Molding the pop ghost: noise and immersion

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Pop Wall Alphabet

My work *Pop Wall Alphabet*, which can in many ways be described as "noisy," consists of 26 pieces, each lasting between six and fourteen minutes, with a total duration of approximately four and a half hours. When performed live in its entirety it takes on certain characteristics of a live installation in that it is neither necessary to follow the work from beginning to end nor to follow it for a specific continuous duration. Each of the 26 pieces has been composed according to the same procedure, in each case using appropriated source materials taken from pop albums produced between 1970 and 2011. Amongst many other criteria, the albums have been chosen for the first letter of the artists' names, each artist representing one letter and together forming the complete alphabet: *Abba* for A, *Beastie Boys* for B, *Chemical Brothers* for C, *Devo* for D, etc. I use superimpositions of pop songs in order to generate dense textures. For quite some time I have had a fascination with the changes in perception that occur when familiar materials are condensed and concentrated, and in observing how well known material gradually becomes alienated and eventually unrecognizable as it is superimposed in an increasing number of layers.

Various listening modes are evoked when listening to *Pop Wall Alphabet*. In order to explain how this takes place I find it necessary first to outline briefly the principle of the form of the pieces. I use two kinds of material to construct each piece: first, the entirety of songs found on a single pop album, and second, a so-called spectral freeze of each of these songs. The spectral freeze is realized with a Giant FFT analysis. The phase information gathered during this analysis is randomized and then used to resynthesize

the song over time. In the resulting sound, all the frequencies and amplitude changes are present as they occurred in the original material; however, due to the phase randomization the audio sounds subjectively like bandpass-filtered noise. It could also be described as a reverb tail that does not decay.

Each piece starts with a superimposition of all songs found on the album plus their spectral freezes. The spectral freezes immediately start to fade out, with the duration of the fade identical to the duration of the shortest song on the album. Hence, at the end of the shortest song all of the spectral freezes disappear; the other songs continue playing. One by one the songs drop out, according to their original duration, until only the longest song remains. At this point the spectral freeze of this same song fades in, the unmodified song fades out, and the spectral freeze is allowed to ring on after the song has finished. This point marks the start of the second part of the piece. The spectral freezes of all the songs return, starting one after the other in reverse order to which the original songs dropped out in the first part. As each new spectral freeze fades in the previous one fades out, resulting in a continuously changing texture of noise bands, with the time intervals between the onsets of the individual spectral freezes the same as the time intervals between the

Graphic display of how the 26 pieces of the ***Pop Wall Alphabet*** were composed. (Five songs are used in this example; most of the time around 12 songs were used per piece.)

Gray blocks indicate songs, black triangles indicate fading spectral freezes.

The moment when the shortest song ends is also the point at which the spectral freezes finish their fade-out.

The spectral freezes of the songs return in the reverse order to which they dropped out.

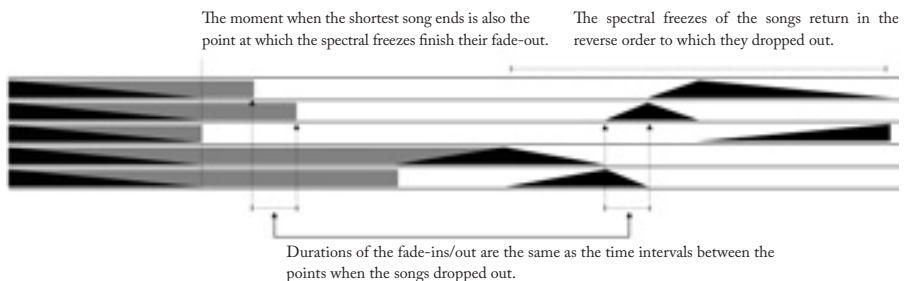Durations of the fade-ins/out are the same as the time intervals between the points when the songs dropped out.

