Interview with Benjamin Halligan

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Benjamin Halligan is Director of the Graduate Programme for the School of Media, Music and Performance at the University of Salford. His publications include *Michael Reeves* (Manchester University Press, 2003), *Mark E. Smith and The Fall: Art, Music and Politics* (Ashgate, 2010; co-edited with Michael Goddard), *The Music Documentary: Acid Rock to Electropop* (Routledge, 2013, co-edited with Rob Edgar and Kirsty Fairclough-Isaacs). He has published on disco music music and and science fiction, The Sarajevo Documentary School, Dušan Makavejev, Frank Zappa, Andrei Tarkovsky and the British Royal Family. *Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music*, co-edited with Michael Goddard and Nicola Spelman, has been published by Bloomsbury in 2013, and is the companion volume to *Reverberations: The Philsophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise* (Continuum, 2013; co-edited with Michael Goddard and Paul Hegarty).

The following interview occurred at The Cornerhouse, in the city of Manchester, England, in June 2013. Benjamin speaks about topics related to the two books he recently organized with co-workers at the University of Salford, *Reverberations: the philosophy, aesthetics and politics of noise*, and *Resonances: noise and contemporary music.*

1) What is Reverberations' about?

The book is the first of a two-part investigation into noise. It arises from a conference that we ran in 2010: Michael Goddard and I were thinking about the idea of noise as connecting number of contexts - for instance, and most obviously, industrial noise and post-industrial cultures, but also legality and architecture, class and multiculturalism. Noise meant for us not only music, but also film aesthetics, installation art, torture, gated communities, and the limits of language and communication, among other things.

The second volume, *Resonances*, which has only just been published, dealt exclusively with noise as typifying kinds music, as with rave and dance culture in the late eighties and shoegaze music. And, at this point, between 2008-2010, there were a number of shoegazer groups that were reforming and performing live. We saw My Bloody Valentine in 2008 (and I've seen them many times subsequently, in the UK and Spain), and this was the first tour they had mounted - the first live performances - in many years. To me, this seemed to be anticipated by the popularity of post-rock groups such as Mogwai and Hood, and "nu-gaze" a couple of years before. Noise figured in all of this - not only noise as understood in a musicological sense but, and this is the other element of investigation, in an effective way. And it seems to me that, crucially, when looking at the field of musicology and the way people write about popular music, this question of affect was at best marginal. Michael and I at that time had been discussing post-punk (which informed the collection we edited on The Fall for Ashgate) too and I was keen to move further into the area of thinking about noise and music, and noise and everything else.

So we decided to call a conference for summer 2010, in Salford University. We wanted to talk about noise, and we didn't want to be very schematic: we just wanted to see what would happen. At times, it seemed like an insane idea. I remember thinking, the day before, when I was also trying to sort out equipment for a gig by The Telescopes that I had arranged for the conference, "what on Earth have we done? This is going to be a disaster!" One person had spent 24 hours on a plane to attend and we basically weren't sure what we were all going to be talking about! We got people from all over the world, from Brazil, Japan, Australia, Germany...

2) Yes, from Brazil you've had Simbiotecnoise's Vinicius A. Pereira, José C. S. Castanheira, Rafael Sarpa, J-P Caron...

Yes, and not only to speak, but also to perform, along with The Telescopes, and Paul Hegarty (both as performer and keynote speaker). Stephen Lawrie from The Telescopes also spoke, along with Stuart Braithwaite from Mogwai.

Straight away, we decided to do a book based on the contributions of the conference. But there were so many we had to turn this project into two books. So the first one

considers politics, art, aesthetics and philosophy, and that's *Reverberations*. And the second book, *Resonances*, considers noise in contemporary music.

3) And how is the issue of noise is approached?

When working on the introduction to *Reverberations*, something arose that was rather disorientating. We were discussing the various definitions and concepts of noise but then we realized that the problem, for us, was actually over the absent definition of silence. We were not sure how to define silence.

4) I think it is even harder than noise.

