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'Extreme' music and graphic representation online

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Abstract

Previously obscure musical genres, traditionally mediated by tape trading, mail order and the like, become relatively public as they migrate into online environments. The niche is now easily available in 'pirated' format: mp3 blogs post links to material which was previously only available on limited-run cassette or vinyl. Such material also circulates widely on peer-to-peer networks, and listeners can conveniently find each other and new bands through platforms such as Last.fm. One such genre is considered here: power electronics or 'noise'. The textual and visual material around power electronics is presented as a limit case for considering the grounds upon which censorship operates in Australia.

Power electronics has a longstanding thematic preoccupation with transgressive content, and it addresses such issues from a complex and sometimes indeterminate position, ultimately leaving judgement with the listener. However, such material appears increasingly problematic where there is no grasp of the context of use, and no grasp of the often surprisingly nuanced approach taken by the artists and fans involved. Ambivalence is characteristic of the subtle orientations evident in power electronics, and this has in the past led to interpretive problems inside and outside of the subculture. Regardless of whether an argument can be made about the aesthetic merits of this genre, its increasing online visibility is inflected in the Australian context by a legal framework likely to criminalise it 'on sight'. This is an imposition which obfuscates the meaning of the material, its social use, and most seriously, the broader societal context which gives rise to such material in the first place.

1. Introduction

Check out the skinny white kids from Boston who ditched their Converge hoodies when someone told them about Whitehouse. Now they roll with that new "shocking" noise scene, which is pretty much an ongoing, transparently calculated ploy staged by quite ordinary MySpace nerds and J. Crew shoppers. Gratuitous screeching, noncontextual use of the word "faggot," and songs about child rape will earn you a super-scary rep when you get banned from the local art gallery, but to the rest of us it's as safe, boring, and dumb as any football game. See you in a few years for your folk-rock phase, brohams [1].

'Extreme' is a generic designator, applied positively by participants within a range of musical subcultures, and used as a marketing feature by music magazines such as *Terrorizer* ("extreme music – no boundaries"), *Zero Tolerance* ("extreme views on extreme music by extreme people"), and *Pit* ("the extreme music magazine").

As one may assume, 'extreme' does *not* refer to contemporary state-funded opera, although that music may be considered extreme by many people unfamiliar with it. It *does* refer to entire artworlds, such as death metal, black metal, industrial music, power electronics, speedcore and other musical subcultures.

However, there is a continuum of extremity as it were, and access to online materials renders relatively public what had been obscure genres, mediated by a private, backstage set of practices engaged in by enthusiasts: tape trading and mail order and the like. Where the aforementioned magazines sometimes feature breathless reviews of the 'unlistenable', the previously *niche* is now easily available in 'pirated' format: numerous mp3 blogs post links to material which was previously only available on often extremely limited-run cassette or vinyl. Such material also circulates widely on peer-to-peer networks, and listeners can easily find each other, as well as further musical leads, through platforms such as Last.fm [2]. The very form of digital distribution, combined with such capacities as folksonomic tagging on Last.fm and other 'Web 2.0' sites, is such that rare and obscure releases now become much more accessible: initiates simply pursue the trail (by searching, for example, for all releases tagged with 'noise').

This has some consequences for a number of popular music subgenres which have thematic and stylistic preoccupations with, among other things, death, violence, and violent sex. Two such genres are 'grind' or 'brutal death metal', a metal subgenre, and an industrial subgenre: 'noise', or 'power electronics', the focus of this paper. Noise as a genre marker is a broad umbrella term, now incorporating a wide variety of styles, but for the purposes of this paper, discussion will be restricted to those bands and artists who routinely address transgressive themes.

Grind and noise differ in their stylistic approaches to signification, and this has some bearing on the interpretation of the material. And where metal in general has repeatedly been the subject of media concern and

moral panic [3], industrial has generally avoided such attention, often deliberately. As William Bennet has said of Whitehouse, the band most frequently credited with the emergence of the genre:

the existence and the success of the group has greatly depended upon NOT being in the press and maintaining a very low profile. There could be all sorts of trouble otherwise, given the public climate towards some of the subject matters we specialise in - material like this can quickly blow up in your face [4].

