

# Medium-Specific Noise

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[...] the accident reveals the substance

Aristotle

It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory

Adorno, *Bequest*, 1945

An aesthetics of medium-specific noise has pervaded contemporary culture. This is an aesthetics in which noises associated with particular media are actively employed as expressive devices, rather than being eradicated in the interest of high fidelity. In the realm of music, the post-industrial sound of the early releases by bands like Portishead and Massive Attack from the mid-1990s feature surface sound related to vinyl records, tape decks with uneven speeds or a fluttering frequency range, and a host of other medium-specific noises. Likewise, in the audiovisual realm, degraded film of several kinds – like color faded super 8, worn out film copies with scratches and errors – have been used in various settings, perhaps especially in music videos, where aural and visual noise may also be used in parallel.

Throughout history, a number of technologies have been deployed to fight and suppress the various noises that emerge within certain forms of media. There is also a rich history of artistic strategies that counteract restrictive notions of fidelity by pressing media beyond their calculated ranges of operation. This may involve over-exposure of film, sound recording beyond set levels and a number of other twists and tweaks aimed at thickening the medium. Such strategies have supported artistic visions in numerous productions and will continue to do so.

The aesthetics of medium-specific noise in question for this essay, however, represents something more radical. Rather than pressing photographic media to offer special forms of saturation and graininess, or a sound recording tape to deliver a fatter sound with elements of distortion, the aesthetic of medium-specific noise employs symptoms of wear and tear and errors or malfunctions characteristic of specific media as deliberate means of artistic expression. In the service of this aesthetic, technologies are developed to enhance and artificially produce such medium-specific noises and malfunctions. This situation calls for an exploration of what these medium-specific noises afford, and how the emergence of the aesthetics of medium-specific noise can be explained.

Although the aural and the visual realms are figured differently, there are striking parallels between how medium-specific noise operates across this divide,

which indicates that a comparative interrogation may be productive. Musicologists have brilliantly addressed medium-specific noise in the aural field. In the visual field, however, contributions are few. So far, attempts to explore the phenomenon as it operates across the aural and visual fields are missing as well. From this lack springs the aspiration of this present article.

In the following, I aim to synthesize and combine insights from musicology and various other fields in order to interrogate what the medium-specific noise yields in the visual and aural realms respectively, what operational logics inform it, and why this particular aesthetics has evolved. This interrogation also exemplifies an approach to media aesthetic research, where the operational logic of media and their interrelations is at center.

I will start this exploration by looking at how noise has been addressed within musicology, and then move on to issues of iconoclasm, before linking the discussion to various ways in which recorded traces have been dealt with in cultural theory. I will end by positioning medium-specific noise within the more general context of digitalization, before tracing back through the argument in a brief reflection of how this article conceives of media aesthetic research. But first, it is necessary to look into the question of how noise is to be defined in this context.

## Two Conceptions of Noise

The concept of noise is handled in different ways and there exists no single answer to the question of what noise is. In fact, Douglas Kahn, in *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, claims that trying to define noise “in a unifying manner across the range of contexts will only invite noise on itself” (1999, p. 21). Yet, perhaps Kahn complicates the issue more than necessary. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), two major, but competing, meanings of the term can be singled out in their first entry on noise. First, we find the phrase “disturbance caused by sounds.” Clearly, noise is primarily a compliment we pay to *sound*. A more general principle is also suggested in this phrase whereby something *disturbs* the perception of something else. This meaning is elaborated in the eleventh entry offered in the *OED*, where noise in “scientific and technical use” is taken to be “disturbances which are not part of a signal ... which interfere with or obscure a signal.” The *OED* is here implicitly referring to the meaning of noise operating in C. E. Shannon’s seminal article, *A Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1948), and in later models of communication derived from Shannon’s work and other contributions to the field of information theory.

John Johnston locates paradoxical complexities in the fact that noise in Shannon’s theory “appears to be both what impedes the transmission of information and

what is not yet coded as information” (2010, p. 201). However, it would seem that a conception of noise as disturbance, as “what impedes the transmission of information,” by necessity generates complexities, simply by rendering noise *relative* to our interest. If noise on a telephone line may be considered as impeding the transmission of the voice of our interlocutor, it may also provide useful information about errors in the telephone system. What we have may even be two conversations interfering with each other, where each may be construed as noise from the point of view of the other.

In contrast to conceiving noise as “what impedes the transmission of information,” the second part of the *OED*’s first entry offers a quite different conception of noise, as “music characterized by use of dissonance or inharmonious noise, esp. loud distorted guitar, amplifier noise, feedback, etc.”<sup>1</sup> While the first part of the entry sets up a relation between two elements, one signal disturbing the perception of another, the second part focuses on the single issue of inharmonious sound and dissonance often associated with forms of distortion. Thus, inside the first *OED* entry, oddly enough, we find two rather divergent characterizations of the term *noise*. These two are, I believe, the most relevant conceptions of noise for the current exploration. The musicological research on noise also seems to address these two divergent meanings, with a main emphasis on dissonance rather than on disturbance.

## Musicology’s Take on Noise

In the textbook definition offered by the information theorist Abraham Moles, “noise is a signal the sender does not want to transmit” (1966, p. 78). Of this conception, we can safely say that noise has been with us as long as anyone has attempted to construe a signal: from the singer having throat problems, to the guitar player seeking to suppress strings not meant to sound, to the artist perfecting molds for death masks or automatically recording the visual and aural world after the emergence of the mechanical inscription devices of the photographic camera, and the phonograph in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

From the inevitable concern with noise, as the unwanted other of any positive signal as articulated in Mole’s trans-historically relevant phrase, noise comes to the center of attention in cultural life when the Futurists turn the tables and argue

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1 “Noise-rock” is a prominent genre in this part of the *OED* definition of noise, “characterized by the use of dissonance or inharmonious noise, esp. loud distorted guitar, amplifier noise, feedback, etc. It can also be related back to the “noise music ... originating among members of the Futurist movement, utilizing non-musical or dissonant sounds (often made on customized instruments) and rejecting traditional notions of harmony and structure” (*OED*).

that noise is worthy of exploration in its own right. In a 1913 letter, later known as “The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto,” Luigi Russolo notes how, in a world of machines, noise reigns “over the sensibility of men” (Russolo 2004, p. 10). He goes on to observe that, after having sought purity and sweetness, “musical art seeks out combinations more dissonant, stranger, and harsher for the ear. Thus, it comes ever closer to the *noise-sound*” (ibid., p. 11). Russolo calls on artists to break out of the limited circle of sounds previously used and “*conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds*” (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> In Russolo’s vision, noise is conceived not as disturbance, but as inharmonious, yet artistically interesting, sound. This perception, as I have noted, is later to become the dominant in musicological work on noise, a body of research that does not quite cut to the core of the aesthetics of medium-specific noise, but still holds some relevance to it.

John Cage makes an interesting connection between the two main conceptions of noise in the following observation:

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments (Cage 2004, pp. 25-6).

