"Total Trash"
Analysis and Post Punk Music

The evaluation of rock music based on inappropriate criteria drawn from the creative arts generally takes two forms: the literary critical assessment of words, or the musicological-notational assessment of music. In both cases the aural artefact of rock song is valued only to the extent that it can be reduced to the form of a visual artefact - a page poem or a musical score.

Analysis and rock music: are they incompatible? Is popular music criticism’s analytic methodology ill-equipped for its own purposes? In the above passage, Paul Clarke complains that modes of inquiry developed for the analysis of western art music, focusing upon the text and the musical ‘score,’ are inappropriate for the analysis of rock music. He believes rock analysts wrongly attempt to fit the music within a narrow, established template. A more profitable approach, he suggests, would evaluate the music “not on any one aural strand - lyrical, musical or vocal - but on the complex of created relationships between sounds as they act on us through time.” Clarke’s analysis would represent a composite set of interests. His insights would emerge from his own interpretive experience as well as from a technical understanding of the music. His observations would be less confined by preexisting prescriptive or circumscribed guidelines. Instead, Clarke suggests that “we can afford a degree of critical pragmatism, borrowing or adopting musical, literal, linguistic, literary and drama critical terms and techniques where necessary” to represent the song’s audible effects. These different methodologies would enable the analyst to relate the song’s “situation” or “story” as a combination of all its component parts.

Ten years have passed since Clarke issued these statements, and in that time many changes have occurred in popular music analysis. For example, the sound of specific styles or artists is now a recognized area of analytical concern. I am using sound, here, in a manner analogous to Barthes’s “grain” of the voice. As he explains, the “grain” is

1. This passage and the citations that follow beneath are all found in Paul Clarke’s “A Magic Science: Rock Music as a Recorded Art,” Popular Music 3 (1985): 102.
2. Barthes describes the “grain” of the voice as “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. If I perceive the ‘grain’ in a piece of music and accord this ‘grain’ a theoretical value, I inevitably
an individual property composed of those discrete characteristics which distinguish one musical artist’s performances or recordings from another. He sees the “grain” as a communicable element upon which a dialogue may be founded between performer and listener. Indeed, this notion of the “grain” or sound traditionally has dictated rock and roll’s critical discourse. By referring to the sound of a particular era or style, listeners encapsulate a particular and distinctive auditory impression for their own purposes. In short, sound is that quality of the music’s being that we often feel instinctively inclined to judge and evaluate.

While analysts recently have undertaken comparatively in-depth examinations of sound, Clarke’s points of contention are still with us. For while their analyses may seek to ‘control’ the music’s effect or the way it captures one’s imagination, the song remains rooted in its contextual milieu. Even though the rock analyst may structure or deconstruct the song through a variety of techniques, the musical object usually represents a well-defined genre. Musical texts, as such, are based in a style defined through their own self-evident conventions. Analyses that we undertake on those texts rely on familiarization: our analytical conclusions and observations seem comprehensible because they relate to the recognizable style and form of the musical text. They examine lyrics that have an acknowledged function (whether through a narrative system or culturally expressive language) and music that is familiar through its style (understood within its conventions or in notated form). A situation exists, then, where rock music analysts are constantly refining their descriptive devices upon musical objects of discourse that, themselves, seem comparatively stable. In this paper, however, I wish to examine music that may bring the analyst’s dependence upon lyrical and music-notational devices into question. My discussion will center around issues of sound that complicate our analytical efforts to ‘control’ a particular generic type - post punk music.

set up a new scheme of evaluation which will certainly be individual (my emphasis) - but in no way ‘subjective.’” Barthes relates this idea of the “grain” to Kristeva’s use of the pheno-song and geno-song in “The Grain of the Voice” On Record, ed. Frith & Goodwin, pages 293-300 (New York: Pantheon, 1990).

3. Sound circulates as a means of differentiation within the interpretive community. While I acknowledge that music analysis often requires a technical-referential base for such terminology, I also believe that a property such as sound (especially in popular music) has certain recondite qualities beyond any standardized conceptual framework. In short, sound does not and should not have a fixed meaning outside of our means of normal discourse.


5. Susan McClary and Robert Walser discuss the politics and inherent pitfalls facing those popular music analyses that attempt to control the music in “Start Making Sense! Musicology Wrestles with Rock” in On Record, pp. 177-92.
The ‘Post Punk’ Problem

The term post punk implies music that expands on punk’s noticeable stylistic traits. When critics label a band as ‘post punk’ they arrive at a compromise: the group’s music clearly contains elements of punk, but also enough outside influences to blur its conspicuous similarities. However, where punk music espouses a return to rock and roll’s simple, unadorned ‘roots,’ post punk appears more concerned with exploration and experimentation. Post punk is involved not only with a deliberate, exaggerated foregrounding of sound but a distortion of musical styles as well. As musical “bricolage,” post punk is a compendium containing interpretive versions of borrowed and assembled styles. Post punk, for example, incorporates genres such as heavy metal, funk, country and jazz, among others, to establish a unique view of music's past and present. One might even say that through its appropriation of musical styles post punk perverts rock's system of aesthetic values.

If rock music criticism’s investigative procedures are dictated by the musical content, how am I or any other analyst to contend with post punk music that seems outside our familiar notions of style and form? While we recognize that analytical explanations ought to grow out of an understanding between the analyst and musical text, how can we strive for such a state when stripped of our normal literary-critical, transcriptive or structuralist abilities?