Neither grind nor power electronics can be said to seek the limelight; both routinely address subject matter which many might find unpalatable.

Comparing the two genres highlights the distinctive textual and sonic politics of each, and through such comparison we can see how the stylistics of each genre inform their interpretation. In the case of grind, the genre appears to use 'formal' thematics as genre identifiers, where these thematics do not 'mean' what they appear to mean, whilst in the case of power electronics, the approach to the material is such that moral attribution and judgement become even more difficult.

Where grind sometimes borders on the cartoonish in its preoccupations with spectacular violence and spectacular sexual violence, power electronics addresses issues such as serial murder, racial hatred, child sexual abuse, eating disorders, drug addiction, suicide, prostitution, and violent misogyny, from a complex position which customarily leaves judgement with the listener. The emphasis is commonly on the desperation and despair associated with such situations, alongside a usually, though not always, implicit critique of the situations that give rise to them.

For their audiences, it is likely that these genres constitute the principal social space within which such issues can be addressed, and their relative visibility and longevity is indicative of the fact that there is some felt need for these issues to be addressed in this way. However, such material, particularly when taken together with its artwork, becomes problematic to outsiders where there is no grasp of the context of use, and no grasp of the often surprisingly nuanced approaches taken by the practitioners involved – artists and fans alike.

Ambivalence and open-endedness are characteristic of the quite subtle orientations displayed by power electronics producers; this has in the past led to interpretive problems inside and outside of the subculture. Whether or not an argument can be made about the aesthetic merits of such material, the increasing visibility of these genres online means that possession of certain digital album cover images, for instance, likely constitutes a crime in Australia, an imposition which fails to grasp the meaning of the material, its social use, and most seriously, the broader societal context which gives rise to such material in the first place.

2. Transgression, noise, and musical meaning

'Noise' is a genre of experimental electronic music which has its roots in the post-punk industrial scene of the late 1970s. Noise is oriented sonically around texture and density; it is characterised by atonality, often harsh, granular static, feedback, and synthesised oscillations and pulses. There is a fundamental paradox about noise as a musical genre; the term 'noise music' is a contradiction. Noise and music are defined by their opposition; the very notion of music is predicated on its being differentiable from noise. The paradox of noise as a genre is that of formlessness within strict formal parameters. This paradoxical 'anti-musical musicality' or formal formlessness has been noted in other avant-garde or experimental music scenes, such as free improvisation in jazz circles [5].

In terms of its mood or affect, noise is associated with "decay, decomposition, disorder, helplessness, horror, irresolution, madness, paranoia, persecution, secrecy, unease and terror" [6]. As with any musical subculture, there are disputes among the cognoscenti as to the parameters and definitions of the genre, the appropriate designators for various subgenres (death industrial, harsh noise, power electronics, rhythmic noise etc.), and the constituent elements to be assessed when locating one or other piece of music within the genre spectrum.

Noise attempts to achieve certain things. It attempts to address issues which are taboo; it is transgressive. It aims at both a sonic and a discursive level to explore the limits of the conventionally explicable, the limits of the comprehensible [7]. In some accounts [8], it aims to simultaneously attack norms of musicality and norms of bourgeois respectability. These aspects: its thematic and audible 'noisiness', are inextricably linked, and in violating these standards, noise is predicated on their existence and perpetually bound to refer to and in some sense reinforce them.

These two conventions of the genre bolster each other; it is as though without one or the other, it would much more difficult to establish the preferred reading. Noise, like grind, *could* (at the level of discursive content, for example in lyrics, titles, or album artwork) be 'about' fluffy bunnies, cotton candy, and so on, and still meet its objectives as a critique of musicality. In fact, noise would arguably present a more forceful critique of the conventions of musicality where discursive content was minimal or indeed wholly absent. But noise in fact seems to require transgressive content:

The subliminal message of most music is that the universe is essentially benign, that if there is sadness or tragedy, this is resolved at the level of some higher harmony. Noise troubles this worldview. This is why noise groups invariably deal with subject matter that is anti-humanist – extremes of abjection, obsession, trauma, atrocity, possession – all of which undermine humanism's confidence that through individual confidence and will, we can become the subjects of our lives, and work together for the general progress of the commonwealth [9].