Cage’s conception of noise comes across here, in the first instance, as Russolo’s *inharmonious sound*, except perhaps the static between stations, which may also be conceived as *interference* hindering the perception of particular radio signals. Cage’s observation explains a growing interest in noise by inscribing it into a general urge to expand the palette of expressive means open to the artist. Thus, it is in tune with Russolo’s call to *conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds*. This interest grounds the reversal whereby noises are recoded from something unwanted and rejected, to become useful “musical instruments” in their own right. Thus, Cage’s conception resonates well with contemporary interests in noise as a means to artistic expression.

In work on noise as inharmonious sound, there have also been attempts to localize noise in musical instruments that we do not necessarily think of as noisy, as in the following observation by Henry Cowell:

Noise-making instruments are used with telling effect in our greatest symphonies, and were it not for the punctuation of cymbal and bass drum, the climaxes of our operas would be like jelly fish .... But most shocking of all is the discovery that there is a noise element in all our musical instruments. Consider the sound of a violin. Part of the vibrations producing the sound are periodic, as can be shown by a harmonic analyzer. But others are not – they do not

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2 Russolo’s call to “*conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds*” finds its parallel in calls to include all kinds of materials in the visual arts, articulated, among others, by Kurt Schwitters and the Dada movement, though this occurs at a later stage than Russolo’s manifesto.

constantly re-form the same pattern, and consequently must be considered noise (Cowell 2004, p. 23).

The intensification achieved by adding what Cowell conceives to be inharmonious sounds is interesting. But the discovery of “noise” in a number of places the human ear would not find it unless aided by a harmonic analyzer risks stretching the concept beyond the phenomenologically relevant. Mary Russo and Daniel Warner offer a more productive take on the idea that noise is inscribed in all sound and music and therefore also in every instrument. They note that

noise plays a primary role in the perception of virtually every musical sound. Noise components at the beginning of musical instrument tones...referred to as attack transients, very often provide the primary conceptual clues for aural identification. Without these noise components it is virtually impossible for a listener to differentiate between, for instance, a clarinet and piano tune sounding at the same frequency, because their pitched or steady-state portions (comprising most of all instrumental tone's duration) happen to be timbrally similar (Russo and Warner 2004, p. 49).

Thus, the noises known as attack transients are crucial for distinguishing instruments. But again, they are hardly noisy when instruments are handled properly, except in the rather technical sense of embodying inharmonious sound, best assessed by a harmonic analyzer. Seen from the informational point of view, moreover, where we can take noise to be a signal the sender does not want to transmit, attack transients hardly represent noise. On the contrary, they are vital parts of the music and integral to the signals musicians want to transmit, affording orchestras as well as performers crucial elements of timbre. Among the rich varieties of expressive options offered by varieties of timbre are forms of intensification as well, such as a violinist's ferocious attacks on the strings with the bow, where the friction of the bow against the strings adds an intensity that is key to virtuoso violin performances. In such cases, the attack transients bring the identifying and the intensifying capabilities together in an articulation of the *violinness* of the violin, where the grainy earthiness of its building materials and its construction as a prosthetic extension of the human come together. The attack transients do not merely identify the instruments. They also provide a key arena for articulating the individuality of the piece played, as well as that of the particular performer, through sound qualities, dynamism, timbre, attack energy and so on.

## Medium-Specific Noise in the Aural Realm

Returning to the issue of medium-specific noise, what does it mean to say that a noise is medium-specific, and what do such noises afford? The musician and artist Brian Eno may have been the first to describe the effects of medium-specific noise as it is presently used. In the 1999 article, “The Revenge of the

Intuitive,” Eno articulates a fascination with older media, technologies and instruments, and the specific noises they can produce. He writes:

Since so much of our experience is mediated in some way or another, we have deep sensitivities to the signatures of different media. Artists play with these sensitivities, digesting the new and shifting the old. In the end, the characteristic forms of a tool’s or a medium’s distortion, of its weakness and limitations, become sources of emotional meaning and intimacy (Eno 1999, p. 1)

By noting how the “characteristic forms of a tool’s or a medium’s distortion, of its weakness and limitations, become sources of emotional meaning,” Eno initiates a groundbreaking insight about medium-specific noise. He reminds us that there is such a thing as a medium’s “characteristic forms ...[of] distortion,” and that these forms can be used as means of expression. By observing this, Eno also implicitly comes to evoke the simple but important question: what are the means by which we can represent one medium within another? The compelling answer to this question is that medium-specific noise offers a crucial means to represent one medium inside another: it *is* the means by which we can represent the mediality of the vinyl record and the super 8, respectively, within a CD and a 35mm movie.<sup>3</sup> Once these evocative powers of medium-specific noise are established, we must go on to ask: what does medium-specific noise afford, and how does it operate in various circumstances? In two groundbreaking articles, musicologists Joseph Auner and Steven Link have started to address these questions in the realm of music. As is made clear by their contributions, medium-specific noise provides a highly plastic tool for sculpting space in the aural realm. It also provides tools for articulating complex emotional worlds.

The first example Auner points to is Pink Floyd’s eloquent transition between “Have a Cigar,” with its attack on the commercial music business, and the song “Wish You Were Here” from the album of the same name. He writes:

As if to enact the threat of commercialization, the raucous hard rock jam that concludes “Have a Cigar” sounds as if it is sucked out of the speakers into a lo-fidelity AM radio broadcast. The radio is evoked first through the cramped, tinny sound quality and static, and then confirmed as the radio is retuned through several channels...before settling down on a station broadcasting a mellow guitar accompaniment. As the radio continues to play, we become directly aware of the person in the room who has been tuning the radio, as he clears his throat, sniffs, and then starts to play along on an acoustic guitar (Auner 2000, p. 3).

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3 The German artist Gerhard Richter developed a new style of realist paintings in the 1960s by painting motifs from photographs. By imitating medium-specific noise associated with photography, particularly out of focus and motion blur, he was able to emulate the mediality of photography in his paintings. Richter’s work utilizes the medial principles commented on by Eno, but in spite of Richter’s success, these principles were not widely adopted and explored by others until they came to define parts of the music scene in the 1990s.

The example takes us back to 1975, when Pink Floyd released their album. Auner describes well how an imaginary space is created where someone seems to be listening inside the recording. The contrast between high and low fidelity helps build the space, and the radio's static further specifies its physicality. The flickering across channels and the noise of interference while the radio is tuned evokes the image of someone in the room tuning it, and that someone is confirmed to be a male when he is heard clearing his throat. Now, from these sounds, the imaginary space is construed and specified.<sup>4</sup> However, this example merely contains one distinctly medium-specific noise which, in addition to helping build the space, also calls forth the medium of the radio. Now what more do medium-specific noises specifically afford, and how can such noises be orchestrated?