Figure 1: Graphic representation of the formal construction principle of *Pop Wall Alphabet*

moments when the corresponding songs dropped out. The piece ends with the spectral freeze of the shortest song in the piece.

The same set of rules was applied to 26 different pop albums, as outlined above, to construct each of the 26 pieces. The superimpositions of songs and the spectral freezes yield in each case different sonic textures and spectra. In addition, since each album contains a different number of songs, and since the songs have different durations, each piece ends up with a different structure in the time domain.[1]

The *signature sound*

I was originally led to this approach because of the relevance of identifiable sonic qualities—the "sound" of an artist or producer—in pop production. In simple terms, *sound* refers to qualities that identify a particular genre of pop music, but its significance often extends to the identity of the artists themselves. For example, Quincy Jones's production techniques lend a particular, identifiable *sound* to the Michael Jackson albums *Thriller* and *Bad*. In discussions of the *sound* of a certain production style, technical aspects of sound engineering are often found alongside more enigmatic or esoteric concepts.[2]

When a sound quality or set of qualities takes on the function of an identifier for a particular artist, I will call that sound quality the artist's *signature sound*. This *signature sound* is something that I attempt to capture as one aspect of *Pop Wall Alphabet*. By superimposing songs from albums that

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1 This description might suggest that the choice of pop albums used as the source material is rather arbitrary. In fact, while working on the piece it turned out that this was not at all the case. Albums that contained too much variety in the style of the songs proved problematic, as did albums that were too homogeneous. It took quite a lot of trial and error to find out what sort of material was appropriate for this project.

2 For a discussion of the various implications of *sound* in pop production see: Martin Pfleiderer, "Sound. Anmerkungen zu einem populären Begriff," in *Pop Sounds. Klangtexturen in der Pop- und Rockmusik*, ed. Thomas Phleps and Ralf van Appe (Bielefeld: Transkript, 2003), 19–30.

are characterized by a specific and perceivable *signature sound*, I intend to render the individual tracks unrecognizable and achieve as a result a wall of sound that has all of that *signature sound*'s spectral characteristics. My aim—admittedly with a grain of irony—was, through this condensing process, to make audible that which can usually not be heard in the singular moment of a pop song: the *signature sound* usually only becomes recognizable after the listener has heard multiple songs by the same artist, and sometimes even then only in retrospect. It is ever present but at the same time evasive and ephemeral, unless it is accumulated in a wall of sound. *Pop Wall Alphabet* is therefore an attempt to capture this evasive "ghost in the static." It makes audible that which is otherwise difficult to grasp.

Putting individual songs on top of each other means that they can no longer be identified independently. From the perspective of signal processing we could say that each song serves as the other song's noise by making the original unintelligible. By drawing attention away from the surface characteristics of an individual song, such as melody, harmony, rhythm, or the sentiment that it conveys, a quality that is normally submerged can be heard emerge more clearly.

Triggering the listener's memory

What I find fascinating when working with the superimposition of songs in *Pop Wall Alphabet* is the change of perception that occurs when the shorter songs start to drop out of the condensed texture.[3] At the moment of maximum density, the resulting sound can be described as a compact wall of noise. It is fully abstract in that the origin of the material cannot be recognized at all. As the shorter songs end, the texture becomes more transparent and

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3 In the paragraphs that follow I describe my personal listening experience. Although listening is a subjective process, and other people may perceive this music very differently, from conversations with audience members after previous performances I have noticed that other people have described their listening experience of *Pop Wall Alphabet* in similar terms.

it becomes apparent that the dense sonic texture is made of a set of songs superimposed on one another. The continuous wall of noise thus begins as something abstract and over time becomes increasingly referential: first the style of music becomes identifiable, then the performing artist, and in the last stage the individual song. During this process, the mode of listening changes from an acousmatic, abstract sort of attention to different degrees of identification and recognition, thereby vividly triggering the listener's memories and the associations they may have with the individual songs.