In what ways does post punk music frustrate analytical efforts? Often it requires the analyst to contort the realm of the “page poem” and “musical score” tradition. The lyrics in post punk music frequently deviate from normal or familiar narrative representations. In many cases the verbal content is audibly ambiguous, inconclusive or indecipherable. For example, singer/lyricist David Yow of the Chicago band, The Jesus Lizard, screams, gargles, whispers, breathes heavily and occasionally speaks the words to the song. In this way, lyrics, as such, rarely conform to our standard notions of ‘coherent’ meaning. Yow explains his approach to lyric writing thus:

“I'm proud of the lyrics on Liar. There are six words on the song 'Whirl': ‘Get undressed/but I want to.’ For some reason, as stupid as it must be, I like it a lot. I think it looks good on a lyric sheet. 'Boilermaker,’ like a lot of things I write, isn't focused on

6. As this certainly is not the place to undertake an in-depth examination of punk rock’s generic attributes, Katherine Charlton’s succinct introductory remarks to her chapter “Punk Rock and New Wave,” pp. 231-47 in Rock Music Styles: A History (Dubuque: Iowa, 1990) will suffice: “The musical style that came to be called punk rock developed in the United States out of the raw and energetic music played by garage bands of the mid-sixties. Most of these bands were formed by teenagers who learned to finger basic guitar chords and flourished at drums and cymbals in their own garages, while playing at as high a decibel level as their neighbors would tolerate. The result was rough, raw, and musically undisciplined, but it expressed the interests of teenagers and brought the music back to their level.” The chapter continues with a brief examination of early American, British and hardcore punk.

7. Larry Grossberg applies Levi Straus’s concept of bricolage to rock and roll, much in the same way that Dick Hebdige talks of appropriated punk fashion. In “Is There Rock After Punk?” (in On Record, p.116) Grossberg claims that “rock and roll at all levels of its existence constantly steals form other sources, creating its own encapsulation by transgressing any sense of boundary and identity. This is the stage of bricolage.” In Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London and New York: Methuen, 1979), p. 104, Hebdige says that “the teddy boy’s theft and transformation of the Edwardian style in the early 1950s ... can be construed as an act of bricolage.” My own application of bricolage works within both these conceptual frameworks. I conceive of post punk bricolage more as stylistic interpretation, however, often not reducible to any one point.
one particular thing. The choruses are about drinking bourbon and beer, where the verses are . . . about nothing . . . in particular . . . God, I hate talking about this shit. I’m not good at it. 8

One might guess that undertaking a literary analysis of such lyrics would not yield entirely satisfactory findings. Perhaps our analytical observations would make more sense when drawn from a musical transcription. Here, however, post punk again makes such designs problematic. For post punk bands often deliberately pursue distinctive sonorities outside of rock’s ordinary perimeters. Many groups define themselves through unique manipulations of the music’s textural levels. In particular, increased developments both in guitar technique and in recording technology allow for entire fields of new sound structures. Mere transcriptions cannot explain how such processes work within the music. Indeed, transcription seems to be not only ill-suited for many advanced technical or studio creations, but often times difficult to realize, as well. How, for example, would one notate sounds described as such:

One of Sonic Youth’s techniques consists of jamming screwdrivers or drumsticks under the string to create a second “bridge,” usually at the 9th fret. Tapping the back of the neck or body and “just letting the resonance happen through the amp” produces haunting wind chimes. [Lee] Ranaldo even recalls a song where “I played the guitar and Thurston [Moore] played my amp, doing the modifications.”

In such a case, a transference from sound to notation presents many problems. 10

If words and music impede traditional methods of visual-representative analysis, the critic seems left with few options. These factors, then, have contributed to post punk music’s relative lack of academic analytical attention. The post punk aesthetic has been the subject, instead, of journalistic scrutiny. Journalists admittedly have different aims than those critics who employ music theory and analysis. Often they are not concerned with the music’s internal devices aside from their relation to the piece’s overall ‘beauty’ or ‘effect.’ Their writing, like a large amount of nineteenth century art music criticism, does not seek to unravel the music’s details. 11 Instead, it views the musical work as a unified creation. The journalist’s function is to mirror the musical text in language; the goal is to communicate the music’s affective qualities to a reading audience. While such tactics have been out of circulation in the academic criticism of art music for decades, writing of this nature

10. For some time now contemporary art music criticism has grappled with issues of graphic notation and analysis. In those works for which no score exists (in particular, many pieces for electronic music) the analyst must strongly consider how sound stimulates the listener to make visual, verbal or other types of associations. As mentioned earlier in this paper, rock music analysis generally has avoided these issues. Rock’s conventions and formal devices have not necessitated investigations in this direction. If the sounds commonly found in rock music were to be completely dissociated from their current formal ‘constraints’ such representations certainly would seem more necessary. Nonetheless, this ought to become an issue of further consideration for all rock music analyses.
11. In Analysis and Value Judgment (New York: Pendragon Press, 1983), see especially pp. 11-17, Carl Dahlhaus places aesthetic judgments as characteristic representatives of nineteenth century music criticism. As Dahlhaus explains, aesthetic criticism from this period immerses itself in a poetic style. Critics believed that the “mechanics” of the music should be concealed rather displayed. As Simon Reynolds’s prose below attests, popular music journalism shares many attributes with this aesthetic realm of value.
virtually defines popular music journalism’s present state. The writings of British music journalist Simon Reynolds illustrate how such descriptive language represents the music in symbolisms:

“Daydream Nation” sees Sonic Youth poised between its early days of urgency and the urge, and its future of somnambulist nirvana . . . (the songs’) truest moments are when the hurtling gives way to idling, when the song is breached by a caesura of wilting and incandescent guitars, a gulf of light, a mind furnace in which all delineation disappears.