Auner moves to the 1990s in order to explore this further, when the current aesthetics of medium-specific noise started to emerge with the trip-hop coming out of Bristol bands like Massive Attack, Portishead and Tricky. He notes the powerful emotional charge Portishead can produce, and attributes this "to the way the band foregrounds recording media and musical technologies to engage tradition and to manipulate memory and time." A key feature for these bands was the prominent use of surface noise from vinyl records, the implicit negation of the presumptive digital perfection of the CD, a format that could render a previously unheard silence. Commenting on the track entitled "Undenied" from Portishead's second album, the use of silence is a key element for Auner:

In "Undenied," the opposition of the sound of a very scratchy record and digital silence become an integral part of the composition. After a short introduction ... a noisy rhythm track suddenly begins, marked by a bright cymbal rhythm embedded in a haze of vinyl noise. These background scratches and pops continue...providing a tense, highly-charged backdrop that underscores the obsessive nature of the sexual attachment described in the lyrics. But at two key moments, this veil of noise abruptly drops out; first just before the voice enters and then at the restrained climax of the song .... The effect is very different than in Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here," where the flawed sound of the radio was contrasted with the purity and presence of the guitar sound and the careful construction of the sound space of the room. Here when the scratchy noises and cymbal hiss drop out we are confronted with

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4 We can learn more on the construction of space by aural means from various sorts of radio drama, as well as from sound work in filmmaking. In order to understand how this works, it might be useful to explore what the effect would be if one were to take away certain elements. Basically, we could take away the medium-specific noises of the radio (static and tuning) and still sustain the space (generated from the contrast between the high fidelity of the clearing of the throat and the acoustic guitar, and the low fidelity of the other music), but we would lose the specificity of the radio, and thereby its symbolic implications relating to commercialism. The sound would merely be seen as coming from a generic music player with a limited frequency range. The elimination of the clearing of the throat would render the character in the room less physical and, for example, preclude the identification of a male. In short, the various elements add different aspects to the sculpting of the imagined space.

a desperate emptiness. Through the lyrics, the vinyl noise becomes the embodiment of the obsession; the thought of absence results in the moment of absolute emptiness represented by the digital silence, now made horrible and empty (Auner 2000, p. 5).

A silence rendered horrible and empty is here set up against the material physicality of a bright cymbal rhythm embedded in a haze of vinyl noise, representing loving obsession, but also a love about to be lost. The example demonstrates how noise may help construe complex textures with rich symbolic meanings that are not merely reduced to positive and negative comments regarding the digital and the analog, or the CD and the vinyl format respectively.<sup>5</sup> The use of the medium-specific noise here does not explicitly construe a space in which someone listens, as in the example from Pink Floyd. Such a prospective spatiality is here swallowed up in a palimpsest where audible traces of the material physicality of the vinyl are revealed through its imperfections, and where the potential spatiality only adds to the dense medial texture as an unspecified layer.<sup>6</sup>

Medium-specific noise may easily invoke nostalgia. Analog media, like turntables and vinyl records, are often associated with notions of warmth, authenticity and wholeness. The situation that they have now been largely replaced by digital formats sets up a nostalgic relation to elements of the past now lost to us. Stan Link points to how a construction of imaginary spaces, comprising a subject listening to old media technologies, may support such a sense of nostalgia. The nostalgia may be evoked by our identification with someone listening inside such a space. But if we take the position of an outside observer, “who hears a scene of audition but does not enter,” as Link puts it, the listeners may “experience their own absence from that scene ... the sense that the actual listener cannot be there. The nostalgic aspect of this situation is obvious, and no doubt accounts again for the appeal of retro noises ....” (Link, 2001, p. 38).<sup>7</sup> In an analysis that seems as

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5 Simplistic notions of the difference between the analog and the digital, circulating through popular culture, need to be interrogated and corrected. Tellef Kvifte offers a productive rethinking of this divide in the article, “Digital Sampling and Analogue Aesthetics” (2007).

6 But the physicality of this medium is not the mere physicality of the actual recording material used. In contemporary music as well as in the Portishead productions of the 1990s, recording is usually digital and involves digital samples. In contrast to this, sounds of old media technologies like vinyl records are imported. But they are imported as deliberately construed samples, ironically embedded within and presented in the digital mediality they implicitly negate.

7 Link notes that this structure is also found on a more general level in the medial structure that recording sets up: “I believe these were, however, the effects of genuine transduction noise as well. Noise was a palpable sign of the listener’s remove from the recording along with its remove from the scene of documentation. Serving as an opacity between scenes, noise articulated our possible conceptual locations along with those from which we were absent. Again, though an artifact of the apparatus, noise becomes a powerful mechanism of establishing and reconfiguring subjectivity” (ibid. p. 38).



relevant to the use of aural as well as visual medium-specific noise, Link further proposes to anchor an effect of authenticity in the relations to the listener in these imaginary spaces.

It is in these ways – presence, identification, absence, location – that even the noisiest recordings may be perceived as “authentic.” By creating conditions whereby such categories become both possible and necessary, noise enables us to dwell in and about such recordings. This has quite a significant impact on the effect of listening. In a very palpable sense, the “real” emerges from where one is present or located, regardless of its qualities or correspondence to some other circumstances whether “real” or imagined (Link 2001, p. 38).

This palpable sense of the real, of presence and location, is also intimately connected with the fascination with the medium itself and its materiality, and the noises that testify to its embodied dimensions. Thus, we can observe a connection between the interest in medium-specific noise and more general urges for embodiment in the face of sensations and conceptions of disembodiment and immateriality. These come together with a stronger interest in notions of physical location, materiality and opacity, as opposed to tendencies toward dislocation, disembodiment, immateriality and transparency, both in the realms of aural and visual media. Noise plays a vital role in articulating such interests. As Link notes,

in drawing our attention to the technology itself, its machines and media, noise becomes a metaphor attaching a kind of tactility to sound. Radio static becomes the feel of a tuning knob. The crackle of dust becomes the vinyl itself. The hum of tubes evokes their warm temperature. A stylus dropping carries the weight of a tone arm (2001, p. 38).

Noise then helps to counteract a notion of dematerialization produced in various ways as storage media have become less tangible (see Fetveit 2007). It also comes to set up an adversarial relation to the presumably improved digital technologies of CDs and other formats of digital storage. Thus, noise is not merely a means for artists’ expression. It is also mired in a more substantial battle between the new and the old, progress and tradition, playing itself out in various fields, hovering above a mediascape struggling to digest current changes, both in the aural and the visual realm.

## Noise in the Visual Realm

Following the advent of the aesthetics of medium-specific noise in the 1990s, various forms of noise and retrograde aesthetics have also pervaded the visual culture for more than a decade. Examples are rife in the cover work for various musical artists, for example, on albums from the Scottish electronica duo Boards of Canada, like *Music Has the Right to Children* (1998), *In a Beautiful Place Out in the Country* (2000), *Twoism* (2002) and *The Campfire Headspace* (2005). The

covers of these albums have discolored and torn photographs evoking the 1970s. A noisy and retrograde aesthetics also defines the cover art for Madonna's greatest hits album *Celebration* (2009), where Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe portrait has formed the basis for a Madonna image where raster dots, wear and tear as well as imperfect splices between paper bits help illude an aged and worn billboard image.