That noise seemingly ‘needs’ to be about transgression in this way has broad and fascinating implications for understandings of musical meaning and of music as a vehicle for the transmission of meaning and of affect. However, it also has more immediate consequences in terms of the legal standing of the genre, and thus research into it and into music at large as such a vehicle.

Insofar as an explanation has been developed for the relation between noise as a genre and the routinely transgressive objects of its attention, the sonic experience of noise and the pleasures of noise are generally related to experiences of *power* and sonic manifestations of power. An approving review of the famously prolific noise musician Merzbow reads:

The sound is an assault. It is total and annihilating, an unstoppable sheet of noise covering the listener entirely. The sound is grainy and flowing, the sonic equivalent of a turbulent ocean of sand, chaotic and powerful [10].

The pleasure of the experience of noise lies at least in part in immersion in and *submission* to textured sound. Noise *is* power [11]. In submitting to noise, one can also take pleasure in this submission, and draw power *from* it. It seems logical enough, therefore, that musicians should choose to explore and articulate these dynamics through addressing transgressive and taboo material: through material which draws on real inequalities of power and real extremes in the exercise of power. Engagement with noise has consequently been likened to the sadomasochistic relation – it is unsurprising that Merzbow has released an album entitled *Music for Bondage Performance* (1991). The figure behind Merzbow, Masami Akita, has also published scholarly work on rope bondage and other aspects of BDSM culture. The thematics coincide and inter-articulate with the approach to sound itself – the genre is after all also called *power* electronics. At some level it is logical and consistent that abrasive noise should be associated with abrasive ‘meaning’, although the association is not necessary or automatic.

Noise thus coalesces or logically extends psychosocial and cultural tendencies and power effects present in all genres of music, and in fact in all socially produced sound [12]. This is what makes the genre of noise, as a cultural form, appear so compelling: noise seems to distil and concentrate an entire spectrum of contemporary concerns in an unnervingly targeted way.

Yet the persistent movement towards extremity in noise, towards further thematic radicalism and transgression, generates a curious kind of semiotic deflation, where in order to innovate and maintain interest, new avenues of human depravity must be pursued as subject matter which is appropriately shocking. Notable here is the sense in which noise can be said to *track and exploit* mainstream concerns regarding

whatever is the current nadir of horror. In researching noise – an activity not radically dissimilar to that engaged in by fans and especially novice fans [13] – one soon becomes embroiled in obscure histories, freeway killer biographies, conspiracy theories, alternative radical political histories, and what is referred to in some circles as ‘parapolitics’. Vagina Dentata Organ, for example, released *The Last Supper* in 1983, an album which consisted in its entirety of the ‘death tape’: the final recording produced at Jonestown immediately before (and during) the 1978 People’s Temple mass suicide. However, one also encounters material of such a nature that it is not immediately clear whether merely possessing digital copies of albums may be in violation of the law, independently of the more common infraction of violating, sometimes in a rather didactic and predictable fashion, conventional bourgeois decorum.

As an instance of the latter, in the work of Slogun, Deathpile, Richard Ramirez, Taint, Sutcliffe Jugend, Grunt etc., the figure of the serial killer looms large. Whitehouse named an early album *Right to Kill: Dedicated to Denis Andrew Nilsen* (1983), Deathpile produced an album called *Dedicated to Edmund Emil Kemper* (1997). The cover of Slogun’s *Pleasures of Death* (1997) is simply a list of the names of some serial killers, both infamous and obscure.

This is all-too-familiar territory: the serial killer, as sovereign *übermensch* ‘beyond’ morality, is a kind of experimental muse for exploring the limits of subjective experience and the limits of sense and musicality. Such topics are simultaneously transgressive and clichéd; the transgression is formulaic. Customarily, the serial killer is presented as an asocial enactment of repressed desires we are supposed to share, a symptom of contemporary spiritual bankruptcy, and an existential and moral lack or absence [14]. In the place of coherent motive one finds a grotesquely blank “negative economy of desire” [15]. We will (the story goes) be shocked out of our complacency in being challenged by this material, this shock will force us to confront our own complicity in the soul-destroying supermarket of Western capitalist consumer culture (*etc.*). This is rather like Adorno’s ‘art after Auschwitz’, and a well-worn avant-garde aesthetic strategy.