“Total Trash” starts as a ponderous punk stomp almost borne under by its own mass, but ends as a mirage of itself, an after-image lost in a dubscape of unhinged resonances and infinitely receding drones [my emphasis].12

Reynolds’ writing employs what Roman Jakobson recognizes as poetic language to convey the music’s sound to a reading audience. This language is suffused with metonymic and metaphoric constructions.13 For example, in the above passage a phrase such as “mind furnace” is used as an equivalent representation of certain sonorities in Sonic Youth’s music. In this phrase Reynolds links two contiguous words in an internal relationship. He assumes the reader will equate the overheatedness within a furnace as a correspondent sensation in the mind. The furnace’s function then is associated with the mind’s activities. The two words combine, however, to form one metaphorical equivalence with the textural quality of Sonic Youth’s guitars. Through this synaesthetic process, Reynolds induces the reader to imagine a musical sound.

Reynolds’ language directs itself within a wider metalingual context in this passage as well. For Jakobson, metalingual constructions are built around codes that we use as checkpoints for correspondence and communication.14 As speakers, we anticipate that our audience will deduce encoded meaning in our metalingual syntax. For example, in the above excerpt both “dubscape” and “drones” refer to extramusical associations as well as specific musical techniques. Each reader will base an interpretation of these terms on their knowledge of Reynolds’ metalingual code.

With Reynolds’ writing, then, the conflation of poetic language and metalingual code creates a dizzying representation of the musical events. And as the most active element at work, Reynolds’ language relegates the music to a passive state of existence. While such writing is not characteristic of our usual interests as critical music analysts, it does represent a specific interpretive community’s views on post punk music. Indeed,

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13. Terence Hawkes provides a concise description of Jakobson’s theories in Structuralism and Semiotics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 77-9. He explains that “messages are constructed, as Saussure said, by a combination of a ‘horizontal’ movement, which combines words together, and a ‘vertical’ movement, which selects the particular words from the available inventory or ‘inner storehouse’ of the language. The combinative (or syntagmatic) process manifests itself in contiguity (one word being placed next to another) and in its mode is metonymic. The selective (or associative) process manifests itself in similarity (one word or concept being ‘like’ another) and its mode is metaphoric . . . The poetic function of language [is] one which draws on both the selective and the combinative modes as a means of equivalence.
Reynolds’ observations provide an important source of commentary on post punk as a musical and societal phenomenon. Given this situation, perhaps we should strive to align our critical findings with the referential imagery that populates writing such as Reynolds’. If Reynolds’ poetic language can effectively represent the music’s interesting features, our musical theoretical and analytical code ought to address the same qualities. In this approach, then, our methodology might seem more compatible with post punk’s new aesthetic. In short, if we can understand the meaning in Reynolds’ depictions, we should use his experience of the music to our advantage. In my own analysis I accordingly will seek to portray the music’s functional elements as part of the song’s situation. And I will utilize both resources — Reynolds’ writings and the music itself — as a departure for my examination of Sonic Youth’s “Total Trash.”

Sonic Youth

Sonic Youth’s “Total Trash” illustrates many of post punk music’s seemingly ineffable properties. As with many of their songs, in “Total Trash” the band does not seem overly concerned with a lyric content relative to any traditional rock style; instead they place a disproportionate emphasis on instrumental texture. In “Total Trash,” the listener is faced with a complex field or network of sound layers, each vying for attention within the song’s space. When these textural items converge and diverge at seemingly random points, the musical form often becomes unclear. Indeed, the band’s arrangements, at times, seem characterized by their apparent lack of formal structure.

These sounds, however, do not exist solely in a complicated musical state. Rather, we need to examine the music in light of the band’s stated interests and objectives. Accordingly, I will explore the band’s conceptual process from both a compositional and technical perspective. Then I will question how, as listeners, we might typically respond to such music in an affective manner. With these guidelines, my analysis will maintain a sense of balance and hopefully avoid two common interpretive pitfalls. First, my analysis will neither place inordinate stress on the song’s musical text nor succumb to its apparent ambiguities. I will try, instead, to maintain the listener’s perspective within the song at all times. Second, my observations as a critical listener/reader will not reach an overly active state, such as Reynolds’, whereby the ‘confusing’ music is supplanted by poetic descriptives. Instead, I will attempt to explain how and why Reynolds or I might select meaning from the musical text. In this way, the area of analytical control will emerge between the musical text and my position as a listener. First, though, I will examine the ideas and theories behind the music itself.

The Realization of Musical Form

We never know what shape our songs will take until they’re done. There are four people involved in the process, and there’s never a conscious effort to write a specific kind of song. It’s a matter of dealing with the material that’s being generated and trying to shape it into something, in a sculpting sort of way. It’s improvisation within preset limits. It may be a free-for-all, but everyone bases their free-for-all around the same thing. It’s
like, “Put these things in a hat and pull them out in any order you want.” Aleatoric . . . is that the proper Cagean term?  

