent and above all, empty, the noisy subject is generated through its recognition of the markers of inclusion and exclusion, identity

and difference within noise, and as such inhabits a space which is fundamentally *relational*. In this project, that post-Cartesian spatiality will be charted through an appeal to the ways in which noise works to locate a subject in a field of difference: the principle, that is, that what is understood as signal and what is understood as noise, locates a subject with respect to a particular communication system or community.

That principle receives one of its most familiar articulations in formalist accounts of noise as the marker of “literary” over purely instrumental language use. Literature as “organized violence committed on ordinary speech” (Jakobson, qtd. Erlich 219), or the conscious deployment of ambiguity and equivocation in order to privilege connotative over denotative meaning has been examined by amongst others, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Schlovsky and Jurij Lotman and informs such concepts as defamiliarization and the alienation effect. Lotman gives it one of its most ambitious formulations when he writes that art is Art because, like life, it “is capable of transforming noise into information”, because, uniquely “[i]t complicates its own structure owing to its correlation with its environment (in all other systems the clash with the environment can only lead to the fade-out of information)” (75). Some years later William Paulson further elaborated this meta-linguistic thesis to argue for literature as “the noise of culture” (1988). For Paulson literature as a “noisy channel” is a marginal activity in a communicative economy dominated by instrumental forms of language use, and, as such, “creates meaning by putting meaning in jeopardy” (“Literature, Complexity, Interdisciplinarity” 269). In a move which, as we will see, anticipates Jacques Rancière’s formulation of the political, Paulson effectively argues that “[b]y perturbing existing systems of meaning [noise] enables the creation of new ideas and ultimately new domains of knowledge” (“Literature, Complexity, Interdisciplinarity” 269).

Sinclair’s title “*flesh eggs & scalp metal*” (given first to a volume of poetry in 1983 and then recycled for a 1989 poetry collection) is exemplary in both these senses. The noisy transformation of the familiar sign “fresh eggs and scrap metal” precisely identifies Sinclair’s topographic concern with the hybridity of edgelands: with spaces that are neither rural nor urban, country nor city, agricultural nor industrial. Simultaneously it invokes his thematic concern with marginal economies and with poetry as a marginal economy concerned with the production of value from waste,

while it suggests too the place of small-press poetry production within a self-sustaining cottage economy in which reader and producer are as interchangeable as chicken and egg. Noise as organized violence here works to locate Sinclair's subject with the precision of a geotag. However, the operation of noise within Sinclair's text is not restricted to the opacity of his neo-modernist lyric, nor that "hyperbolic celerity, that over-the-top, speed-freak aphoristic annotation" which Julian Wolfreys suggests constitutes a form of readerly provocation (*Writing London Vol 2* 163). Beyond its tactical deployment for aesthetic ends, the noise of Sinclair's text works to problematise the space of criticism itself, for, as Wolfreys notes,

Iain Sinclair's texts cannot be read, they are unreadable in a very real way, which has nothing to do with the language, syntax, the grammar or any other formal element. They are unreadable inasmuch as everything that is to be said already finds itself on the surface of the text. Informed by a belief that poesis is also always a praxis, and that his writing is always capable of opening itself to the multiple voicings of the city's historical and cultural others. (*Writing London Vol 2* 162)

Sinclair's texts, in other words, resist their theorisation not simply in their imprecations against "wankers spouting Baudrillard, Derrida, flannel about flâneurs" (Sinclair, *Dining on Stones* 87) but because of their disruption of the notional space which underpins a critical practice predicated on the objectification of the text. Confronted by a text which has foreclosed the space of critical manoeuvre, Wolfreys suggests, the reader encounters the problem of noise in its purest form: that of simple redundancy. To attempt to write about Sinclair, Wolfreys suggests, is to

fall into habits of reiteration that, in their excessiveness, are doomed merely to express what Sinclair has already expressed, and by which process he has already forestalled and resisted any act of critical appropriation, however sympathetic to his project of creating a London that is, itself, in its excessive play of memory's traces, a site of resistance. (*Writing London Vol 2* 161)

Confronted with that threatened redundancy it is instructive at the outset of this project to invoke some form of noise which will register the implications of this

disruption of critical space for any writing which takes Sinclair as its subject. Here, the din of the construction work on Amsterdam's new metro line (the Noord/Zuidlijn) which has formed a more or less constant backdrop to the writing of this introduction provides a convenient means for figuring that space.