There are of course legal definitions. If your neighbors are causing disturbance, throwing a party late into the night, and you call the police to intervene, they can measure the decibels and decide if it constitutes noise. They can shut down the party or confiscate sound equipment. But noise here can depend on the type of noise (conversation, beats), and the time of the day or night. What isn't noise at 10pm is noise at 2am. Likewise, if you buy a house or a flat, and if it sold as being in a quiet area, what does "quiet" actually mean? Not silence - far from it. Most probably, "other" types of noise: an acceptable level or type of noise. This was investigated, in *Reverberations*, in a very arresting way by Daniel Cockney. He talks about experiments with recording silence, in silent places like libraries, and he shows how silence does not exist in the literal sense. In short: we are constantly in negotiation with noise - to the extent that we use noise to define silence, and to assert our legal rights in respect of our environs.

5) Just like John Cage used to say: silence everywhere is mostly the sound of traffic.

So we find ourselves between those two shifting sets of ideas: noise and silence. And in a way, both are equally problematic because we don't like total silence, and noise is a problem for many people.

6) I think one could not stand complete silence.

It can induce vertigo and panic attacks, and destroy a grasp of time passing. So really, answering your question, *Reverberations* and *Resonances* are about the investigations of the extremes of audio phenomena that we find in cities and in the countryside, in culture, embedded in law, in installation art, in how we live our lives.

7) You were talking about silence and noise. Shannon and Weaver have this theory of sender, message and receptor. Nicklas Luhmann criticized this idea through Bateson, because the message is not an object that I lost when I communicate it, it is actually multiplied. How the discussion about these two elements, noise and silence, might contribute to both communication and information area?

I think silence sometimes is a way of blocking communication: not the absence of communication, but to actively stop communication occurring when it is unwanted, inappropriate or dangerous. "To silence" is well understood: to stop someone talking (perhaps via gagging or intimidation) or, as a euphemism, to kill someone. In the UK over the last year, the "breaking of silence" has revealed a history of sexual abuse at the hands of fondly remembered celebrities and children's entertainments. And, over the last decade, the same in respect of clerical sexual abuse. In these instances, the victims understood the obstacle to justice, and even psychic healing, was silence.

8) Like "Shh!"

Yeah, like "shh!" between one person and another. So you have a self-policing in operation. I wrote about this elsewhere actually: I was interested in a series of arguments that occurred in theaters in London. People's mobiles phones has gone off during performances, and actors at times stopped the play and had a go at the audience, or individual audience member. To me it seems like hypocrisy and I was very interested in how invoking a common understanding of appropriate silence in a certain setting is a new form of manners. When you should be differential you are to turn off your mobile phone, and this then was attempting to make a theatre into a church, based perhaps on the assumptions of

an automatic respect for high art, and respect for its elitism. That is, that this wasn't a popular music event, where you could do what you wanted. What it meant to me was the demand for silence, blocking communication and the exchange of information. As in court - "silence in court" - you have the demand for respectful silence on the part of the accused. So silence is not just the absence of verbal communication, but the regulation of verbal communication. Is noise then simply too much information, too much communication? At the conference in 2010, we talked about vuvuzelas, and the idea of this noise as being an unacceptable during a football match. Was it because it was from the "wrong" class of people, the poor, somehow polluting the sound of the match? So the noise was filtered out of broadcasts: television stations managed to use technology to shut down the audio spectrums on which vuvuzelas could be heard.

There is another kind of silence for me that is very interesting, which is a phenomena you get in all countries, and particularly in the UK. It is when you have a mass of people, and when you "silence" those people. For example, every year on the same day we have one minute of silence to remember the dead of the Second World War. But this notion of silence as a collective, "national" expression of respect also occurs in terms of coverage on television of Royal events. So when the Queen Mother died, when Princess Diana died, you had reportage of the assembled masses of people (sizeable for Diana, minimal for the Queen Mother). The reportage silences them: we can see them, but can't hear them. Two types of people speak for them. One is the presenter, who will say "the people are grieving, they're brave but they're terribly sad". On whose authority does he speak for this crowd? The second type is the representative of (not necessarily from) the crowd. But these figures are not really representatives of the crowd: they're "busy bodies", they spend all their lives trying to promote themselves, trying to make themselves important, petit bourgeois, and often this occurs through absolute deference to Royalty. Maybe they met once Diana for a couple of minutes, and they speak about this moment on the interview, and they then come to speak on behalf of the crowd. To me this is the fundamental issue on news and reportage: silence imposed, with controlled communication making sense of that silence. The same operation occurs for protests. The media cannot deal with the idea that the protestors have any number of concerns and opinions and objectives and goals: they want a spokesman, and

controlled communication over noise. They want one voice, they want certain demands. They have to take the noise and channel it into one acceptable form of communication where possible. Where impossible: silence.