-Excerpt from a Guitar Player interview with the band

If the members of Sonic Youth relate themselves to a punk rock style, how does one explain their approach to musical form? The procedures described above, for example, show few traces of a generic punk rock formulation. The band makes no mention of rock’s common language, which consists of such typical components as verses, choruses, bridges, and solos. The band could well be describing a jazz compositional process instead, where “improvisation” around the “same thing” is standard rather than exceptional. Is Sonic Youth, then, that far removed from rock? Even though the band regards its music as inspired “aleatoric” collections of events, we should keep in mind that each song’s language still stands as part of a rock lineage. One can identify, for example, guitar riffs, bass lines and drum patterns as functional devices within the songs. How can we then interpret the descriptive metalingual encoding that Sonic Youth uses to discuss their own music?

If one applies Viktor Shklovsky’s idea of *enstrangement* to the proceedings, the band’s music may be seen as varying rather than displacing rock’s structural underpinnings. One might use Shklovsky’s interpretive-literary theory to show how Sonic Youth creates a “poetic” rock. As Shklovsky explains, both prose and poetry contain the same mechanistic units of language. The former operates through a “process of habituation,” wherein we recognize signs and symbols as a matter of routine perceptive awareness. Poetry, however, knowingly *enstranges* this process of recognition, forcing us to perceive the language under a new set of associations. The components of what might be called rock “prose,” for example, such as riffs, patterns, chords, lyrics, etc., are *enstranged* in Sonic Youth’s post punk attack. The band’s experimental technique distorts the form of the musical language without replacing its basic constructive function. In short, Sonic Youth de-automatizes rock’s language. Shklovsky explains how such processes are related to our awareness of an artistic object:

> The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By “enstranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and “laborious.” The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant.*

Sonic Youth similarly invites the listener to participate actively in the creation of musical form. This declarative procedure is related to that of the minimalist musical style

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16. While Sonic Youth pursue experimental means in their music, the band members nonetheless do cite numerous punk rock influences in their interviews. The rock primitivism of Iggy Pop and the Stooges and the sustained drone techniques of the Velvet Underground (both important antecedents of the mid-seventies New York punk rock scene) are two out of many eminent reference points.
18. “Shklovsky, 6” Dery, 102.
wherein the listener engages in the unfolding of the music. In a sense such a process equally envelops both listener and performer. We might better understand Sonic Youth’s concepts of form as a new way of hearing as opposed to only recognizing punk rock music.

**Sound and Invention**

The guitar is used in a very limited way by 99% of the people that use it. One tuning, one conceptualization, barre chords, lead riffs - shit like that. Our conception is that the possibilities are unlimited.19

-Guitarist Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth

“The idea behind punk is that anybody can make music, and they should.”20 While this simple axiom that captures much of punk rock’s Do-it-Yourself attitude explains why Sonic Youth’s approach is punk, it does not align with the way the band members conceive their music. The freedom of their musical approach extends into technical aspects that have moved far beyond punk rock’s basic instrumental applications. Sonic Youth’s intelligent musicianship, instead, almost implies an elitist comprehension of their equipment’s capabilities. For example, the band’s ouevre is characterized particularly by their use of alternate guitar tunings. Sonic Youth designs specific tunings for each song, so that open strings and chords become standards for sound differentiation. How do the instruments function in this system? In a song such as “Total Trash,” the guitars are tuned to G G D D Eb Eb.21 G and D, in this case, are situated as the ‘tonal’ centers of the piece; much of the song’s harmonic motion revolves around these two pitches. Similar pitches, however, are slightly detuned from one another, so that when adjacent strings with the same pitch are played, they emit a “beating” or “wobbling” sonority. The texture varies, then, in relation to the number of concurrent similar notes. As a player incorporates more such notes, wider fluctuations in pitch accuracy and actuality will occur. As a result, the band’s sonorities frequently operate outside a normal conceptualization of the tonal system. Sonic Youth effectively creates a disorienting microtonal variation of rock’s common language.

In both Sonic Youth’s live shows and studio recordings, this tuning system often necessitates that the band operate in a complicated logistical manner. On stage Sonic Youth uses different pretunings with virtually every song, which at times has warranted upwards of twenty guitars for a single performance. In the studio, the band layers guitar parts one upon another, escaping the restrictive limits of a live reproduction. “Total Trash,” for example, contains at least six or seven simultaneous guitar tracks. The use of distortion effects in the drums and bass accompanies the guitars, as well, to create a textural web of sound. As a product deliberately assembled in the studio, “Total Trash” is far removed from any unfurbished punk rock sonorities. Consequently, the band’s technique in this song requires that we delve even further into Clarke’s “situational” milieu, where the listener must conform

21. Lee Ranaldo explains some of the band’s alternate tunings in Gore’s “Sonic Youth” article, pp. 235-6. “G G D D Eb Eb is one our most important tunings ... It lends itself to rocking out, and it works great for barre chords, like on ‘Total Trash’. It’s our ‘rock’ tuning.” Gore also provides a concise examination of Sonic Youth’s system of alternate tuning, portions of which I have extracted for my own discussion.
to the music’s terms. Indeed, the musical text, at this point, seems rather daunting to many conventional or routine ‘rock’ concepts and ideas.