In the realm of photography, the German artist Stephanie Schneider also presents seemingly washed-out and discolored images where details might be smudged out to the point where they are hardly legible. She uses expired Polaroid film in which the deprecation of the chemicals produces odd and partly unpredictable effects. Her photographs are often taken in desert areas such as those found in California's Death Valley, and they look at times as if they were stills from a road movie.<sup>8</sup> She has also narrativized her images in short films based on a series of Polaroid still images. Each image may be shown from a fraction of a second to several seconds and, as such, they never aspire toward creating the illusion of movement. The films utilize music rather than dialog on their sound tracks, evoking moods of intimacy and authentic living, as exemplified in *Strange Love* (2004). A number of other photographers also actively take advantage of medium-specific noise in various ways, among them U.S. photographer Sally Mann, who I will come back to.

Within the realm of film, both Peter Delpet's *Lyrical Nitrate* (1991) and Bill Morrison's *Decasia: The State of Decay* (2002) display radically deteriorated film material, but in these cases the deteriorated materials are displayed in their own right, rather than used to invoke one specific medium inside another. In these films, often a third or more of the face of the image is so destroyed that there is hardly any image left. They remind us of how film material has a historicity of its own, and how time and poor storage conditions may completely deteriorate this material. As Mary Ann Doane notes,

The historicity of a medium is traced in the physical condition of its objects. This is why a film like Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002) is so moving in its melancholic record of the slow death of the films once thought to immortalize their subjects, in its chronicling of the deterioration and disintegration of film stock and its subjection to the external forces of water and fire (2007 p. 144).

If nostalgia relates to past life, and outmoded or decayed media forms are evoked in the album covers by Boards of Canada and in Schneider's imagery, nostalgia and melancholy take center stage in *Lyrical Nitrate* and *Decasia*. The mourning for the medium in a state of decay, staged as a meditative spectacle to be enjoyed for its aesthetic beauty, charged with a host of photographic *puncta* from a past

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8 Her book, *Stranger Than Paradise*, offers a collection of her photographs (2006).

in the process of being lost, is on offer in a film where visual motifs are largely subjugated to the formal and material qualities of this decay. If *Decasia* mourns the loss of chemical film in a meditative fashion, there are also films with a cheerful take on the shift to digital technology.



*Ill 1: Screenshots from Planet Terror, Robert Rodriguez, 2007.*

Robert Rodriguez has mired his *Planet Terror* (2007) with deteriorated imagery<sup>9</sup>. The film is a light-hearted comic book-style horror movie about a zombie attack on the planet. Its imagery is, to varying degrees, degraded. In the extra material on the DVD, Rodriguez explains what he calls “the aging effect” by saying that it “is really just a series of layers of real film print damage, artifacts, dust-passes, scratches.” (Rodriguez 2007). He emphasizes the importance of keeping it

looking random so it doesn’t feel like you’re watching the same effect over and over .... I would also use the aging for dramatic effect. Whenever a scary sequence is coming up or an action sequence, you notice that the film gets more deteriorated. And then, once the threat disappears, so miraculously do a lot of the scratches (ibid.).

Thus, the film gets deteriorated and wobbly at dramatic high points, as when doctor Block (Josh Brolin), sees the badly damaged Tammy (the pop singer Stacy Ferguson) come into the hospital. Block later discovers that Tammy is the secret lesbian lover of his wife. Aural noise accompanies the visual deterioration in the hospital scene when the corpse of Tammy, who Block refers to as a “no-brainer ... scooped clean out of her skull,” is put on display to his associates. Similar combinations of narrative intensity and noisy crescendos take place throughout the movie, especially in violent and sexually charged scenes.

In one example, we also get to see attacking zombies eating humans. Rodriguez comments interestingly on the effect of introducing deterioration in this case:

In one instance, the MPAA wanted us to cut down a scene where someone’s brain was being eaten, because it was getting munched on for a little too long. I cut it down and added a lot of aging, and it actually made it feel a lot more violent.... Clean, it looks fine, but once you add the skipping and the jumping and deterioration of an old print, it feels twice as fast, twice as violent. It just roughs it up a lot (ibid.).

The most deteriorated element is a love scene, in which the film loses all its colors but red, distorts and gets sprinkled with deteriorated bits and missing flecks of film. It ends with the sound of flicker as the movie halts to a full stop and then burns from the heat of the projector. If Ingmar Bergman let his film strip burn *Persona* (1966), as if to hint at how the film was pressing up against something the medium could barely represent, Rodriguez lets his film strip burn with an effect as different as the films are different. The playful implications of the celluloid burning in Rodriguez’s film is perhaps, first of all, that his leading lady is too hot for the film material.

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9 The film was part of a double feature of “Grindhouse movies” together with Quentin Tarantino’s *Death Proof* (2007).



Ill 2: Planet Terror, Robert Rodriguez, 2007.

A. O. Scott, the *New York Times* reviewer, commented on both of the “Grindhouse” films, Rodriguez’s *Planet Terror* and Quentin Tarantino’s *Death Proof* (2007):

Each of the features is missing a reel – the management apologizes for the inconvenience – and of course it’s the reel with the sex in it, which the projectionist probably stole for his own amusement. The prints are full of scratches, bad splices and busted sprocket holes, and the images are not always in focus.

It’s all a pretty good joke, especially since most of these glitches, artifacts of an earlier technological era, have been produced digitally.<sup>10</sup>

*Planet Terror*, according to the film scholar Caetlin Benson-Allott, was “shot with a Panavision HD video camera, meaning that their imperfections are digital composites, image imperfections lifted from celluloid transfers and added to the necessarily pristine HD file” (2008 p. 20). The artifice produced by Rodriguez evokes a particular mode of nostalgia. The celluloid copy of a Grindhouse movie theater, worn to pieces by innumerable screenings, perhaps even robbed of the juicy sex scenes as hinted at by the *New York Times* reviewer, is evoked again in a digital age, largely by medium-specific noises and malfunctions transferred from real celluloid materials.<sup>11</sup>

A completely different tone is set in the autobiographical documentary by the Norwegian filmmaker Margreth Olin, *My Body* (2002). In a highly personal and intimate tone, Olin reveals the difficult relation she has to her own body. From the age of five, she became increasingly aware of its abnormalities in the eyes of various female observers. Her belly that was sticking out, her toes that would “ruin any shoes,” the position of her teeth that, according to the dentist’s assistant, could hardly bite off a sausage. In the film, Olin shares this difficult coming of age story, generously crediting men with a series of loving remarks that eventually help her to come to terms with her body. She questions the ways in which

10 Technically, this process creates glitches that are produced in an analog medium, which then are transferred to a digital film. Thus, they combine both analog and digital techniques <http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/04/06/movies/06grin.html> (accessed 4.4.2013).