Other conventional themes in noise include violent ethnic conflict, as exemplified by much of the work of Con-Dom, and, with similar ambiguity, graphic political, religious, (and/) or sexual violence, such as the album cover for The Grey Wolves’ *No New Jerusalem* (1985).

The ‘confusionist’ ambiguity of such images, needless to say, is not clarified by the enclosed audio, and The Grey Wolves were allegedly obliged to spell out their political persuasions when neo-Nazis began appearing at their live shows. At the limits of meaning, ambiguity and the refusal of closure is open to (mis)interpretation in the mundane ways one would expect [16]. Criminalisation is just such an interpretive response.

3. Critique and criminality

For current purposes, the central issue around noise lies at the intersection of two institutional or structural phenomena. The first is that subcultural practices around niche genres are increasingly visible online. The second is that, in the Australian context, representations of certain kinds are criminal, and that it is furthermore extremely difficult to determine *what* kinds of representations are criminal or how they achieve such status.

For instance, one of the covers of *Hated Perversions*, a 2008 compilation album on Mikko Aspa's Finnish label Freak Animal, features a digitally manipulated or 'morphed' image of a young girl, where the girl's mouth appears to have been replaced by that of an inflatable sex doll. This image likely constitutes "pseudo child pornography" in Australia, making it an offence to possess [17]. Yet in browsing online noise 'distro' sites, the image is easy to stumble upon, and a cursory Google search for the album will return links to blogs and other locations where pirated copies of the album are freely available for download.

The Discogs database, an invaluable user-generated archive with cross-listed details for approaching two million musical releases, commonly includes digital images of album covers, including that for *Hated Perversions*. Music fans who regularly upload and download large quantities of audio on peer-to-peer may not even be aware they are in possession of such images, given their interest lies largely in *music*.

It is useful to contextualise the legal status of this image with reference to the controversy over the 1976 album cover for Scorpions' *Virgin Killer*, which in 2008 resulted in some Wikipedia pages being temporarily blacklisted in the UK as "potentially illegal". Needless to say, the controversy increased the visibility of the album cover, having the opposite effect to that intended [18]. The *Hated Perversions* album cover is similarly "potentially illegal" in Australia, meeting the (broad) definition of child pornography to the extent that it

depicts or *describes* (or *appears* to depict or describe), in a manner that would in all the circumstances cause offence to reasonable persons, a person who is (or *appears to be*) a child:

(a) engaged in sexual activity, or (b) in a sexual context, or (c) as the victim of torture, cruelty or physical abuse (whether or not in a sexual context) [19, emphasis added].

As of December 2009, when it was announced that Australia would proceed with mandatory internet filtering, material that is refused classification (RC) "includes child sex abuse content, bestiality, sexual violence including rape, and the detailed instruction of crime or drug use" [20]. At the time of writing it remains unclear how the scheme applies to an extremely wide variety of material beyond the scope of this paper,

including for example educational material concerning safe sex or drug use, or sites concerned with euthanasia, which is illegal in Australia. The list of filtered content is to be drawn from lists maintained by "highly reputable overseas agencies", alongside any content "that is the subject of a complaint from the public" to ACMA (the Australian Communications and Media Authority) [21].

The Australian legislative framework has ramifications for fans, musicians, and distributors, but also of course for researchers. The legal definition above is sufficiently broad that it is possible, for instance, that a detailed academic description of some of the material that circulates in noise circles would also be potentially illegal.

Within the current legal framework the distinction between the metatextual material (album covers and titles etc.) and the actual music is a moot point: the definition of child pornography above extends to *non-visual* descriptions [17], such that the entire *audio* catalogue produced by Nicole 12 (one of Mikko Aspa's musical projects), for example, is also likely criminal. The facts of the increasing online accessibility of such material as circulates within the noise scene, combined with its increasing criminality; render some account of how this material is used and to what purposes imperative. But even the possibility of conducting research so as to present such an account is being foreclosed in the current climate. There are, however, historical precedents demonstrating the curious intersection of media criminalisation and subcultural activity: consider, as an example, Peter Sotos and his relationship with noise pioneers Whitehouse [22].