Any analysis we undertake, then, ought to balance two sets of inclinations. First, our observations should not rely completely upon the language of analyses such as those found in Guitar Player. For these expositions often empower the musical text as an unquestioned technical achievement. Likewise, our analyses should not encourage, at the music’s expense, an auto-referential language such as Reynolds’s. While the journalist’s experience of the music is undoubtedly illuminating, such poetic writing ultimately functions as a separate form of referential notation, removed from the broader based aims of critical analysis. My goal is to reach a qualified meeting ground hovering between the band’s creative ideas and the analyst’s interpretive interests. In this manner we may witness the ways that different communities’ interpretations of sound actually coalesce in the perceptible shape of one song. With “Total Trash,” then, I will ask why we, as listeners, might focus on certain sounds as opposed to others and look to find how we actively process this music.

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‘Total Trash’...

Deconstructing the Rock Song

If we as listeners find ourselves, as Reynolds seems to be, overwhelmed by inordinate amounts of sensory data, we ought to contemplate how we formulate meaning in music. To address this issue we should consider how temporally defined objects of sound that we recognize as music cause us to react and respond in certain ways. If we then ask why a song like “Total Trash” provokes certain emotive responses, we may identify what makes the music stimulating. In my analysis I will trace how the arrangement and deployment of constituent parts within the overall sound might arouse certain tendencies on the listener’s behalf. An identification of this correlation between content and response will guide my inquiry of “Total Trash.”

For my analytical purposes I will apply Leonard Meyer’s theories, as set forth in Emotion and Meaning in Music. 22 I will acknowledge three different yet interlinked ways in which sound stimuli act upon our receptory systems. First, one may say that listeners initially hear a song in relation to their generalized notion of how the music ought to sound. In other words, when we encounter music we have a preparatory set of expectations. Since we anticipate a particular aural experience, we are predisposed to hear the music in a certain manner. Secondly, one may point to the effects that deviations create in a musical situation. For example, when our preparatory expectations are thwarted or suspended, our senses react and attempt to reconcile the situation. As Meyer explains: “Expectation is always ahead of the music, creating a background of diffuse tension against...

22 While I find many of Meyer’s ideas germane to this investigation, my current adoption of these theories is necessarily limited. The first two sections, “Theory” and “Expectation and Learning,” in Emotion and Meaning in Music (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 1-82, supply a basic framework for many of my own observations. In addition, Meyer’s thoughts on “Pattern Perception and Continuation” (83-93), “Saturation” (135-38) and “Textural Perception” (185-89) support a large portion of this paper’s findings.
which particular delays [or deviations] articulate the affective curve and create meaning." 

Lastly, one may speak of musical perception in relation to our understanding of continuity. Stimuli, deviations and resolutions all work as part of a changing process, shaping musical continuation and, thus, form. If we shift our perceptual focus between both obvious and obscure musical events, then those elements seem to have meaning as part of a whole.

One may imagine, then, that the most insightful observations will emerge through this last way of hearing; that of perceptual awareness. In such instances the analytical task requires that one does more than merely recognize the music within a preparatory set of expectations. Instead, as Shklovsky suggests the reader see the text in poetry, I will choose to hear continuity in Sonic Youth's defamiliarized musical constructions. In short, my analysis will seek to understand the music's complicated enstrangement.

Musical Form and Expectation

With Daydream Nation, Sonic Youth still go nowhere fast, but the effect is one of suspension rather than suspense. The ultra-realism of their earlier albums gives way to irrealism. Where the serrated edges of their sound were painfully distinct, now their riffs and chords undergo ‘halation’: the photographic term for ‘the spreading of light beyond its proper boundary in a developed image.’

-Simon Reynolds

The piece I am delegating as representative of a post punk aesthetic, “Total Trash,” appears on Sonic Youth’s 1988 album Daydream Nation. As Reynolds indicates, many of the record’s songs seem to step out of their physicalities and dissipate into space. In a song such as “Total Trash,” process and change go beyond mere embellishment or variation. Those stylistic elements that Meyer refers to as “sound terms” seem to move past their constructive designations. At times Sonic Youth apparently neglects to situate these “terms” as parts in a chain of logically sequential events. We then must force ourselves to hear these terms in their dizzying, enstranged states. While these sound terms may appear as variations of clearly related forms or shapes throughout the song, in many cases their presence openly frustrates the listener’s efforts to stabilize the surrounding “situation.” In short, the listener may struggle to comprehend the piece’s structural design.

While Sonic Youth does traverse wide textural fields in “Total Trash,” the music manages to cohere as a formal unit by the song’s closing bars. As Reynolds describes it, “Total Trash starts as a ponderous punk stomp . . . but ends as a mirage of itself.” Why does he choose to frame the song this way? Perhaps Reynolds recognizes that the textural transformations in “Total Trash” are rooted around certain recurring elements. We may identify these elements through a group of sound terms or riffs that ground the song’s various timbral, temporal, and rhythmic fluctuations. In my analysis I will focus on these riffs as representative markers of the music’s content. For I believe as one is drawn to the riff’s changing shapes and functions, one becomes aware of the song’s other qualities as well. I have not included a discussion of the song’s lyrical content for I feel, as Reynolds seems to, more

connected to the band's use of instrumental sound. My analysis will concentrate, then, on the contrasts between the composite parts that form the song's three main sections.

The 96 bars that constitute the song's first section revolve around a conventional verse-chorus format. Within these measures Sonic Youth works in the prose language of Reynolds' "ponderous punk stomp." The functional devices in this section prepare our initial expectations of what the second and third sections might contain. And, as such, the meanings we first attach to these devices will act as comparative yardsticks for the piece's remaining sections. The song's germinal traits unfold in the first 26 bars (refer to Example 1). Sonic Youth employ three separate guitar riffs that anchor the music's progress. Riffs X and Y are two-bar units, each repeated four times; Riff Z is a four-bar unit repeated twice. In their initial appearances, the three riffs each last eight bars. The last two bars of the section serve to extend Riff Z which leads back into Riff X. In this context, Riffs X and Y form a direct contrast with one another; the former's eighth note rhythms compare with the latter's relatively static melodic motion. Riff Z, on the other hand, is a transposition and variation of Riff X's ascending three note melodic line, and consequently upon its appearance sounds all the more familiar.