11 The ironic tribute to, and longing for, the past invites a new and particular form of cinephilia, according to the German media researcher Dominik Schrey (2010).

women, in particular, can be highly critical toward each other, and emphasizes the importance of a pounding heart over a picture-perfect body. In a number of cases when medium-specific noise is used in movies, it is especially prevalent in the opening of films, as seen for example in David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995), where a long and beautifully orchestrated credit sequence puts on display what seems like multiple materials collected from a crime scene, in footage that is full of scratches and glitches, to produce a compelling and rough forensic aesthetic.

*My Body* also starts with scratched footage and what appears like dust on a vinyl record on the sound track, during an old style pre-movie count down from 8 to 3.



Ill 3: Screenshots from *My Body*, 2002, Margreth Olin

Then, the volume of dusty sound track is lowered and we hear the voice of Olin say: “Now you should lean back, lower your shoulders and breathe deeply. Nobody is judging you now. Slowly, in...and out.”<sup>12</sup> In between her utterances, a male voice sounding possibly like some kind of relaxation guru, is echoing Olin’s voice by saying: “take a deep breath – you must not be so self-protective – make lower your shoulders, it’s not so dangerous to relax.”<sup>13</sup> While this is spoken, the deteriorated film, in black and white, full of scratches, missing flecks of emulsion, visible dust, and flickering lights, has provided the visuals. Thus, the opening of this film strives to set a particular tone. It is explicitly therapeutic toward its audience, in its attempt to establish its mood. What mood is this, and how does the aesthetics of noise contribute to establishing it?

We are told to relax, to lean back, and to lower shoulders and breathe deeply, and we are assured that nobody is judging us now. Olin aims to set up an intimate connection to her audience in which generous acceptance is the key issue. The aesthetics of the film is not one of pristine beauty-shots, smooth and elegant framing and editing. It is not an aesthetic akin to the glossy fashion magazines like *Elle*, in which female beauty is negotiated. It is more reasonable to see the

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12 My translation from Norwegian.

13 This is spoken in English with a strong accent that may suggest a person coming from India.



film's aesthetic as a negation of such glossy imagery of the female body.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is an aesthetic of imperfection, of vulnerability, inaugurated by displaying a film body marked by life. Within the movie, we also find a lively, unpretentious and charming use of imagery. Transitions may seem clumsy, the camera seems at times searching, zooming, the images are partly out of focus, and discolored, partly so grainy and so low in resolution that they cover up as much as display the body of Olin. This aesthetics of imperfection is that of the amateur: "One who loves or is fond *of*; one who has a taste for anything," in the words of the *OED*.

In this film, told by a pounding heart, the carnal predicament of its frail medium comes to parallel the frailty of the person portrayed, or perhaps more importantly, the respectful care the filmmaker wants to see granted to other female bodies, other humans, other hearts. In the film, Olin tells the story of how her deep uncertainty about her own body and her various inferiority complexes defined her coming of age, but she also shares how these insecurities were eventually overcome with the help of loving men. The decayed aesthetics of the film helps Olin articulate a particular tone of intimacy and fragility, and helps convey the respect that bodies deserve.

## Noise in the Aural and the Visual Realms

In view of these examples, what is there to be said about the similarities between the noise in the aural and visual realm? We noted how aural noise can be used to construct space. Does visual noise have comparable powers? Film history offers a number of examples where we see someone seeing a film, and where the low-grade image emphasizes that it is indeed a film within a film. But to a considerable extent, the information added tends to be redundant as we already perceive and judge the space from what we see. In the classic opening of *Citizen Kane*, for example, when the newsreel ends, its poorer quality as we cut to the screening space is superfluous for our understanding that we are seeing someone seeing a film. But even though it is not crucial for building the space, it still may add realism and credibility to the spatial setup we are perceiving. However, the power to build space is, as we have seen, hardly the most important feature of medium-specific noise, as a number of other sounds can also achieve this. The main achievement of medium-specific noise is, therefore, simply its capability to call forth specific

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14 Olin got considerable attention in the Norwegian press when launching the film. One reason for this involved *Elle* magazine, which had asked for a feature interview. As a condition for granting the interview, Olin required that her body should be displayed on the cover of the magazine. *Elle* declined, which spurned a debate and also made the case for the importance of the topic of the film.

media, media that can be summoned by other means only with difficulty. Forms of nostalgia are also constructed through the evocation of these media, forms which seem to operate in a parallel manner in the aural and the visual realm.

As Cowell pointed out, noise in the sense of inharmonious sound, from cymbals, bass drums and the like, is a crucial means of intensifying an expression in order to produce climaxes in music. Medium-specific noise may also operate to intensify an expression. Thus, Auner points to the way in which the bright cymbal rhythm embedded in a haze of vinyl noise intensifies the sense of obsession articulated in the Portishead song, and as Rodriguez notes how a violent scene could be roughed up to seem twice as violent with the medium-specific noise of the worn film strip added. Now, intensification by means of noise in the form of something that impedes the transmission of information may also occur and may in fact be part of the explanation of the intensifying effect noted by Rodriguez. Link is onto this medial operation when he reminds us that: "As a barrier to the signal, noise engenders interference with transmission as well as embodying an effort to receive" (2001, p. 37). Our effort to receive in the face of interference may render our connection with what we try to perceive vulnerable and precarious, and the faint information we get from the material, as well as the mediating material itself, may become more precious, as it is a scarce resource. Under these conditions, our perception may be intensified, as it is in the cases Rodriguez discussed above.

## **The Digital Remediation of Medialities**

The efficiency with which a medium can be evoked, or remediated, by means of its specific forms of noise, adds crucial medial resources to digital media. Filters imitating the specific forms of noise associated with various media come to provide a powerful resource for bringing forth a considerable back catalog of medial qualities. The strategy of remediating by means of medium-specific noise operates as a working principle that can articulate a number of media, not only media that are becoming obsolete. In a situation where human creativity excels in the arena of software, and software becomes a major tool for cultural production, it is no surprise that a host of software applications now exist that assist in these remediation efforts by means of medium-specific noise, and in more general efforts to create forms of retro looks and sounds.

At the same time, of course, more solutions than ever aim at the contrary effects of noise reduction to improve the quality of photographic images by removing noise and grain and so on. Thus, along with the digital remediations on offer, there are plenty of other opportunities to support degrading as well as upgrading,



to enhance as well as to erase noise, in this era when new media in many ways seem pitted against older media forms.

## Iconoclasm as Rivalry Between Media

Rivalry and competition between media may be viewed as involving particular kinds of iconoclasm. These are perspectives that may help add to an explanation as to why the aesthetics of medium-specific noise has become so prevalent. A stimulating take on such rivalry and competition between media may be found in Boris Groys' provocative analysis of how film has been related to other media, involving observations that bear on the current divide between the new and the old, as well as on the issue of medium-specific noise.

