

SoundEffects



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience

Jordan Lacey

Review

**Marie Thompson
Beyond Unwanted Sound:
Noise, Affect and
Aesthetic Moralism
(Bloomsbury 2017)**

www.soundeffects.dk



SoundEffects | vol. 7 | no. 3 | 2017

issn 1904-500X

When I recently completed my book *Sonic Rupture*, I received a back-cover blurb from Marie Thompson. At this stage I hadn't had any dealings with Thompson's work beyond reading the collaboratively edited book with Ian Biddle – *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*. I was curious to read Thompson's view that my book was a provocative intervention into the field of soundscapes studies, something which I had never intended. Rather my book was a description of an unfolding practice that turned pragmatically to affect theory as a means to find new ways to engage with the noises of the city. It since turns out Thompson was indeed, right. It did provoke some reactions. But that is another story... Despite being on opposite sides of the globe and in such different disciplinary contexts (with my own being urban design and public art), I was struck by a number of similar views that our books share in relation to acoustic ecology and the application of Spinozian (via Deleuze) affect. My own practice-based descriptions of affect are aimed at those unfamiliar with affect theory, which is applied specifically to develop a new approach to soundscape studies and design. Comparatively, the theoretical critiques provided by Thompson are in-depth and wide-ranging. If a student of mine were to read *Sonic Rupture* and inquire further into affect theory I wouldn't hesitate to send them to Thompson's book, where they would find excellent descriptions of what affect theory is with clues as to its historical development, and the manner in which the application of an ethico-affective framework can effectively dissolve dualities. Thompson's theoretical goal, which has surely succeeded, builds on the arguments developed by other sound study scholars including Christoph Cox, Steve Goodman and Greg Hainge, who, in different ways, reposition noise away from negative perception towards a relational ground of being in which all bodies are immersed and shaped/transformed.

Thompson begins Chapter 1 by describing subject-oriented and object-oriented approaches to noise, which establish those axioms seeking to negatively describe noise from both subjective and acoustic perspectives. Following this Thompson deftly articulates Spinozian affect, as understood through Deleuze, as a means to understand noise as something relational that is always everywhere present as a material and mediating substance. In Chapter 2 Thompson describes information system theory's desire to eliminate noise in the pursuit of the perfect uninterrupted signal, which flows well into Chapter 3 in which acoustic ecology's own use of information system theory to apply a lo-fi – hi-fi understanding of the urban sonic environment is described. A common drive towards perfection is revealed – Claude Shannon's undisturbed signal and R. Murray Schafer's silent transcendent spheres. In so doing, Thompson reveals a moralistic framework that judges noise as negative, responsible for preventing the creation of a perfect system/environment/world. Rather, Thompson argues that noise exists as an affective medium, which is necessary for the transference of signals; and, in reference to Serres' parasite, is

responsible for transforming relations between bodies – living, non-living, bodies of knowledge etc – positively (augmentation) or negatively (diminution). Thus, noise is reconceptualised as a ubiquitous relational connective that acts as a “productive, generative force” that “affects and transforms relations”.

This steps into the fourth chapter of the book describing noise music. Besides the fact I'll be busy downloading the vast inventory of fascinating noise artists brought to the reader's attention, what is innovative about this chapter is the analysis of the 'transgressive' nature of noise music. Personally, while I enjoy the artistic exploration (or exposure, to use Thompson's language) that these artists employ, I find a little tedious the ongoing shock and awe intent administered via sheer volume (and abrasive lyrics/themes) that is synonymous with certain approaches to 'noise' music. Though Thompson passes no such judgement, instead introducing the reader to a range of other musical types that have emerged through noise exploration including the silent music of onkyo, which developed due to the volume restrictions of the small architectural space in which the scene was housed, and the popularization of glitch via the artistic explorations of the audible skips and jumps of cds. As such, noise music is critiqued just as is information system theory and acoustic ecology, albeit from a different perspective. If the latter two are critiqued for negating the importance of noise to systems/environments, then the former is critiqued as a type of fetishizing (not a term applied by Thompson) of noise-as-transgression that sets it up in opposition to music, or we might say, order. Instead, Thompson argues for noise as a type of exploration and experimentation that exposes music to new forms of organisation. In combination, Thompson successfully applies affect theory to disassemble three binary oppositions – “noise/signal, noise/silence and noise/music” thereby achieving the book's central premise: “there is much more to noise than unwanted sound, and to fail to recognize this is to fail to recognize the crucial role noise plays in auditory culture and in material culture more generally”.

Given the care Thompson takes to mention that affect theory itself is rooted in “the long-standing genealogy of feminist, queer and postcolonial thought that precedes the contemporary 'affective turn'” I would like to have seen some attention paid to Westerkamp's sound practice, within Chapter 3's acoustic ecology discussion. Referring to “Schaferian acoustic ecology” suggests R. Murray Schafer was solely responsible for the emergence of the field of acoustic ecology. Although Schafer was research leader of the World Soundscape Project (WSP), there were in fact five members of the WSP, with Westerkamp being the only female member. I began to wonder if there might be a Westerkamperian acoustic ecology (or indeed a Truaxian acoustic ecology etc). Westerkamp's practice is solidly rooted in soundwalking and compositions built from field recordings, both of which have constructively interacted with urban noise (as I outline in my book). It might be more constructive (and affirmative) to consider those practices, nested within acoustic ecology, which

might be consistent with the non-judgemental approach of affect theory, rather than entirely framing the field within a moralistic noise/silence duality. Consistent with this, I find the Schafer-Franklin-Sim 'silence' connective – while an excellently executed argument that reveals the lack of critique of silence as a potentially suppressive agent of control – risks missing the point that listening lies at the heart of the acoustic ecology mandate. That is, connecting with the world through listening is necessarily accompanied by silence (of the self). This view – connecting listening and silence – can, in different ways, be traced to McLuhan, Cage and Augoyard (among others), not to mention indigenous listening practices (thinking specifically of Australia and Canada). Acoustic ecology needn't be reduced to a field of moral crusaders; rather, as the field of sound studies progresses, affect-based theories might find a way to absorb acoustic ecology insights into emerging non-judgemental, noise-based listening/design practices.

None of this is in any way to diminish Thompson's excellent book. I learnt a lot from reading it, and I think it is the clearest book to date (to my knowledge) that demonstrates the effectiveness of applying affect theory critiques and understandings to sound studies. I would enthusiastically recommend it to anyone wanting to get their head around exactly what is affect theory, and what is its relation to questions regarding noise/sound/silence. I see the book as a consolidation of a building argument that we can now trace as Cox – Goodman – Hainge – Thompson. It will be interesting to see how the theoretical and practical fields of sound studies, as interpreted by affect theorists, develops from here.