

Howl Redux: On Noisific(a)tion

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay

[L]istening to the Terror through the wall ...

—*Howl*, Allen Ginsberg (1956)

He (The parasite) becomes invisible by making, on the contrary, a lot of noise. One can hide by being too visible or too perceptible. The parasite hides behind the noise and to-do of the devout. He becomes invisible by being impossible. Impossible, absurd, outside reason and logic. That is what is interesting; that is the point; that is what must be thought about...

—*The Parasite*, Michel Serres (2013)

After a solitary and austere winter in Copenhagen, sound researcher Budhaditya Chattopadhyay again meets media artist Budhaditya Chattopadhyay in Berlin. It is a small but cosy apartment turned film studio in the Alt Trep-tow area, just beside the canal where Rosa Luxemburg was assassinated in 1919. Summer is just sprouting between arrays of grey buildings; calm and domesticised balconies are listening to each other. The courtyard resonates with children safely grazing the greener grass and

the buzzing neighbourhood leaves out shabby outsiders on the park benches, or under the bridge. One can hear the faint sounds of an opera aria played on a vinyl from a gentrified drawing room. As they sat opposite to each other in the kitchen, coffee was brewing. Following are the snippets of the ensuing intraaudition¹ as it was scribbled. These inwardly contemplative discourses may reveal artistic research as a self-aware conversation between the artist and the researcher often present in the same body.

1. Aural Intrusion

Researcher – What are you thinking while looking outside the window?

Artist – I am thinking about the transparent glass in the window separating the safety and privacy of the room-tone from the outdoor ambience of a thriving urban living; as if there is a border between inside and outside realities, and this border is architecturally built through this windowpane. Often, windows and walls separating the outside and inside worlds are made soundproof. Why

¹ This un-grammatical coinage is invented to understand soliloquy in sonic terms. The coinage also relates to the idea of intraview (which is also another coinage made earlier, if not already used elsewhere) more precisely, where one speaks with oneself, focusing on the aural. Self-talk is a common everyday practice, but not so much discussed in the scholarly discourses in the arts and humanities. The coinage has been previously employed in two recent publications from a series of intraauditions: Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, 'Unrecording Nature', in *Sound, Art, and Climate Change*, ed. Petri Kuljuntausta (Helsinki: The Frequency Association, 2021); and Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, 'Autolisting', in *Exercises in Listening* issue 3, ed. Richard Francis (Auckland: End of the Alphabet Records, 2017).

are the ambient sounds considered unwanted noise in a domestic household? Is it because the sanctity of the private has a margin of acceptance where the public sphere needs to stop and wait? When a householder opens a window and leans down to see and hear what's happening at the street corner, her curiosity crosses this margin. I focus on her curiosity. This is a moment when sounds from outside enter the domestic sphere and inform it with news, perspectives and views. Is this intrusion unwanted? Does it imply disruption?

R – Intrusion by whom? Disruption of what?

A – Intrusion of the public sounds, termed *noise*, in private territories disrupting the domestic sphere obsessed with a sense of safety and security. Like an aural infection, the sound of a bomb blast, a scream on the street, an angry motorcycle or an obvious car crash will shake up and affect the health of the household bliss and those of its inhabitants and caretakers. For those who are outside of this inner familial territory, for them, however, being strangers and aliens are manifested in tuning their ears for the outside, for the catastrophic sound. To their curiosity, this anarchic infection is life.

R – I see the first edition of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* on your hand. Are you reading it now?

A – Few books I often keep in my travel bag, or on the table in a makeshift lodging, or beside my bed, wherever I sleep in my meanderings. I don't always read or reread them – but I stay fervently inspired in their presence. Sometimes I read a few passages from these works, and contemplate the words in silence and solitude.

R – Do you like to share with me some of your thoughts on reading or re-reading *Howl*?