Groys claims that "throughout its entire history as a medium, film has waged a more or less open struggle against other media such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and even theater and opera" (Groys 2008, p. 282). Thus, he locates what he calls cinematic iconoclasm "in terms of the conflict between different media." More generally, he links iconoclasm to notions of progress, where it appears to clear "our path of all that has become redundant, powerless, and void of inner meaning, to make way for whatever the future might bring." He goes on to suggest that "the avant-garde is nothing other than a staged martyrdom of the image that replaced the Christian image of martyrdom" (ibid.). After all, he adds, "the avant-garde abuses the body of the traditional image with all manner of torture utterly reminiscent of the torture inflicted on the body of Christ in the iconography of medieval Christianity." Groys continues to note that

this possibility of strategically deploying iconoclasm as an artistic device came about because the artistic avant-garde, for its part, shifted its focus from the message to the medium. The destruction of old images embodying a particular message is not meant to generate new images embodying a new message, but rather to highlight the materiality of the medium concealed behind any "spiritual" message (2008, p. 77).

The evidence that Groys draws on in terms of smashed statues, slashed paintings and crushed buildings is convincing for making his point about filmic iconoclasm and media rivalry. However, Groys also finds that, in recent years, an iconoclasm is also directed against the medium of film itself. New technologies like video, the computer and the DVD format, make it possible to arrest a film's flow, and thus, the medium is laid bare. Its movement is proven to be a mere illusion.

Though Groys' analysis is suggestive, it becomes less convincing when he locates iconoclasm in the increased manipulation of time, and illustrates his point by

referring to *The Matrix*.<sup>15</sup> It is easier to see how audiovisual motion is amplified and refined through the new flexibility afforded by digital techniques than how it is abated and crushed. But this does not mean that the film is not subjected to iconoclasm. What it means is that we should look elsewhere than to the amplification of motion control to find it. The ubiquitous uses of medium-specific noise, in cinema as well as the audiovisual media, would be a useful place to look. We have already seen how Rodriguez thrashes his celluloid in *Planet Terror*, how Stephanie Schneider implicitly batters her Polaroid film material by aging it beyond expiration dates, how Margreth Olin presses Super 8 to degrade its looks, and how, in their album art, Boards of Canada uses faded photographs pushed to look decades older than they are, and Madonna uses scruffy and worn medial materials to intensify the look of the *Celebrity*-cover through a palimpsest of media evoking conflicting time signatures. As mentioned, such strategies have also become prevalent in music videos, where forms of noisy iconoclasm have been prevalent since the turn of the millennium.

Let us consider Green Day's video for "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" (2004). The music video is ordinary in its mix of footage from the band playing and the members of the band walking through a presumably interesting landscape, in this case an arid landscape with cacti and various other tokens of the desert. But the level of distortion and noise the footage is inflicted with makes it a powerful example of the lengths to which directors have taken this trend in music videos.<sup>16</sup> In the "Making of" movie accounting for its production, which is featured as extra material on the CD, the director Samuel David Bayer claims that he intends to "hand-burn the negative with cigarettes and spill coffee on it." We then see him burn the film-strip and scratch it with a razor blade. The procedure clearly offers a tangible sense of physical materiality, much like the physicality of the film Rodriguez has used to obtain his effects, though the styles of distortion differ. The violent aggressivity these film materials are subjected to can bring to mind violent acts of iconoclasm.

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15 It might be argued that the famous instances of manipulated time in *The Matrix* do not represent an abatement of movement, but rather the opposite, its amplification, by means of highly refined motion control. This refined motion control takes place on the diegetic level where Neo must learn to command his powers (in Zen-inspired scenes where mind trumps matter), and on a technical level through the ground-breaking visual effects of the movie. This, by the way, is only one of a series of ways in which the spatiotemporal flexibility of moving images in general has been augmented with digital effects to allow for the emergence of a new aesthetic of post-production that excels in the use of mutable temporality (see Fetveit 2011).

16 The video won six awards at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2005, most notably Video of the Year. It was also awarded Best Direction, Best Editing, and Best Cinematography, as well as Best Group Video and Best Rock Video.

Groys describes the iconoclastic strategies of the avant-garde of the 1920s, as “a staged martyrdom of the image.” His observations on the 1920s avant-garde iconoclastic practices are surprisingly well-fitted to practices characteristic of the current aesthetics of noise, most certainly those to which Bayer subjected the above-mentioned film strip.

In its treatment by the avant-garde, the image is – in both symbolic and literal terms – sawed apart, cut up, smashed into fragments, pierced, spiked, drawn through dirt, and exposed to ridicule [...]. This is by no means driven by some sadistic urge to cruelly maltreat the bodies of innocent images. Nor is all this wreckage and destruction intended to clear the way for the emergence of new images and the introduction of new values. Far from it, for it is the images of wreckage and destruction themselves that serve as the icons of new values. In the eyes of the avant-garde the iconoclastic gesture represents an artistic device, deployed less as a means of destroying old icons than as a way to generate new images – or, indeed, new icons (Groys 2008, p. 77).

At the end of this observation, Groys, without claiming to do so, comes close to articulating an aesthetic of noise which sits in a complex way between an iconoclastic gesture and a retooling of what was formerly unwanted noise. It becomes a means of expression in its own right, as an iconoclastic act that aims to produce new icons. And here it gets complicated, because diagnosing the punishment meted out on the film material merely as expressing iconoclasm is hardly satisfactory, no matter how violently the martyrdom of the image is staged. What we see in present audiovisual culture is not merely destruction of the image and ways of displaying the weaknesses of various media. It is also, as we have seen, a caring for and a nostalgia for media materialities that are about to become obsolete. The unsettled score here – between appreciation and depreciation, between nostalgia and scorn – may be related to what Zygmunt Bauman diagnoses as a fundamental ambivalence in what he calls “liquid modernity” (2000). This is a situation in which we come to celebrate technological progress by displaying the inadequacies of past media, while at the same time evoking the life and warmth of older media in a nostalgic gesture of longing.

Such a structural situation – mired with ambivalent tensions, where destruction and love go together – provides us with a sketch for a medial ecology defined by our fundamental ambivalence toward the efficiency of computers for handling cultural data on the one side, and a longing for lost materialities like vinyl and film emulsion on the other. This provides a backdrop for assessing the current ubiquity of the aesthetics of medium-specific noise. In particular, we may see more clearly why it has risen to prominence, and therefore perhaps the factors that may lead to its decline. But before getting to that, how can we further explain the urge for material embodiment and for the materiality of the medium?