In 1985, Peter Sotos was arrested for obscenity and eventually found guilty of possession of child pornography: the first person in the United States to be found guilty of such a charge. He received a suspended sentence. Sotos was originally arrested for producing and circulating a zine called *Pure*. There are good reasons for considering Sotos and his work in light of his longstanding association with Whitehouse. Sotos was a member of the group from 1983. He left in 2002, with another member of the group citing "a notable difference in lifestyle attitudes" as the cause of the departure [23]. The piece "Ruthless Babysitting", on the 2006 Whitehouse album *Asceticists*, is widely reputed to be about Sotos, and is unusual for the insight it furnishes into the noise scene's internal political morality regarding the consumption of problematic media. It reflects the concerns of this paper and the written lyrics warrant attention [24].

In addition to his work with Whitehouse, Sotos has written prose, essays, and fiction, and produced a number of spoken word and audio collage albums. The spoken word album *Proxy* (2005) features Sotos chronicling a litany of sexual horrors, largely although not exclusively concerning the commercial sexual exploitation of children

(usually from the perspective of a consumer). The audio collage album *Waitress* (2005), like some of Sotos' other collage work with Whitehouse, as on *Bird Seed* (2003) and *Cruise* (2001), is assembled from audio interviews of children being interviewed about their sexual abuse, adults describing the sexual abuse they were subject to when they were children, and parents describing the circumstances in which their children were abused or abducted and killed. This material is culled from radio and TV talk-shows and documentaries.

Interestingly, the critical reception of this work, as in the following review of *Bird Seed* (2003), suspends its apparent referentiality, content, and implications:

The title track, sequenced right in the middle of the record, is a 15-minute sound collage comprised entirely of monologues delivered by victims of rape and sexual abuse. It's some interesting stuff – and disturbing in an entirely different way than the preceding music – but ultimately doesn't really stand up to repeat plays [25].

From a conventional politically progressive perspective towards the 'meaning' of subcultural texts, this review, like many other accounts of what is happening where noise addresses such issues, seems to elide the ostensible social and political implications of the collage and thus, arguably, the 'meaning' of the album of a whole, restricting it to being that of a solely aesthetic object which one may listen to, use, and re-use. If something 'stands up to repeated plays', it is a good (financial) investment, as its (artistic) value persists into the future. The review situates *Bird Seed* as something which either bears or does not bear the listener's ongoing interest as an aesthetic experience. This doubling confusion between commodity, art and political statement (with its possible status as critique or salacious celebration yet to be determined) is something Whitehouse would no doubt relish. As it happens, the Sotos collages which feature on Whitehouse albums *do* have some moral context for their interpretation, in that the adjacent slabs of noise certainly signify, and the lyrical content and vocal delivery elsewhere certainly presents the performance of outrage for which Whitehouse are famous.

It is not so easy, however, to make a similar argument regarding the 'meaning' of *Pure*, which claims at the outset that it "satiates and encourages true lusts" [26]. As a text, as a career-making moment, and as an element in the history of the genre of noise, *Pure* gets us to the hub of a number of issues: around the circulation of problematic content, the criminalisation of such content, the relocation of documentary evidence of criminal acts in new contexts, and the role of context and interpretation in determining the legal and moral status of access to such content.

With *Pure* it is not so much the litany of cruelty which is at issue (these are the facts of the cases concerned: people were raped, tortured and murdered), but the

manner in which they are presented. The most frequent topics are the documented actions of serial killers, and Nazi concentration camp atrocities. In *Pure #1*, for instance, conjectures are advanced around a transcript of the audio recording made by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley of the sexual torture of Lesley Downey, who was 10 years old at the time of her murder (Sotos evidently elaborated at length on this topic in the currently out-of-print *Selfish, Little: The Annotated Lesley Ann Downey*) [27]. The text dwells, for instance, on the consequences of child murder for the surviving families as an achievement on the part of the murderers: the grief of the parents is an "added pleasure" [26].

There are two conventional interpretations for what Sotos is doing:

1. Sotos is conducting a subtle critique of the hypocrisy in media representations of actual violence, and drawing out and exploring the pornographic appeal in such representations.