The next unit of 22 bars begins with a four-bar repetition of Riff X before Thurston Moore enters with the vocal line over guitar Riff Y. Interestingly, Moore's vocal line behaves as a consequent phrase to guitar Riff X's antecedent. He uses the same notes (D-E-F#) as Riff X, but in a descending line answering the guitar's rising figure. This correlation is relative, however, to each riff's differing harmonic context. When Moore sings the chorus eight bars later, the notes from Riff Z (G-A-B) match the notes of his new vocal line. This agreement creates a sense of correspondence and hence arrival. Sonic Youth completes the chorus as Riff Z extends and leads back into Riff X and another verse-chorus repetition.

This second occurrence of the 22-bar unit retraces the previous unit's steps with one noticeable addition. For the first time Kim Gordon plays a bass line of steady eighth notes on G, which rises in volume within the sound mixture. During Riff Z's progression, her bass pattern inches towards the foreground and acts as an effective contrast to the chorus's familiar material. After the chorus (and its two-bar extension), the band diverges into a 16-bar instrumental break. This short segment centers around Steve Shelley's syncopated drum pattern and Gordon's descending bass line, both of which improvise around the same rhythm (the first bars of the syncopated guitar/drum rhythm and bass line are shown in Example 1). The foreground movement in these measures occurs primarily around the bass line's disjunct rhythmic gestures between G and C. In the background, the guitarists play a distorted, sliding line between D and F(?). The band underlays the entire segment with a sustained G chord. After the instrumental break, Sonic Youth finishes the first section with one last repetition of Riff Z, the chorus.

Taken as a whole, then, this opening section meets with a generic preparatory set of punk rock expectations. Indeed, the formal similarities between a 'classic' punk song such as The Ramones' "I Don't Wanna Walk Around With You" and the opening section of "Total Trash" are striking. Both examples feature three different, functional riffs or chord

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The bands use the first riff, in each case, as both an instrumental introduction and a connective unit to areas of vocal activity. The second and third progressions correspond as verse and chorus, respectively. In each instance, as well, the bands repeat this basic material three times before launching into their solo/bridge sections. In listening to both The Ramones and Sonic Youth, these instrumental breaks give the illusion of

26. This section functions, of course, neither as a solo nor bridge. Rather, it occurs in place of what might be found in a 'normal' rock song. I use the term solo/bridge solely for lack of a better word.
suspended progress. In short, at this juncture the musical material heightens our expectation of the vocal line’s return. Finally, each band closes its example with a punctuating chorus. One feels that the song has reached its destination.

If “Total Trash” actually were to end at this point, a particular set of punk expectations certainly would seem fulfilled. As I have presented Sonic Youth’s discussion of their compositional and technical conceptions, however, we might expect that “Total Trash” is more than a routine “punk stomp.” As listeners/readers, then, we adjust our preparatory set of expectations in anticipation of the song’s probable enstrangement.

Musical Form and Deviation

After the opening section’s resolution, as listeners, we sense we have reached a point of arrival and satisfaction. Following the section’s last chorus, the band even continues once again with Riff X and one detects a probability that perhaps the verse and chorus will proceed as well. The band does not follow Riff X with Riff Y, however, and the middle section continues as a “deviation” for 112 bars. As Meyer explains, a “deviation” is an irregularity that frustrates our normal set of expectations. When its presence continues unabated, the listener experiences increased levels of tension and suspense. How does the middle section deviate from the opening section? Most noticeably, events seem to gravitate towards Riff X’s circular reiterations. The listener follows Riff X as a guide for the section’s development. As the preliminary chart below shows, however, we may hear Riff X’s shape through both its presences and absences.

In the first 44 bars the way in which Sonic Youth establishes Riff X through successive reiteration and saturation frustrates our attempts to determine the piece’s directional goals. As Riff X is stuck in its repetitive lock we grow confused over its decontextualized presence. The riff seems disembodied; the band appears unconcerned with Riff X’s linked relations to the song’s other elements. According to Meyer, “anything acquires meaning if it is connected with or indicates, or refers to something beyond itself, so that its full nature points to and is revealed in that connection.”

As Sonic Youth employs Riff X, though, it does not necessitate any particular sequitur apart from its own pattern. Since the band has saturated the texture so thoroughly with the riff in the first 44 bars, it seems striking when Riff X later drops out in two places. One perceives these breaks as obvious disconnectives. To hear continuity during these moments, however, one may imagine Riff X’s presence against the song’s other elements.