## Embodied Animism

The critical theorist Greg Hainge's reading of the foregrounding of noise is much in tune with that of Auner and Link, when he points out how these noises can evoke "a more embodied, physical, past era different from our own" (Hainge, 2005, p. 6). He comments on the sense of nostalgia produced by "Mom's typewriter," a font emulating the print of an old pre-electric typewriter, a noisier version of the more common "Typist."<sup>17</sup> Its inadequacies, he says, become proof of the overwork to which this machine has been subject, like Mom. Certainly, they are both past their retirement age, but they are somehow more endearing in their slight incompetence, as they cannot fail to make us nostalgically recall what they once were (Hainge 2005, p. 5). In Hainge's phrasing, the distinction between the human Mom and the machine typewriter disappears, which is a main point in his analysis. The machine comes to elicit similar notions of getting old and worn and eventually passing away, and before that happens, both Mom and machine become "endearing." Hainge's reading adeptly brings out the animism in play, where old media and old machines come to be perceived as subjected to similar processes of aging and decay as humans, and they therefore also enlist similar endearing emotions.

Now, Hainge notes how "the promise of 'Mom's typewriter' (for all nostalgia implies a promise, a promise of a return to a longed-for past) is a lie since it emulates as noisy (or opaque) a font that was never ever intended to be silent and transparent" (2005, p. 6). Clearly, the nostalgia articulated by these noises does not return us to a longed-for past, but sets up a *relation* to this past (as shown in Link's analysis). This relation is premised on the evocation of the older medium, and this evocation is made possible by means of its characteristic noise. Thus, we are not returned to the medium in its prime working modus, where it would be perceived as reasonably transparent and therefore not so clearly articulated as a material medium subject to decay, error and noise.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it returns us to a situation in which the medium is worn, noisy, opaque, endearing and possibly even dying, setting up an ambiguous relation between now and then. The putting on display of the weaknesses of the older medium, by focusing on its noise, can

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17 The font was made in 1997 by Christoph Mueller who typed the alphabet on his mom's old typewriter, scanned it and then made the font.

18 Both Auner and Link point out how we are trained to listen past the noise of whatever medium is in current use. As Link says: "Listeners learned to 'hear through' noise. The dust and nicks on vinyl recordings, amplifier hum, or speed inaccuracies of tape mechanisms produced types of noise that were basically as predictable as potholes on a familiar road. We knew where and when these things occurred and simply drove around them, so to speak. We could ignore noise and, as we say, ignorance is bliss" (p. 36).

be taken to imply the sovereign quality of the new digital alternative as well as an affirmation of progress. Contrary to this, the endearing weaknesses can be read as placing the older medium on the right side of a divide constituted by a set of dichotomies sorting good from bad. The noisy media then may very well come to be seen as alive as opposed to dead, warm as opposed to cold, human as opposed to machinic, real as opposed to virtual, material as opposed to immaterial.<sup>19</sup>

Objects, as they age, become marked with their history. This, according to Walter Benjamin, comes to endow them with a special “aura.” He also notes that an aura can be evoked by an experience of something that seems close, yet distant at the same time, like the star in the night sky that is remote while its light is yet with us. More precisely, he speaks of “a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance [...] of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin cited in Hansen 2008, p. 336). The presence-effect of mechanical recordings is precisely that which places us within the reach of, brings us close to, people or objects recorded. Yet, these media based on *automated inscription* – to use Friedrich Kittler’s term, which is more narrow and also more fitted to electronic media than Benjamin’s term *mechanical reproduction* – also place us at a remove from the objects and events they represent. Thus, a structural similarity can be noted between the operational logic of media based upon automated inscription and the aura-producing constellation Benjamin describes. Noise may intensify this pull between distance and nearness. It may expand a sense of distance, by making characters, like the ones in *Lyrical Nitrate* and *Decasia* seem more faded and remote. Yet, this sense of partial loss of and disturbance to the connection may also intensify our perception and our relation to what may otherwise be lost, and paradoxically bring it nearer to us. In this way, as we have seen, noise can charge recordings with a curious energy, an energy that the clean recording would lack.

Noise, by disturbing the transition of sound and imagery from the source to the delivery medium can make that transition precarious, staging it as only able to take place against long odds. What comes to us, then, must be cherished, as it just barely made it to us and was almost lost. This set-up, where a recording is charged with a special energy by means of intervening noise, can be generalized beyond the medium-specific sense of noise discussed here, to an even more general disturbance that interferes with or obscures a signal.<sup>20</sup> The negation of the

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19 How this is balanced in actual examples, whether they are tilted clearly in favor of the presumably analog, or they articulate a more ambivalent position, may vary.

20 This is an issue that deserves to be explored in its own right. I started such an exploration by presenting a paper on *The Precarious Aesthetic of the Documentary* in a seminar at University of Copenhagen in November 2007. The work is now being continued in the research project *The Power of the Precarious Aesthetic*, which is supported by The Danish Council for Independent Research for 2013-2015.

medium's ordinary power to inform us about what is happening can then be compensated by a denser connection offered by the metonymic power of the relic. In a sense, we move, as from metaphor to metonymy, from likeness to closeness, from the iconic to the indexical. The energy with which the medium is charged is also auratic – both on the model of the paradoxical distance and nearness, and on the model of how objects are marked by the history to which they have been subjected. Thus, noise may work to actualize the media in question as material objects in their own right, subject to histories, marked by a physical life, ultimately subject to decay and death. This is a major contribution of the timely films *Lyrical Nitrate* and *Decasia*, which seems to display limited interest in the faith of its human subjects, and focus instead on the death of their own medial material.

Sally Mann combines an interest in the death and decay of human subjects, as well as that of the medium itself, in her series of photographs collected in *What Remains* (2003). Mann's engagement with death combines mortality as a motive with a Culloden wet plate technique that produces an uneven image that itself seems subject to the similar processes of decay and dying that affect humans. Thereby, the mortality of the medium comes to echo the mortality of the represented, but it also endows the representation of death with a contemplative spirituality. The carnal medial effect offered by the very hands-on techniques required by the wet plates helps to carry the images away from a merely informational, "forensic" status to one that invites reflection on our predicament as humans, our mortality.<sup>21</sup>

In these images, we get the stripping bare of the medium itself, perhaps more than the subjects presented. The medium, being examined in its decay, where its inadequacies and problems are laid bare, inadequacies that testify to the particular shortcomings through which it can be recognized and evoked, is revealed as to its weaknesses and possible mortality. In fact, the medium comes across as as mortal as the humans represented in it. And just as the decaying and dying human body elicits care, so does the decaying and dying medial body. This allows human sentiments to come to bear on the medium, it humanizes the medial body on the basis of the silent assumption that what can die is alive. But how does this material and embodied medium come forth, how does it speak?