2. Sotos is a paedophile (and for good measure, a boring exhibitionist too).

As it happens, Sotos seemingly rejects both of these interpretations:

I'm absolutely sick of the differences between intention and interpretation. I want to create an art that is ideally shored. One that can't be misunderstood any longer. Not by the powers that want to see me jailed or by the fucking mice that pretend I'm doing something socially significant [28].

This is all very 'confrontational' in the over-determined terms which provide noise with precisely the transgressive appeal the genre has. The parameters of these terms are in part given by their continual formulation in mass media descriptions, often of exactly the same crimes. Of course, we are not obliged to accept either of the above interpretations; it is also possible that both could hold. Part of the objective for noise as a genre is to *refuse* moral closure, to confront and disrupt the finality of interpretation.

Thus Sotos, or Nicole 12, say, do not account in any determinate sense for what it is exactly that they *really mean*: such meaning can only be guessed at or projected by the listener. The style of noise is predicated on a posture of nihilistic *nonmeaning*, of attempting to gesture towards meaninglessness. Thematically, noise is premised upon and draws much of its success from an extraordinary discursive gambit: it uses material which seems to have an absolute and incontestable meaning, to interrogate the idea of meaning itself. Such a gambit perhaps relies on the meaningfulness of the transgression raised as such; it may be a calculated ploy in claiming *not* to have one's cake and eating it all the same.

This strategy is itself perhaps incoherent and morally problematic: such an interrogation of meaning relies in some sense on the transgressive content being meaningful and indeed shocking in the required way. The attempt to

disrupt meaning in *this* way is parasitic precisely on the stability and abhorrence of *that* meaning. The claim to moral indeterminacy, be it critical or blank, is perhaps not made in good faith, but it succeeds *to the extent that we can't tell whether it succeeds*. Indeterminacy is here success, and whether this is coherent or how it is to be understood, this is at least part of the appeal and pleasure of the genre. Not only does this make much noise difficult to defend in a political sense, it has the added critical benefit of making those who *would* defend it appear to the pro-censorship lobby to be advocating for 'sick art', and thus no doubt 'sick' themselves.

Noise musicians who address child sexual abuse hit a special nerve beyond the serial killer/war atrocity fare in this regard, because children commonly function in Western cultures as the absolute and incontestable benchmark of innocence, goodness, and purity. This makes it even more difficult to talk about noise 'rationally', but it highlights the fact that the discussion is now so polarised that raising such work in the context of debates about censorship immediately runs the risk of being reductively subsumed into a "depravity narrative", where questioning censorship is equivalent to supporting child sexual abuse [29]. The cultural anxiety around this sacredness of childhood is further evidenced by the fact that the need for legislation is invariably couched in terms of protection of children and families. It is virtually unspeakable to raise the mundane point that the greatest threat to children comes not from the internet, but from within their own families: most child abuse is of course perpetrated by someone known to the child concerned.

4. Media, meaning, and morality

For the purposes of this paper, the meaning or value of something like *Pure* is not precisely the concern, vexed though this issue is. The point, rather, is the *function* of *Pure* within the noise community, and thus its continuing circulation. The soap opera narrative of Whitehouse's career trajectory, and thus the development of noise itself, is inextricably bound up with the recitation of the early arrest of Sotos; this arrest somehow signifies that noise *works*; that noise is transgressive and dangerous in the way it aspires to be, the way that validates it for scene members:

Sotos is an incredibly important figure within the power electronics community even outside of his contributions to Whitehouse ... Bennett and Best both position themselves as critical intellectuals opposed to hypocrisies within the present modes of discourse, rather than the apparatus of discourse itself [30].

This description allows us to infer that Sotos is opposed to "the apparatus of discourse itself", whilst the other members of Whitehouse are merely opposed to hypocrisies *within* that apparatus. This is a grand and interesting claim, but the noteworthy feature of this

continuous iteration of the Sotos story (replicated also in this paper) lies in its consequences for fans of noise, particularly those beginning to investigate the genre. The constitutive role of such origin myths is well documented in anthropology, where "the myth briefly summarizes the essential moments of the Creation of the World and then goes on to relate the genealogy of the royal family or the history of the tribe or the history of the origin of sicknesses and remedies, and so on" [31].