Even more disorienting than these absences, though, is Riff X’s perpetually diverging shape. In the first section of the song, for example, riff X consists of three notes (D-E-F♯). During the middle section’s first 14 bars, however, the band begins to mutate the riff. As Sonic Youth layers guitar tracks one on top of the other, the pattern’s notes succumb to an overall detuning process. The increased number of similar pitches, resulting from their combination of five or six guitar tracks, serves to blur the original pattern’s demarcated notes. In Reynolds description: “their riffs and chords undergo ‘halation’... The spreading of light beyond its proper boundary in a developed image.” Through the
band’s conglomeration of alternate tunings, Riff X mutates from its original pitches (D-E-F#) and emerges in a new pattern centered approximately around Eb-F-G. Sonic Youth’s process of mutation effectively draws Riff X outside its previous tonal background, where it now assumes a microtonal identity. The riff glides between any number of notes within the approximate borders of its five half steps. Even Riff X’s delineating notes, Eb and G, are not heard as equivalents to any diatonic representatives. For example, Riff X’s G never quite matches the G ostinato in Kim Gordon’s bass line. In short, Riff X refuses to accommodate our desire for normalization. As Meyer explains, as listeners, we normalize events and experiences through our simplification of “memory traces.” These memory traces are the details out of which we reconstruct a remembered musical experience. If a musical object is recognizable and fits within a generalized “memory” type, we will absorb it effortlessly. The musical object will align with a past experience. If, however, the object exaggerates certain features of a general remembered pattern, we will actively try to standardize this point of exaggeration. We will try to make the object, as a whole, fit into a simplified pattern.

After 64 bars, a new Riff XX, centered around D-F-G, finally does solidify. While this version seems more stable than its immediate predecessor, they both nonetheless relate back to the original pattern from the first section. How do changes between the Riffs create affect? We find our reactions are centered around the comparisons we make between the new pattern with both its initial form and each of its successive appearances. As Sonic Youth saturates the middle section with Riff XX, we have difficulty simplifying its pattern within Riff X’s shape. Riff XX apparently has a separate form. Just as we readily recognized Riff X in the first section, we now hear Riff XX in this section. As a result, it seems that rock’s prosaic and poetical devices are sharing space within the same song. When the band eventually returns to the original Riff X in the last section, these contrasts fall into one another and the mutated riff conforms to the original’s reiterated shape and form. If we listen to the piece again, though, we find ourselves deconstructing Riff X’s simplified “memory trace.” In the middle section we willingly reenter Riff XX’s estranged form. If we acknowledge the separate qualities of both Riffs X and XX, “Total Trash” then becomes two pieces each with its own identity.

Musical Form and Perception
Perhaps we may resolve some of the “irrealism” that Reynolds encounters in “Total Trash,” if we engage the song and adjust our perceptions to account for changes in the textural field. Accordingly, I will focus on foreground patterns in the music and consider why they might be drawn to their presence. Should this fail to explain the piece’s
perceptible flow, I will attempt to restore continuation through those background elements which originally had foreground meaning but have since become comparatively recondite. In other words, instead of allowing the musical text to overwhelm my expectations, I will choose those elements in the song that impel the piece forward. Then I may qualify these parts, relative to the piece’s whole.

I will undertake this process, however, in recognition of one basic premise: the material that we focus on in the middle section is not ‘new.’ The patterns that hold one’s attention in this section are merely enstranged versions of the first section’s devices. This way of hearing entails active mental reconstruction, through which I reinterpret patterns in relation to their original impressions. By focusing on those sound terms established within a punk style in the first section, I choose to hear them as connections in the middle section. This method is facilitated by the simplified nature of the patterns themselves, which, in their initial shapes, sound relatively normalized. For my purposes I will employ only three basic connectives, though further inquiry certainly could yield a variety of more complicated patterns.

As I have shown, the first connective, Riff X, dominates the opening 44 bars. When this riff drops from the perceptual field and dissolves into a cloud of guitar distortion, its absence creates a noticeable sensation. As Reynolds says, the music is “breached by a caesura of wilting and incandescing guitars.” In the riff’s place, Kim Gordon’s bass line emerges from the textural mix and acts as a continuing element. Since her simple bass riff of G eighth notes has been a background element for some time, it does not appear as an unfamiliar element. In its initial form, her bass pattern functioned as an ostinato background figure, supporting the simultaneous movement of foreground elements. But in this new and confused context, the bass line moves to the center of our attention. Given this situation, one may then begin constructing “hypothetical” probabilities. For example, the pattern may change and give way to other events or it may persist and saturate the texture.

After four bars Steve Shelley joins the bass connective with a drum beat that previously underscored Riff X. His simple pattern, a rhythmic snare motive (see Example 1), has obvious associations. First, we remember this reductive pattern from the song’s opening section, where it was linked with Riff X; therefore its present appearance reinforces an entire complex of initial impressions. Secondly, the band establishes this pattern and the bass connective as background elements within the middle section’s first 44 measures. At the point in the middle section where Sonic Youth first drops Riff X from the textural, they have already ensconced both the bass and drum patterns as part of the enstrangement process. For four bars the bass and drum connectives simultaneously hold the piece together. Gordon’s bass motive then assumes the rhythm of the snare motive, while Shelley adds an accelerating straight eighth-note pattern in the bass drum. Eight bars later Sonic Youth reintroduces Riff XX as the main foreground element. After another eight bars, Gordon’s bass motive reenters for a climactic ten bar section that effectively closes the second part of the middle section.