9) You spoke about Diana's funeral and vuvuzelas. I think there is something you said about it that responds to what is happening in the way Brazilian media first reacted to the protests. Maybe it's not like media is trying to do a maneuver to make the protesters look something else, but it's just that they cannot expose them in a proper way. The words fail, like you say in your chapter.

That's true. I say that in relation to - and quoting - Sam Beckett. Noise occurs when words fail, or when ideas somehow outstrip words or terminology. But noise isn't just a series of conceptual problems, or types of absences. We can identify a semiotics of noise. In *Reverberations* we note the idea of "black noise" - that is, the sound of African-American music (in this case, Public Enemy) - as something historically unwelcome and unwanted in the mainstream.

10) Is it not in the rhythm or in the melody... but it might be a kind of affection, would you say? Like it is way too black to the radios...

I think in matters of ambiance there's a sonic reach to the noise. It is a kind of mirror to, for example, urban degradation -- even in the 1970s recording of Stevie Wonder, and then of course in the early years of rap. Wonder and Grandmaster Flash both staged the "sounds of the city" (in both cases, police racism in the form of harassment) for their songs. It is as if this noise (shouting, sirens… certainly not music, although it's dropped into the music) was part of a soundscape of everyday life. And noise then becomes a shaping of culture: allowing culture to become entranced with that "actually existing" everyday life in terms of noise.

More generally, the aesthetics of noise come to organize protest. Such an aesthetics may not even be apparent to the generators of this noise, the protestors. Obviously, there is the formal sound of the angry protest: yelling and chanting, slogans and demands - "One, two, three, four: we don't want your fucking war", "All we are saying, is give peace a chance," "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it" and so on. But the sound of anger, and the existence

of noise within that sound (the, then, "informal" sound of the protest) communicates more. For instance, in Argentina, with the banging of pots and pans: feminized noise ("misusing" the woman's tools of the kitchen).

11) Reading your chapter, "'As if from the sky': Divine and Secular Dramaturgies of Noise" I am reminded of Prendergast. He wrote Film Music: A neglected art. Cinema has been historically studied mostly on its visual elements, not only on communication, but on others areas, while sound sometimes get left behind. Why does this happens, and how does this neglected condition prejudice both visual and sound?

I was interested in a forgotten period of commercial filmmaking in Hollywood that was very technologically driven: 1970s disaster movies. In this was the sense that the film should be like a rollercoaster, and should be affective and immersive, and should envelop

and even terrorize the viewer. At the time, there were a number of progressive experiments with sound, a rethinking of sound design, and mixing across four channels rather than two - "quad" rather than stereo, "surround" rather than directional. There are many stories that may or may not be true about the sound being too loud, parts of the roof of cinemas falling on the audience, nosebleeds being induced especially by *Earthquake*. And I suspected that this was the moment when sound was, almost for the first time, introduce into film in a proper fashion - that is, as comparable in importance to the image. Sound before was limited by technology and so was often marginal or incidental. These innovations were not coming from the avant-garde, but from the most commercial quarters of filmmaking.

12) It cost a lot of money to do it!

It does. And not only to reproduce sound in this way, but also to achieve the ways in which sound was being recorded on the set. So, for Star Wars, Lucas and his team recorded the actor Alec Guinness [Obi Wan Kenobi] in a certain way, with quite a lot of "natural" reverb achieved through his speaking in a large space: the voice expands and is nuanced rather than echoes. So when he ponders aloud the coming assault on the good half of the galaxy (or whatever), it is with an echo that is relayed across, that reaches out across the meets and matches, and fills the auditorium space about the audience. Is this not than the

paradoxical voice of God? Both intimate (heard as if closely by, every nuance audience), and from above - and from all places? This concerned the way they used a microphone for Guinness, and the way they understood something that eluded the initial manufacturers of CDs: that you need to record ambience, and silence, and decay, and include this in the mix.