That Whitehouse are so often advanced as the founding fathers of noise, and that *Pure* is therefore inscribed in the genre's origin myth, effectively guarantees its continuing circulation. If it has any effect at all, its dubious legal status most likely renders it more rather than less desirable. Part of the point we run the risk of missing in relation to this is that it is precisely the rarity, obscurity, and potential criminality of such artefacts which feeds in to their desirability for scene members. Those who are 'truly' immersed can demonstrate such status through, for instance, exhibiting a copy of *Pure* in their peer-to-peer share, or posting links on Facebook, Last.fm, or elsewhere to where it can be found.

Where participation, belonging and cultural literacy within a given subculture continue to be articulated through possession of a collection of artefacts which instantiate and exemplify that subculture, and where these circulate freely in digitised form (thus increasing access and the potentials for participation), artefacts like *Pure*, constitutive of the counter-canon representing the subculture, will certainly continue to proliferate online. *Pure* is thus not consumed as a sign of or stimulus to criminal depravity, but as a fetish of subcultural commitment and expertise. In this sense, subcultural engagement within noise circles follows the "logic of mundanity" described by Kahn-Harris, where the circulation of transgressive texts is routinised; both illicit and quotidian [3].

Noise is a good example to consider when we look at the circulation of material subject to criminalisation, because of the conventional concerns and stylistics within the genre and the approaches to meaning elaborated within it. The problematic material 'stands for' something else: the mode of signification is complex; a perpetual underlying concern is the relation between violence and the representation of violence in a variety of media texts. The lack of fixity of meaning can be demonstrated by considering cases (such as The Grey Wolves, or relations between Whitehouse and Sotos) indicating that both inside and outside of the scene, there are periodic disputes about intent, meaning and morality.

These kinds of disputes are indicative of the negotiated and contextual character of meaning, and this negotiative aspect makes the legislative approaches to problematic content currently operating in Australia ill-advised, misguided, and potentially dangerous. That the aesthetic

strategies of noise so often involve a refusal to answer in a morally unambiguous way oblige us to ask why we seek such answers so vehemently that we are prepared to risk silencing whole communities. Noise again refers us to the question of power.

The transgressive content and radical ambivalence of noise disrupts politically progressive sociocultural analysis in a profound way. As a set of aesthetic practices, an approach to sonic signification, and a mode of communicating about the very real horror that happens to people, noise has a lot to say to researchers interested in music, politics, subculture, and their contemporary intersections with networked technology. *Pure*, or the work of Nicole 12 and many other musicians, is not easily described as exemplifying an emancipatory, DIY subculture, such as those commonly interpreted as unjustly criminalised despite their offering spaces for autonomy and identity to vulnerable or marginalised youth [32]. Noise frequently contains or elaborates upon visual and auditory documentary evidence of genuine human suffering. It therefore presents potentially insuperable problems to that approach to cultural studies and the sociology of popular music which

validates affective experience only insofar as it can find unanimity with a commitment to political and structural transformation. Cultural forms invested in affectivities less easily assimilated into interventionist agendas, on the other hand, tend to be met with far less approbation [33].

Noise is an excellent example of such a cultural form.

The ‘meaning’ of the noise text, such as it is, lies more in its transgressive appeal than its actual content. There is of course an affective and musical pleasure in the *sound* of noise, which ‘direct’, literal readings obfuscate. Politically oriented critique of the sort commonly espoused in the academy imposes a monolithic ethical meaning, at odds with that engaged in by fans and practitioners within the genre, as does legislation which projects a singular meaning and use. Unfortunately, such legislation tends to discourage the development of more successful engagements on the part of researchers.

The applicability of law to the online circulation of this kind of material is evidence of DeNora’s point: “If music is a medium for the construction of social reality, then control over the distribution of the musical resources in and through which we are configured as agents is increasingly politicized” [34].

The breathtaking inconsistency involved in the criminalisation of certain kinds of representation can easily be gestured towards with any number of similarly ‘realist’ examples from mainstream media. There is of course a close analogue for noise in its interest in accounts and evidence of actual violence: true crime. The website of noise musician Slogun contains a true crime bibliography [35]; without true crime literature and

everyday crime reportage the work of Sotos would be inconceivable; it could not exist.