Intended to connect the new business district to the south of the city (the Zuid As) with the new residential areas being built to the north of the river IJ, the NZ-lijn represents the type of project which has come to characterize the strategies and spatiality of neoliberal urbanism. It is a project whose rationale lies not in the expressed needs of the city's electorate or inhabitants but in a perceived need to boost the Dutch capital's attraction to (multinational) corporations, and thereby increase the city's competitiveness over and against other cities in the market for international capital (Oudenampsen). As such the noise outside the window articulates the city of Amsterdam as a subject within the space of globalisation, or what Saskia Sassen terms "[t]he space constituted by the global grid of cities". As Sassen notes, this is in conventional terms, a peculiar sort of space in that it "is a space that is both place centred in that it is embedded in particular and strategic locations, and . . . transterritorial because it connects sites that are not geographically proximate" (Brenner and Keil 360). As such the noise of the NZ-lijn articulates Amsterdam as a dual subject: a city which is simultaneously here and elsewhere, local and global.

In one of its iterations, Sinclair's text is an exploration of precisely this space. The noise of the NZ-lijn finds its counterpoint in the noise of the construction of the site for the 2012 Olympics in the East End of London: in both the sound of the "debt elevator singing deliriously as it descends into a money pit of unforeseen billions" (Sinclair, "Diving Into Dirt" 4) is plainly audible. In this space, Amsterdam and London are effectively contiguous, they form parts of a neoliberal cityscape that stretches from Tokyo to New York via Beijing and which is individuated only as instances of the urban as a global brand: the city as object of consumption. Within urban studies this space has of course been widely theorised. As early as 1989 the Marxist geographer David Harvey observing that city councils across the world, irrespective of their ostensible political affiliation, had adopted the same strategic response to the perceived economic reality of globalisation, dubbed this new subject of policy discourse "the entrepreneurial city" (*Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism*).

Saskia Sassen, responding to the same phenomenon, termed it simply the “Global city”, and noted that with its concentration of great wealth and great disadvantage it marks the space of a potential new politics, while Richard Florida, one of the main advocates of this strategy of urban development appropriates the term “creative” to describe this new urban subject (associating, in the process creativity with class).

The abundance of theory capable of transforming this noise into a message about contemporary urban reality, however, suggests that it is noise in only the most literal sense. To move to a second iteration of the space explored by Sinclair it is necessary to note that in privileging the perceived needs of international finance over those of its resident population, the global city marks an implied assumption that the market represents the horizon of the possible, and that, as such the city should no longer be regarded as an expression of the *polis* but of the *agora*. The noise outside the window, in other words, marks the space of the post-political.² It registers the perception that, as Erik Swyngedouw writes,

While the city is alive and thriving - at least in some of its spaces - the polis, conceived in the idealized Greek sense as the site for public political encounter and democratic negotiation, the spacing of (often radical) dissent and disagreement and the place where political subjectivication literally takes place, seems moribund. (59)

It is as the marker of the post-political that the noise of construction gestures towards that other noise which Jacques Rancière has identified as marking a possibility for re-inventing the political in a globalised arena. Within that arena, argues Rancière, politics has been reduced to a simple naming and enumeration of parts. In its belief that it has resolved all antinomies, put an end to history itself, the neoliberal insistence on the sovereignty of the market has effectively instituted a logic of the police in the

² The post-political character of the NZ-lijn is particularly strongly marked. The construction of the existing metro, which involved the demolition of the inner city Jewish quarter, resulted in riots in the 1970s and a tacit understanding that any further metro project was taboo. The current project was the subject of a referendum in 1997 in which 64.8 % of the 123,198 voters rejected the proposed project. The referendum however was ruled inquorate: for the no vote to have counted it would have had to have exceeded half the total number of votes cast at the previous council election (a minimum of 154,935) <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noord/Zuidlijn> accessed 15.07.11.

place of politics: a concern with defending the existing partition of the sensible through an insistence on the proper meaning of words. For Rancière, true politics occurs only in what is excluded from the technocratic, consensual model of society which dominates in neoliberal models of governance. Rather than a dispute about the meaning of words, true politics occurs only in the kind of disagreement where one party does not even recognise that the other is speaking a language:

An extreme form of disagreement is where X cannot see the common object Y is presenting because X cannot comprehend that the sounds uttered by Y form words and chains of words similar to X's own. (*Disagreement* xii)

Making the common object visible involves a staging, and staging is possible only through use of the excess signification inherent in language: the noise that is generated by the errancy of the signifier, its refusal to be put in its proper place.³ For Rancière too, consequently, politics is predicated on poetics, on “literarity”.⁴ As a marker of the post-political, the noise outside the window is in this sense also the marker of the unsignifiable, of the untranslatable. It marks a site of resistance to the imperative to reduce form to function, to extract a sense which can then be put into circulation. This noise stands as a sign of the noise inherent in all communication: it registers the delay and deferral, the *Nachträglichkeit* of signification.

It is this conceptual space rather than any specific topography, I argue, which Sinclair has made his subject and whose ambiguities he articulates in his critical cartographies of London and environs. Informing Sinclair's praxis is the problem of a poetics which is capable of articulating the local and the particular as a site of resistance to the vitiating effects of globalisation. The problem, on the one hand, that the local simply becomes the typical and is subsumed within the brand, the commodification of culture

³ “In order to enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individual themselves may be recognized. It is in this respect that we may speak of a *poetics of politics*” (Panagia and Rancière 116).