13) How do you relate Divine and Secular noise examples with cinema noise examples?

In cinema, the visual relates to the material world: as Pasolini said, cinema is "the language of reality, written with reality." So even for, let's say, hallucinations, and even in films of Jean Cocteau, in his dream sequences, or his sequences in the afterlife, you still have a sense of characters in their surroundings, of how they interact with their surroundings. There is still a crunch underfoot when they walk outdoors. In *Superman*, when Superman flies (which was a big deal in technological terms, and a selling point for the film - "You'll believe a man can fly" was the tagline), what becomes important is the wind in Superman's hair - in this fantastical sequence, it remains the materiality of the experience that sutures fiction and reality.

The soundscape is free from this tension. In the audio, you have the ability to dramatize what cannot be seen. The soundscape becomes a way of expanding the dramatic vocabulary of the film beyond the limits of the material world, of expanding every facet of cinema. And why is that expansion necessary? Because in talking of certain things, which we can understand as divine or sublime, and therefore prohibited, we need to turn to noise to conjure them up. As with the voice of God in the Old Testament, we cover our eyes: we can hear what we cannot see.

14) About Hegarty chapter: what would you say is Bergson's main contribution about time in music?

The idea of duration and the way duration fully enables repetition and drone, as then becoming central to thinking about music – or, more precisely, the affective, phenomenological nature of music, and live music in particular. If you think of a DJ and a rave, what is often important in that the music lasts for one or two hours without any

interruption – or even the whole night. Repetition becomes important to elongate the experience of time for a person dancing in a field, perhaps with the aid of MDMA. Repetition and drone determines, affectively, the experience of music. In my chapter for Resonances, I try to explore this a bit by talking about the notion of the guide or the guru embedded, conceptually, in the music itself. This is also something I am currently working on: methodologies of deconstructing and re-reading Often Awful rave and trance tracks. I was interested in something Sheila Whiteley wrote in The Space Between the Notes, when she talked about Strawberry Fields Forever by The Beatles: the unusual chord progression as a kind of metaphor. She says that the chord progression indicates to the listener that "we" (i.e. the Fab Four) are the experienced users of LSD. If you follow us on this unusual path (indicated by the chord progression's unusual nature), we can teach you, guide you and be your guru. The song then is the guru. I was interested in taking this idea and applying to EDM, where you have a vocal register, and that is "above" the music and above the beat, a lower register. Your body is locked into the beat: regulated, and aligned with the beats per minute, in terms of movement, of breathing and so on. When this occurs, a new form of control can be welcomed in, which is the "guide" of the vocal, which ranges freely across the track, even breaking with (or taking liberties with) the time signature. Even if the vocal is "electronic" (sampled), repeated again and again, this register then becomes the compass – the way in which you can organize your experience. Is an experience that is not within the standard narrative time as we understand and typically experience it.

15) Would you say it is a "reterritorialization", as Deleuze and Guattari says?

Just so: reterritorialization "on the other side of" repetition, duration, drone and noise. It is a commonplace that there is a connection between psychedelia, as Sheila understands it, and EDM, this is a continuum. However, more surely can be made of this? This is not a heritage matter! Negri and Hardt dismiss the idea of hippies "dropping out" in 1968 as inadequate. In *Empire,* they note the radical import of putting your body in a situation where it cannot function as a worker. And to do that you often also need a different experience of time, I would contend. This time is not organized as nine-to-five at work (8 hours) and then a period of freedom either side (8 hours), and then sleep (8 hours). This 1968 response is to achieve a body that no longer operates as privileging a moment of the period of work. Work, sleep, play are mixed together. This may not necessarily be a good thing: the conditions of

work now ("post-Fordist") are such that, as some have argued, work comes to utilize leisure time, and even invade sleep, and then pass actual work time off as leisure time.

16) Just what we are doing right now!

And yes, it does seem to have increased productivity... but let's down tools all the same!

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