Barthes has talked about the grain of the voice, about the ways in which the body comes to obstruct the air flowing out of the lungs and, by means of this hindrance, how the flesh of the body inscribes itself into the voice by providing a

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21 In spite of the noisy technology that thickens the medium and ensures its embodied quality, a number of Mann's images in this series remain somewhat clinical because of the limited concern for the subjects represented, except for her beloved dog whose remains may have initiated the project.

graininess that testifies to its carnal physicality. This bodily resistance to the air slipping out inscribes itself in the voice as *grain*, which again thickens the physical connection between the body of the singer and the body that listens. The obstructions inscribing themselves in the signal as grain are much like the obstructions we have observed inscribing themselves with noise. They are immensely revealing, similar to the way that medium-specific noise reveals the medium, or attack transients help identify the instrument being played. Now, what Barthes sought in the grain of the voice was the intimacy of a connection between the singing body and the listening body – a connection between two humans. When talking about the *grain of the medium*, however, the relation is no longer between the experiencing human body and the represented human body, but between the experiencing body and the medium itself, which has now become endowed with a body subject to decay. It has, in a sense, become mortal and therefore, by implication, alive. Furthermore, the grain that helps thicken and bring into being that medial body ensures for the beholder and listener a physical connection to the represented. This connection ensures the invocation of a form of presence that is physically based, that rests in contiguity more fundamentally than in similarity. But if analog media can be noisy, and can be alive, can digital media be alive as well?

## Digital Noise: GLITCH

Noise from analog media is often presented in a setting where the idea of a more perfect digital medium is evoked. This, however, is a digital perfection that at the same time may be associated with something cold, non-human and machine-like. The genre of Glitch music effectively counters the ideas of perfection, of coldness and immortality that tend to be associated with the digital, in spite of the rapid aging of computers and software caused by upgrades. It demonstrates in a tangible way that digital technology can fail, too. In Glitch music, the particular distortions and inadequacies of the computer, CD and CD-player are put on display in the stuttering, skittering, skating sounds of glitches as the technology fails to correctly read and translate files into analog and thus perceivable sounds. Thus, premature conclusions about the immateriality of the digital, and the unique materiality of analog media are called into question by this genre.<sup>22</sup> Glitch mimics the strategy of mortality adopted by analog media to communicate the fact that digital media are subject to decay as well, which, by implication, also comes to endow them

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22 See Fetveit (2007) for a critical discussion of notions of immateriality.

with a sense of life, and invites notions of animism to come into play in relation to these media as well.

The strength of the interest in Glitch beyond the avant-garde – leading it to become incorporated in the music of Madonna as well as in music videos by Lady Gaga and many more – must be seen as fueled by more substantial cultural negotiations concerning our media as they migrate to digital platforms.<sup>23</sup> Thus, if the prevalence of medium-specific noise at present can be linked to negotiations concerning the shift to digital media technologies, we may expect the interest in such an aesthetic to diminish as digital media become more settled, and nostalgia for analog media eventually fades into the background.<sup>24</sup> However, the new options for re-circulating older media in digital media have provided important expressive options that are likely to continue being used. They broaden the expressive palette of these media substantially. Moreover, the interest in, and exploration of, noise has also disclosed a rich array of artistic possibilities that may transform and continue to develop in their own right, in various ways, rather than merely fade with the further adoption and normalization of digital technologies. At any rate, noise as a means of intensifying human expression is likely to stay with us in various shapes and forms. The precarious aesthetic, based in various forms of obstructed perceptions urging us to intensify our efforts to sense vital signals that are barely perceivable, will also stay with us in different ways, as it is a fundamental operational logic associated with the automatic recording of sounds and images. Therefore, the aesthetics of our media can be expected to remain noisy in various ways, even after the current interest in noise becomes less urgent.

## Media Aesthetics

The exploration of noise, above, takes place in a situation where the concept of medium has gained considerable traction across the humanities, although our insights into how ‘the medium is the message,’ to say it with McLuhan, or into what difference the medium makes, and how it may operate in a number of settings, still needs to be improved. Yet, the common interest in exchanges across disciplines like film and media studies, art history, visual culture, aesthetic philosophy, and others is considerable. In such a context, media aesthetics may be a

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23 For an analysis of glitch in Madonna’s “Don’t Tell Me,” see Anne Danielsen and Arnt Maasø, “Mediating Music: Materiality and Silence in Madonna’s ‘Don’t Tell Me,’” *Popular Music* (2009).

24 An analysis of such processes, involving de-solidifying and solidifying of media, can be found in my article “The Concept of Medium in the Digital Era” (Fetveit 2012).



useful term around which to organize productive exchanges.<sup>25</sup> It may also be a label to describe research into aesthetic uses of medial matters.

The current essay has pursued an interest, not only in the aesthetic sensations and experiences strategic uses of medium-specific noise can produce, but also in principles that are guiding the ways in which this noise operates. This has involved an interrogation of what noise is in its various definitions, its history in the realm of art and music, as well as how the intensified uses of medium-specific noise can be related to media change.

Thus, the exploration above is driven by an interest in how matter – in particular noisy matter that mediates – works to generate experience and emotional engagement. My vantage point has been an interest in the aesthetic experience produced by the sensuous offerings from the medial matters in question. The choice of examples has not been informed by an attempt to prove the importance of medial differences in cases where the medium aspires to invisibility, as media tend to do, but rather to interrogate examples where the medium clearly demands attention, and is actively operating as an arena for creative artistic interventions. The examples also work comparatively to elucidate how what may appear to be similar techniques may elicit widely different results on the level of meaning and emotional engagement, for example, by the different uses of torn and noisy film materials by Olin and Rodriguez, producing even more different effects.

A conception of media aesthetics as a research program that invites close attention to the medium, to the materials and technologies deployed, and how they operate together to elicit sensations and engagement, could be deemed rather formalist and lacking in political significance. Thus, it is also crucial to look into how human subjects are inscribed into and co-constituted by media in a number of ways. It becomes important to ask what life-worlds are co-produced at the receiving end of alternate medial expressions. I have shown how the political productivity of Olin to grant freedom, to suspend and even to erase judgment towards female bodies, in particular, is partly articulated by the noisy imperfection of her medium, while the noisy aesthetic of Rodriguez is more likely to produce a playful jack-ass attitude. Thus, drawing attention toward the biopolitical aspects of noisy media – being both able to elicit fragility, fallibility and a number of other attitudes and sensations – is vital for bringing media aesthetic analysis to bear on life, also in its more political dimensions. Formal aesthetic choices are often fundamentally invested with preferences for life forms and values making up the social fabric of the human endeavor. For this reason, digital perfection is easily translated into something foreign to human life, a point which may be part

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25 An example of this can be found at University of Copenhagen where *Seminar in Media Aesthetics* provides a fertile arena for exchanges accross disciplines.

of the inspiration for an aesthetics that shows the digital to be fallible too, even subject to mortal decay.

Times of medial transition, most certainly the slow burning revolution in media that the migration to a digital platform entails, are bound to make the medium appear more clearly to us. A business-as-usual situation tends to make the medium retreat to a less prominent position – as a kind of reassuring message that stabilizes our sense of connection to the world, and inscribes us with less friction into appropriate subject positions in various life-worlds. In times of transition, it is more evident how the medium is the message, and how those producing media have, in a sense, worked on that message to various effects. However, in times of greater medial stability, when media slide into the background and stop being noticed as much, it will still remain important to investigate these ways in which the medium operates, the differences it makes, the message it may offer, and the subject positioning and life forms it invites.

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