A – Like a broken record, I am stuck in this phrase: ‘Listening to the Terror through the wall’. I am thinking how much our walls do protect us from imagined terror, and if the idea of protection is at all an important point. Perhaps walls are symbolic structures that have varied degrees of porosity, with an embedded desire to break through. Recently, one of the busiest train stations in Berlin decided to use atonal and noise music to deter drug users; the German rail operator, Deutsche Bahn, thought that playing noise music will stop people using drugs.² Deutsche Bahn wanted to use sound as a kind of wall to segregate people who are deemed outsiders to its hyper-capitalistic system of gentrification and protectionism. To my understanding, organised noise can be counterproductive as a tool for urban gentrification. The people from the social margin can more relate to noise music rather than classical music, as a liveable and inviting sonic world, and prefer to comfortably inhabit this world. On a similar note, two years ago activists in front of the Trump administration building played back loud recordings of the cry and whining of the children kept in the US detention centre on the Mexico border. In both the cases, noise was deployed as a trigger for social disruption and rupture. However, in the first case, the state used noise to control the public life, and in the second, noise was incorporated to disrupt and question the

² See: Newshour, ‘Berlin Station to Use Atonal Music to Deter Drug Users’, *BBC Sounds*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p06j24s3>.

legitimate power embedded in the control of the state itself. Again, in both cases, affect was an aspect that was considered intimately linked to the deliberate noisification of the social situation in order to change the behaviour of select public, revolving around the issues of law. It will be interesting to (un)critically listen to the noise reproduction in various contexts used as tools and methods of social intervention both by state and its other. For a project, *Exile and other Syndromes*,³ I made field recordings at various dehumanising urban sites, such as industrial zones and supermarkets, large underground basements and car sheds, examining their cold and estranging environments and the poetic attributes of noise present in these environments for the migratory listeners' search for connections and emancipation.⁴ Marc Augé terms such super-modern sites and 'cold, gloomy space of big housing schemes, industrial zones and supermarkets' as *non-places*.⁵

2. Aural Contemplation

R – What inspires you to work with noise and listening in your artistic practice?

³ See: Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, *Exile and Other Syndromes* (Sound Installation), IEM Cube, 2015. <https://iem.kug.ac.at/fileadmin/media/iem/projects/2016/budhaditya.pdf>.

⁴ See: Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, 'Listening In/To Exile: Migration and Media Arts', *VIS – Nordic Journal for Artistic Research* 2 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.22501/vis.564694>.

⁵ In his work *Non-places*, Augé notes: '(...) bypasses, motorways, high-speed trains, and one-way systems have made it unnecessary for us to linger in them. But this turning away, this bypassing, is not without some feeling of remorse' (1992), 73–74.

A – I don't undermine noise as it is done from the traditional Schaferean soundscape approach.⁶ I even don't like the term *noise*; everything is sound. I rarely get annoyed with so-called 'noise' in public and private spaces, because often such a concern is socially constructed. I am fascinated by the materiality of noise, its many splendours, many textures and multiple layers. My motivation, or the drive to work with noise or sound is to develop a kind of inclusive, contemplative relationship with the lived environment. Since I am an immigrant artist, I have travelled extensively. And through these travels, like a philosophically positioned nomadic entity, I have come across and experienced different kinds of sound environments. The multitude of their characteristics and their unfolding situations are evocative for me, as an artist, my primary reaction is to take a kind of contemplative and phenomenological survey of these environments. And this relationship is something quite dynamic; at the same time, they are inclusive and familiarizing. I am more interested in going beyond the obvious sounds that are immediately heard; I rather focus on the subtle inaudible layers, which are often elusive for the human perception – certain vibrations that are like a distant presence. These kinds of sonic layers trigger my artistic

⁶ R. Murray Schafer's notion of the soundscape tends to simplify the complex ecological discourse of the constantly changing sonic environments into fixed binaries: differentiating between 'lo-fi' and 'hi-fi' soundscapes. This approach has been criticized by sound scholars (Kelman, 2010). To incorporate the factors of chance and flux, and consider the evolving nature of sonic environments, see the idea of 'auditory situation' (Chattopadhyay, 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021a, 2021b) underscoring a situationist approach to everyday sounds and ambient noises.

imagination. My artistic practice as a sound/media artist and composer using field recording is based on a contemplative approach to listen intently to the different layers that constitute a sonic environment or ambience of a particular site, part of which is humanly inaudible or imperceptible.