The true crime genre of nonfiction has growing sales in Australia [36] and a long history internationally, bound up with the emergence of the mass press and with notions of free speech and civic responsibility [37]. But true crime is not thought of as a menace to society in the way that the cover of a noise release apparently can be. At worst, true crime is generally merely considered pulp; tasteless rubbernecking. But true crime simply elaborates on a constant theme in mainstream mass media.

Many will recall the interminable replaying of JonBenét Ramsey pageant footage in 1996, more recently there has been a great deal of interest in the Amanda Knox case, or in Dennis Ferguson as a personification of evil. Sexual abuse within the Catholic Church continues to draw international attention. In 2006, British media extracted great value out of footage of Anneli Alderton, one of Steve Wright’s victims, examining her reflection on the train to Manningtree, and Paula Clennell being interviewed by Anglia TV about the recent murders shortly before her disappearance, saying that she would continue to work (as a prostitute) as she needed the money. The CCTV footage of James Bulger being led to his death in 1993 is iconic.

That attempting to creatively address these cultural obsessions with real violence is effectively criminal, while we are free to both amuse ourselves with *Dexter* and *Criminal Minds*, and watch the last moments of Saddam Hussein’s life on primetime news, is surely evidence of a spectacular lacunae in the way these issues are thought. In May of this year President Barack Obama blocked demands by the ACLU and Human Rights Watch to have images depicting rapes and sexual assaults at Abu Ghraib and other locations released, on the grounds that their dissemination could put US military personnel at risk. The demand to view these images was put forward in the interests of freedom of speech, transparency, open government and the like, but no doubt these images can be put to other uses. This is precisely the point noise raises: ‘pornography’ is a matter of how some media form is *used*, and conversely, the apparently pornographic can be used to critique the moralistic position which is unable to acknowledge that. As with the common use of pornography as album covers in grind, noise suggests that what gets defined as ‘sick’ and thereby criminal is based on a massive and constitutive *other* of media representations which spring from and normalise an ostensibly repressed interest in violence. Consider Nick Út’s Pulitzer prize-winning 1972 photograph of 9 year old Kim Phúc fleeing the recently napalmed Trang Bang: the likely dismaying notion that there might be an exact equivalence between an image presented by liberals as a damning indictment of the military industrial complex, and an instance of child torture porn, arises in precisely

the semiotic environment noise takes as a point of departure [38].

Noise musicians deliberately raise extremely complex issues about the meaning and uses of violence and references to violence in our culture. Where we are interested in challenging violence and the celebration of violence, noise obliges us to question the ubiquity of such representations. There is a cultural and social framework of remarkable and sanctioned interest in violent and sexual crime. The kinds of crimes noise musicians are interested in become so as a direct response to this remarkable interest: in fact, the media's role in reflecting and magnifying this obsession is a central concern in noise. In some respects noise is an attempt to 'culture-jam' this obsession and highlight the discrepancies around these kinds of representations. It is unlikely that there can be a successful challenge to violence until these dots are joined up, until, for example, the violence perpetrated by the state and the violence perpetrated by sex offenders is understood to be linked, and our 'prurient' interest in such understood to be linked.

5. Conclusion

It is commonly argued that criminalisation of content merely drives the consumers of that content 'underground': the content continues to circulate in circuits obscured from view [39]. The 'overground' appearance of noise is a recent phenomenon; the genre remains niche and will likely continue to do so.

The argument elaborated here is rather different. Regardless of the legal status of specific album covers etc. within Australia, noise will continue to circulate here as elsewhere. Criminalisation would most likely have negligible effects; it may even have slight positive effects – 'the Streisand effect' as it is commonly known [40].

The emphasis here, therefore, is instead on the function or purpose of texts *within* the scene, as even within this extremely specific and closely defined context of use, 'meaning' remains a dynamic vehicle that is nonetheless tethered in a critical fashion to the meanings of such content as is circulated in mass media. Not only is there no straightforward way in the current Australian legislative system to explore this, but such routes as were available are increasingly being closed. To restrict access to these kinds of moving targets is to misidentify the problem, to violate rights of aesthetic practice and cultural critique, and to silence and marginalise dissent, however wilfully unedifying the expression of that dissent may be to hypothetical "reasonable persons" [19].

6. Acknowledgements

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7. Notes

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