At this point the piece undergoes a substantial ritard and appears to self-destruct. Shelley’s drums split into phased, double tracked patterns, Gordon’s bass line is buried in the mix and Riff XX seemingly disappears. Where Reynolds perceives that this “hurtling gives
way to idling . . . [and] all delineation disappears,” I will follow the song’s progression through its background elements. In this case, I will choose to find Riff XX within the texture and trace its pattern in order to maintain the song’s sense of continuity. Throughout the next 14 bars, the band does indeed displace guitar Riff XX to the textural field’s lowest strata. We first hear Riff XX buried in the left channel of the mixture, then its pattern follows for eight bars in the right channel. Rather than succumbing to the foreground confusion, I simply adjust my focus to understand the “situation.” As this textural web becomes more convoluted, Shelley builds a drum pattern that coalesces into a triplet quarter-triplet eighth shuffle rhythm. Against this foreground element, we hear Riff XX slowly gain intensity and reassert itself. Even though the riff initially is slightly out of synchronization with the shuffle rhythm, the two motives seem assimilated to each other’s presence and they eventually emerge as a coherent unit. After 16 bars, the shuffle pattern dissipates and the piece falls into what I will call dead time. At this point the sound resembles Reynolds’ description of an “after-image lost in a dubscape of unhinged resonances.” This inertia momentarily holds the piece as the bass and guitar hover around D. Shortly, though, the song solidifies and flows back into Riff X’s original form.

In comparison with the preceding events, the song’s closing 25 bars, those of Reynolds’ “mirage,” seem positively restrained. The band releases the sound terms from their estranged realm; each riff reappears in its simplified form. Once again we find ourselves engaged in punk rock’s prosaic form. Singer Thurston Moore provides a fitting cap to the song, as he finally completes the ending eighth-note run in the chorus (Rather than extending his vocal line into the first bar of the extension, as he had previously done, Moore simply sings the D on the fourth beat of the riff’s last measure. Compare this variation with the motive notated in Example 1). As the piece fades away in a sustained mixture of guitar feedback and distortion, the song becomes nothing more than a remembered experience within our memories, awaiting its reduction into generalized shapes and patterns. The schematic chart in Example 2 suggests one possible way of hearing this piece:

**CONCLUSIONS**

As analysts in popular music studies broaden their areas of interest and address new musical genres and styles, so their analytical methodology must change as well. In a field where the analyst often has few choices but to construct a representative musical score, such changes are certainly welcome. We should constantly be seeking ways to facilitate such processes. Just as bands like Sonic Youth do not exist solely through their sound formations, we should also remember that our own experiences as critics are not confined to any one area or interpretive community. As I incorporate the fields of linguistics, journalism, literary criticism, performance practice and musical perception, theory and analysis in my own analysis, I am striving to demystify the seemingly inexplicable qualities of sound.

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28. Dead time, as I am using this term, refers to those areas in the piece where Riff X/XX’s pulse disappears completely. One way of hearing the middle section is through a superimposed version of Riff X’s pattern. When such a maneuver fails to correspond with the surface level activities, the piece has entered into dead time. That is, the piece is in a heightened state of spatial complacency. As such, Riff X, in its implied absence defines my standard of dead time.
### EXAMPLE 2. TOTAL TRASH AND PATTERN PERCEPTION

#### OPENING SECTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrumental Introduction</th>
<th>Verse-Chorus</th>
<th>Instrumental Break</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26 Bars</td>
<td>22 Bars</td>
<td>16 bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Riff X</td>
<td>1) Riff X</td>
<td>1) Riff Z Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 bars</td>
<td>4 bars</td>
<td>8 bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Riff Y</td>
<td>2) Riff Y Verse</td>
<td>2) Z extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 bars</td>
<td>8 bars</td>
<td>2 bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Riff Z</td>
<td>3) Riff Z Chorus</td>
<td>8 bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 bars</td>
<td>8 bars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Z extension</td>
<td>4) Z extension</td>
<td>2 bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### MIDDLE SECTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Riff XX Saturation</th>
<th>Connectives Section I</th>
<th>Subliminal Connectives II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>44 Bars</td>
<td>38 Bars</td>
<td>30 Bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Riff X mutates</td>
<td>1) Riff X dissolves</td>
<td>1) Riff XX appears deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 bars</td>
<td>or disappears</td>
<td>in the left channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Riff X’s mutating form dominates.</td>
<td>2) G Bass Connective</td>
<td>2) Riff XX appears deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 bars</td>
<td>4 bars</td>
<td>in the right channel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bass and drum patterns enter the mix</td>
<td>3) Bass and Drum</td>
<td>6 bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Bass assumes Drum</td>
<td>4 bars</td>
<td>Riff XX together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connective rhythm</td>
<td>8 bars</td>
<td>DEAD TIME . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Riff XX rejoins</td>
<td>10 bars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 bars</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) D Bass Connective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rejoins textural field</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## EXAMPLE 2. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLOSING SECTION</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verse-Chorus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Riff X</td>
<td>8 bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Riff Y Verse</td>
<td>8 bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Riff Z Chorus</td>
<td>8 bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Z extension</td>
<td>1 bar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*DEAD TIME . . . FADES AWAY*

While one might find it easier *just to listen* than to attempt to explain such a quality, it is precisely such an inclination that warrants our further explorations.

Since I recognize that my observations alone cannot possibly impart all the distinctive characteristics of this music, I have examined the interpretations and ideas of others as well. By placing myself within the song’s “situation,” however, I can allow only certain elements to speak; from the array of bewildering *sound* qualities, I can focus upon one particular selection. My goal must then be one of selective *communication*. My interpretation is only one of many possible approaches to this music. I therefore hope and expect that popular music analysts will extend their analyses in as many communicative directions as possible. Then our interpretive communities may attend more fully to the range of discursive identities both attached to and contained within the music.

*Music Department*
*State University Stony Brook, New York*

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