R – Would you like to explain a bit more about the context?

A – Primarily, I work with a number of contexts. My interaction with sonic environments is heard through the lenses of multitudinal contexts and conceptual positions. These drive my work, namely, the climate crisis, mass migration and race, consumerism and urbanisation of rural life, migratory urban experience, impermanence and urban alienation. These kinds of contexts inform my practice not only in the sense of departing points but also, they shape my intervention in a particular way that there is a stronger discourse triggered by the work itself.

R – How are specific concepts like migration, alienation, and impermanence reflected in your work? Do you take these ideas as points of entry, or as evolving perspectives?

A – Impermanence, presence, absence – these are thoughts aloud in my work; also, truth and evidence. Recently I visited Cairo National Museum, and there was one exhibit with an English translation written under it, which reads ‘maa-kheru’ – an expression in Egyptian, translated into English: ‘true of voice’ – as provided by the Museum. The context was a court case between Horus and Seth. It was a discourse on legitimacy and evidence. I was struck by this idea of a true voice: the true

voice of an artist, a place, or a community – how does it sound? True voice might be an idea which is linked to the notion of presence. How do you find the true presence of a place or the narrative of a place, or the history of a place reshaped in a sound work? In my work, this sense of presence is not obvious; it's not like listening to hear and now: I visit a place to pick up some sounds – it's not like that. It's more inclined to historical inquiry into a place through specific trajectories and various connotations around the place, various temporalities. These kinds of inquiries are something I am interested in; for example, if I'm encouraged to develop a piece based on a particular place, I travel to the place and stay there for, let's say, three to four months, just to initiate the research – site specific exploration or non-extractive excavation of the place. I examine the history of the place; I try to figure out the unfolding situation of the spatial situation. I speculate on the futurity of the place. The trajectory of the place is something I try to respond to. I also dig into archival sonic materials. For my piece *Eye Contact with the City*,⁷ I researched spool tape recordings where room-tones of the 1930's and 1940's colonial households were archived. I incorporated these room-tones as a primary layer in the work. These kinds of in-depth inquiries are part of my artistic practice. Through such practice, I intend to reach the true voice of a place.

R – Do you choose specific sites or is it just where your life leads you to, and you put yourself out there?

⁷ See: Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, 'An Elegy for the City: Composing the Urban Character', *Leonardo Music Journal* 24 (2014): 49–51, https://doi.org/10.1162/LMJ_a_00202.

A – The departing point is actually curiosity about a particular place; I try to get to know about the place beforehand. For example, Bangalore was a city I explored between 2009 and 2013, and then a number of European cities I explored from 2012 to 2019 – Berlin, Den Haag, Vienna, Brussels, Graz are some of these European cities. There are similarities between these cities in terms of ‘non-places’. I wanted to self-attune with, internalise and contemplate what I listen to being at these dehumanising spaces in these cities. Examples are airports, large basements, underground car sheds and abandoned houses or large constructions, abandoned industrial sites, platforms which are not used – these kinds of dehumanising spaces – they sound alienating for the individual’s human agency. So, in order to reconnect with these spaces, a sensitive listener may aim to attune their ears to the contemplative and poetic attributes of noise presence in these spaces.

3. Aural Disintegration

R – Do you think this approach alters the audience’s perception of the work?