⁴ “This excess of words that I call literarity disrupts the relation between an order of discourse and its social function. That is, literarity refers at once to the excess of words available in relation to the thing named; to that excess relating to the requirement for the production of life; and finally, to an excess of words vis-à-vis the modes of communication that function to legitimate 'the proper' itself” (Panagia and Rancière 115).

which is intensified in the appropriation of culture by capital in the notion of the creative class, and on the other, that the local becomes the site of a reactionary politics of essentialism. Sinclair's engagement with this problem, I argue, can usefully be seen in terms of a series of stagings. His work, is not exclusively textual but involves the articulations of boundaries which reveal new possible spaces of articulation between the political and the aesthetic. As such his work can be seen as a spatial performance which seeks to re-partition the sensible through problematising the boundaries of genre, media and authorship. His own simultaneous membership of the avant-garde, as a small-press poet, and of the mainstream as a novelist, journalist and non-fictional prose writer, (one of his most recent books, *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire* (2009) was the BBC Radio 4 "book of the week") illustrates his ability to problematise the relationship between map and territory by being both and neither. Elsewhere this staging takes the form of collaborations with other artists and writers, and with the promotion of lost and "reforgotten" precursors who are presented within his work less as avatars of alternative traditions than as means of exploring what is meant by the terms "alternative" and "tradition".

One such staging takes place in "Diving Into Dirt". Sinclair's introductory essay to the photographer Stephen Gill's *Archaeology in Reverse* (2007), an otherwise textless collection of Polaroids charting the site of the 2012 London Olympics immediately prior to its redevelopment. The production of space as "wasteland" as a necessary preliminary to its "regeneration" is, as Erik Swyngedouw (61) and Merijn Oudenampsen (121) observe, an integral aspect of neoliberal urban policy, and as Sinclair's essay makes clear, *Archaeology in Reverse* thus makes visible the fundamental dystopian/utopian dynamic that is seemingly integral to contemporary constructions of the urban. Articulating Gill's work with respect to that dynamic, Sinclair concentrates on its temporal implications:

if you don't have a version of the past that will stand up in court - Jacobean manor house, Augustinian monastery, brutalist powerstation - you will be provided with a new script: future impossible. The glittering city that is always just over the horizon. That twitch you feel in the soles of your feet, the hot earth, is the first tremor, a tsunami intimation of system-built structures waiting to climb out of the turf. ("Diving into Dirt" 3)

Like Gill's, Sinclair's work insists upon the necessity of wasteland, "the old grungy Arcadia of the marshes" ("Diving Into Dirt" 10) is a vital area within the city's emotional topography, which, as Gill's photos reveal, is far from empty, but rather fulfils a spectrum of cultural and ecological needs which cannot be articulated elsewhere, and certainly not in the "system-built structures" waiting to displace it. In this attention to the temporality of the globalisation of space, Sinclair shares with Rancière a perception that the institution of equality as an ever-deferred *telos*, effectively institutionalises and promotes inequality. The promise of the glittering city becomes a justification for turning the present into a state of exception that links regeneration with regime change:

These vast development sites, in their prolonged phase as exclusion zones, reduce Lammas lands to a state of occupation. War newsreels with everything except the land mines.

It's like the road to Basra this endless convoy of trucks . . . Dirty wheels . . . The Virtual City supplied by a Real-world transport. (9-10)

For Sinclair, articulating the space of politics in this context involves an act of perception in which the ethical is inseparable from the aesthetic. In *Archaeology in Reverse* this is registered in his attention to Gill's camera, a "1960s family model Coronet rescued from the Wick market" ("Diving Into Dirt" 5). This "sentimental totem salvaged from ruin" which "operates as a filtering device, imposing a slight softness on the terrain" is the source of the noise which distinguishes Gill's stylistic and ethical vision. Its images characterized by their "cataract vision: milkiness, unpredictable focus, collusion with place" (5) are emblematic of Gill's refusal of "that mendacious deceit, closure" (3) and, Derridean, respect for the Other as ethically unknowable: "Loving retrieval, like a letter to a friend, never possession. Nothing Gill brings back to his studio for processing or playful arrangement is concluded" (3). However, Sinclair's introduction is also informed by his sense that Gill's landscape only becomes visible as a "wake": "a wake, not for a lost zone, but for a city that has not yet been built" (6). This city whose loss is to be read in the surveyor's marks announcing the advent of the Olympic village is the antithesis of the glittering city which never arrives. It is in effect a vision of the polis grounded in a Rancièrian conception of noise: a city founded on the radical proposition that equality must be

recognised as a quality of the present rather than as the yet to be realized, the recognition of the garden within the wasteland and that the right to the city includes its empty lager cans.