Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics

Aaron Zwintscher

Published by Punctum Books

Zwintscher, Aaron.
Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76691

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2651395
In the beginning was the noise. In the end there will be noise. Noise is the ground against which all signals must define themselves, the medium by which signals travel. Thus, noise stems from the roots of knowledge, makes knowledge possible, even as it articulates the limits of knowledge. Our unfortunate times (and the limits the times impose on our knowledge) thus compel me to write in a new way, to think in a new way, to write and think noise. Because we cannot properly acknowledge our noise or the global impact of our noise, our waste, our excess, our filth, our disruption, and our destruction, I must write in a manner that draws attention to that noise, to noise as the other of knowledge. Such a practice is necessarily incomplete, even as it tries to be comprehensive. But its incompleteness does not prevent it from acting, from demanding change in the world, and in the ways we think about the world.

How much noise must be made to silence noise? How often must I interrupt, digress, and deviate through (and with) my discourse in order to force the change that would reshape

1 This metaphor draws directly from the process of active noise cancellation (such as used in noise-cancelling headphones) that generates noise (or rather a construction of expected noise) to cancel out external noise by
the human relationship with the nonhuman? How can I make my noise challenge the increasing volume of waste, excess, domination, power, destruction, and desecration? It might have been better for us if the Earth had screamed, as it did for Professor Challenger. If it had done so, it might have been easier for us to recognize our error. Instead, the world has gone eerily silent. Thinking the ecological thought, and consequentially, the thorybological thought, is difficult: it involves becoming open, radically open—open forever, without the possibility of closing again. Knowing is no longer enough, we must also act. We must use our noise to reimagine our collective being-as-noise, to redirect its flow.

The primary source of noise is within the body, whose subliminal murmur our proprioceptive ear sometimes strains to hear: billions of cells dedicated to biochemical reactions, the likes of which should have us all fainting from the pressure of their collective hum. The second source of noise is spread over the world: thunder, wind, surf, birds, avalanches, the terrifying rumbling that precedes earthquakes, cosmic events. These forms of noise are the sounds of life, demonstrating the inevitability of being-as-noise. But they are increasingly too quiet for us to recognize. Humans have replaced those sounds of the body and the world with louder and louder forms of everyday life, of progress, of development, of technology—transportation, construction, war.

We have enormous difficulty in accepting our limitedness, our finitude, and this failure is a cause of much tragedy (for both the human and especially the nonhuman). Central to this is a failure to understand failure, to understand the reality being out of phase with it. Despite there being more noise, we hear less of it.

In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s “When the World Screamed,” an early articulation of what would now be considered the Gaia Hypothesis, Professor Challenger drills into the core of the earth until he pierces its brain, causing it to unleash a horrifying and piercing scream. He does this, in a disgusting articulation of privilege, simply because he can, to demonstrate that he exists and to make the world literally notice him.
of being-as-noise. Philosophy begins in disappointment, in failure. The hope and aim of this text and thorybology as a whole is to open what philosophers most often seek to close, to seek out an unfinished knowledge, to dwell in failure and undecidability. The ecological thought is a virus that infects all other areas of thinking and thorybology, now infected, seeks to do the same. Together they describe a method for finding and making use of anomalies, paradoxes, and conundrums in an otherwise smooth-looking stream of ideas. Meaning arises from the meaningless. Background and foreground rely on distinguishing between here and there, this and that. Thorybology interrupts those distinctions, breaks them down, blurs their boundaries. After all, noise has no contradictory equivalent. The contradiction of a noise is a noise.

This text traces the journey of the thinker who does not have to be contented with canonical knowledge or with the correct proof, but who must throw himself also into myths, stories, and literatures. Who must seek, through these diverse sources, a new clinamen, a disturbing imbalance and fragility that haunts this play in order for it to be play, the irruption of radical uncertainty into all fields and the end of the comforting universe of determinacy. Wandering includes the risk of error and distraction but it is philosophy by contact. This text is situated on a wavering margin between words and music, and between music and sheer sound, and ultimately between sound (foreground) and noise (background).

In the use of a distinction, the distinction itself becomes invisible insofar as one passes “through” the distinction to make indications. The result is thus that we end up surreptitiously unifying the world under a particular set of distinctions, failing to recognize that very different sorts of indications are possible. Only by recognizing the distinctions that we have made and the frontiers and divisions that those distinctions have made, the noise they have produced and were produced by, can we understand other possible outcomes, other paths for thought and action. We are in the noises of the world, we cannot close our door to their reception, and we evolve,
rolling in their incalculable swell. Noise is a turbulence, it is order and disorder at the same time, order revolving on itself through repetition and redundancy, disorder through chance occurrences, through the drawing of lots at the crossroads, and through global meandering, unpredictable and crazy. The politics of this turbulence is an anarchism of infinite responsibility rather than unlimited freedom, even though the goal of responsible action might be the cultivation of the other’s freedom. Humans are embarked on an irreversible economic, scientific, and technological adventure. One can regret the fact, and even do so with skill and profundity, but that is how it is, and it depends less on us than on what we have inherited from history. There is no exit from this situation, but that does not mean there is no hope or possibility for change.