A – The semantics of sonic interactions in alienating and oppressive urban environments is often dissolved and disintegrated into Asemic fragments. What remains is pure phenomenological experience. I would like to touch this pure phenomenology of nomadic listening. The outcome is a disjunction between language and immediate meaning, transcending epistemological chains of cognitive decoding. Through this modulation and modification of the listening text, which is no more a mere description

of the place but far more contemplative and poetic, this disjuncture opens up a sonic experience which is emancipatory and disconnected from the here and now. Since noise only has ontology but no epistemology, this epistemic void and neutrality in noise's presence are inviting contexts for an artist like me to contemplatively engage with.

R – What makes you want to break the immersion? In a recent paper, which was presented at ISEA2020 in Montreal, and published in RUUKKU Studies in Artistic Research, titled 'Post-immersion', I'm trying to develop a counterargument against immersive medial experiences. What I'm trying to suggest here is to create post-immersive situations via the means of sound, where immersion is broken to install a sense of discursivity. It's a kind of subjective formation through sound. In immersion, the audience is enveloped by the sonic and visual experience. And in this envelopment the discursive faculty of the audience is suspended. Hence, the audience cannot question the content and context of the experience. What is your position?

A – Immersion is something I also question in my work. What I like to do is break that immersive space to encourage a subjective formation of the audience, where he or she can nurture his or her discursive potential and the questioning faculty. In the contemporary sound art, there are many examples of a less thoughtful and more indulgent sonic experience – sound art experiences with a fetishised use of the idea of immersion. Take for example the audio-visual performances and installations by popular sound artists like Ryoji Ikeda and Alva Noto. Among numerous other artists working today, both produce pure

sensorial experiences via large-scale multichannel sound projections along with live or preprogrammed visuals. Their notoriously abstract and spectacular immersive sound works often drown the potent subjective contemplation of the sensitive listener to foreground the entertaining spectacle itself. There are many noise artists performing regularly in the festival circuits and the club scenes, promoting a popular kind of immediately immersive sound works that are made to move the body and chill out. One can argue that a discursive situation in an artistic experience occurs when the spectator/listener is free to detach him/herself from a sonic experience to open it for multiple possible interpretations, rather than being fixed in an ontological relationship with the experience, as it takes over the phenomenological freedom of the listener. This disjuncture is crucial in my own sound art practice as a mode to personalise an immersive sonic experience for a self-aware critical faculty to emerge. Intrusion of noise, or a sudden loud scream, as an alarm mechanism, or through asynchronism⁸ – a divorce of sound and image in an audiovisual experience as a noise intrusion or glitch in the narrative development – these are my artistic strategies to break the immersion.

R – Does it hint at psychogeography and psychological experience of situated noise? I am personally interested in the psychogeographic approach in listening and urban

⁸ In his essay 'Asynchronism as a Principle of Sound Film', Soviet film director Vsevolod Pudovkin argued for a non-naturalist use of sound in cinema divorced from the slavery of the visual image to create narrative counterpoints between sound and image. In *Film Technique and Film Acting*, trans. ed. Ivor Montagu. (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

sounds. In two of my articles published: ‘Sonic Drifting: Sound, City and Psychogeography’⁹ in *SoundEffects* and ‘Listening in/to Exile: Migration and Media Arts’¹⁰ in *VIS*, I discuss these issues. I am curious to know how you practice these ideas in your artworks.

A – Yes, it does. I don’t actually create music out of noise, but I decipher the sonics of the spatiality through a recording style that is informed by multiple levels of auditory transduction. It’s not composing with field recordings but transforming the quasi-musical elements in recording itself. I use this site-specific approach to underline a historically extended temporality and a participatory spatiality in sound rather than composing it with a musical intention.

R – It’s almost like you don’t have an idea to start with but you just tend to use the material to find something within it. Would you say there is a chance factor?

A – Yes, chance is central here. I think there is a specific emotive context that I start with: like the development of melancholia, loss or some sort of dark emotion in relation to a place and my relationship with it. I start with this particular mood and this mood drives the entire work. It also sets the tempo and the kind of textural exploration I make. That mood is something I start with from the very beginning. If my relationship with the place is creepy, the mood is very creepy.

⁹ See: Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, ‘Sonic Drifting: Sound, City and Psychogeography’, *SoundEffects* 3, no. 3 (2013): 138–152.

¹⁰ See: Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, ‘Listening in/to Exile: Migration and Media Arts’, *VIS – Nordic Journal for Artistic Research* 2 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.22501/vis.564694>.

R – Spending a lot of time finding different environments. It seems like, placing yourself in different situations through travelling is as important as recording and composing.

A – Yes, exactly. Self-inviting me in different kinds of situations is crucial in my practice. I let the places choose me, and the noise choose, rather than I choose them.

R – It could be a form of generative music itself, the fact that you move yourself around in different places.

A – As a kind of interlocutor.

R – Do you think this speaks more widely of your works and how they are something much greater than sound itself, or the sound work is trying to hint at something which is greater than itself, something beyond art and music and sound all together?

A – Yes, of course. It is not the momentary experience of a place, but it is a broad understanding of the evolution of the place, evolution of the city, the evolution of a particular nation or community or culture or strands of a culture, or a landscape.

R – How do you listen to the contemporary time and its refracting noises?

A – If I listen to the contemporary times without a hurried or frenzied frame of mind, I can mostly hear the silence of fear. With careful attention, the sounds that envelop me every day in this continent where I have been living more or less for the past ten years, unfold with a sense of discomfort lately. On the streets and inside institutional corridors of Europe, I have met faces that refused

to let me walk freely, with my dignity or a sense of safety intact. The looks in these eyes have dripped with fear and loathing for the *different*; their ears refused to listen to my voice, pertaining to the dissimilarity in reference to a dominant mode. Not everyone is safe in this Europe. Not everyone feels equally respected, duly appreciated and valued in this land.

R – Do you consider yourself an outside, a stranger, an alien, or an obtrusive figure?

A – An outsider is he, who lives in the margin of thoughts, and intends to come to the centre of thinking-process. Thus, he becomes a noise. Noise is song of the oppressed. We cannot stay away from noise of any kind. Noise is powerful because it is omnipresent. Noise can infiltrate from any side of a tightly closed room, be it the living room of the clerics, or the security-proof corridor of the corporates. Noise can buzz around the ear until one tends to recognise it and interpret a meaning. Noise has its own aesthetics that can enchant parts of the institution to move from their indifference. Noise has its own dynamics that can disturb the limbs of the unresponsive public mechanism to take a decisive action. People whose voices are considered ‘noise’ by not-listened-to, may determine using the very form of noise as a counter-tactic instead of forced silences expected of them by non-responding bodies, as philosopher Michel Serres suggests in his work *The Parasite* (2013), ‘He becomes invisible by being impossible, absurd, outside reason and logic.’¹¹ The art of noise can be the tool to disrupt the regu-

¹¹ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 218.

latory fences of a complacent people and corporate nexus, if strategic deafness of this nexus does not discourage and dishearten the socially, environmentally and politically committed sound artists and noisemakers, and they persist to reverberate the silent walls using the revolutionary methodology of noisific(a)tion. Here the position of the artist as noisemaker is at the absurd margin or outside of a stagnant society; and noise is the fertile ammunition in the hand of the artists to disorder and reorder a society through its self-questioning and regeneration.

R – What can be a superlative future sound experience? Can we imagine a soundwork of discursivity and dissent?

A – Sound artists ‘have been recording protests around the world to create a sound collective that reflects today’s political environment.’¹² What these recordings mostly contain are the shouts and screaming made on the streets. Yes, it is a scream – a loud earth-shaking scream – that is what the future may sound like. That is only when the pleasant immersion can be broken through which the light of alert, aware and mindful actions may break in. This is the power of a scream, a loud *Howl* on a global scale.

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¹² See: Victoria Turk, ‘This Is the Sound of Global Protest, From Trump to Brexit’, *Wired UK*, 7 August 2017, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/sounds-of-protest-trump-brexit-sound-map>.

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