The second parts of the pieces—consisting of the spectral freezes after the longest song has ended—return to a very abstract type of material. Although the spectral freezes sound like static reverb tails or filtered noise, memory again plays a role in the process of perception. Through the listener's effort to identify and disentangle the songs in the mass of sound superimpositions of the first part, the listener's ears become sensitive to the particular timbres found in the music. When listening to the spectral freezes of the second part, I often hear fragments of the previously heard songs in the noise band, even though I know that they are not there. The noisy nature of the sounds makes them complex enough to evoke such manifold associations and to become the carrier or trigger of memories, despite their abstract character.

I find the most fascinating aspect of this work to be this oscillation between abstract and recognition-based hearing and the various ways that memory comes into play. One reason I have chosen pop songs as the material to work with is that, whether we like it or not, we are all constantly exposed to this music, whether at a supermarket, a bar, or a shopping mall. And since pop songs often have a relatively short timespan of actual popularity, they might also represent a very specific time period in a person's history, evoking feelings of nostalgia and taking on a certain iconic quality. The personal memory of the listener thus plays an important role in the perception of the piece, yielding a very personal and intimate listening experience as an emotional subtext.

Immersed listening

Immersion is an ambiguous term; it has even been referred to as an "excessively vague, all-inclusive concept."[4] In this text I use it in the sense that an immersed person loses awareness of the actual environment and becomes absorbed by media-induced stimulation. This stimulation, whether provided by a single medium or several media simultaneously, is often a multi-sensual experience that suggests some sort of alternative reality.

Classic examples of immersive media are the modern movie theater or computer games.[5] With computer games, it is often assumed that making virtual reality look as realistic as possible furthers immersion.[6] If the game simulates reality convincingly and the elements behave as in real life, the player is more likely to accept the virtual reality in exchange for the actual one. This moment is often referred to as the "willing suspension of disbelief."[7] In other words, the player is aware that the simulated reality is artificial, but she or he willingly puts aside all disbelief and focuses attention onto the simulated reality and away from the actual one. The player is absorbed by the medium to the point at which the medium becomes invisible.[8] However, there are indications that immersion is only partially affected by the realistic depiction of virtual environments. Games do not need to look "real" in order to absorb the player.[9] Games that were graphically very primitive in comparison to

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4   Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 183.

5   Jörg Schweinitz, "Totale Immersion und die Utopien von der virtuellen Realität," *Das Spiel mit dem Medium* (Marburg: Schüren, 2006), 136–53.

6   Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams, *On Game Design* (San Francisco: New Riders, 2003), Chapter 3.

7   This phrase is often used in discussions of virtual reality. It was coined in 1817 by the poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his book *Biographia Literaria*, accessed May 1, 2013, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/6081.

8   Rolf F. Nohr, "Rhythmusarbeit," *Das Spiel mit dem Medium* (Marburg: Schüren, 2006), 223.

9   Timothy Sanders and Paul Cairns, "Time perception, immersion and music in videogames," *British Computer Society: Proceedings of the Interaction Specialist Group Conference* 2010, Dundee (2010): 160.

today's standards—for example Pac-Man—were probably no less immersive than the most recent 3D games. A more decisive factor for the likelihood of immersion seems to be the emotional involvement of the player.[10] There seems to be a reciprocal relationship between emotional involvement and the realism of virtual reality. The more the player is emotionally engaged, the less realistic the virtual reality needs to appear in order for immersion to take place.

Within the context of media, immersion is almost exclusively discussed with reference to multi-sensual environments. A willing suspension of disbelief is more likely to occur if all of our senses are addressed. If we are looking at a perfect visual simulation of reality but hearing the real-world surroundings outside the simulation, our imagination might be less likely to give in to the simulation. Therefore my question is this: is immersion (in the sense outlined above) possible if the only medium available is sound? Can sound alone evoke some sort of virtual reality that the listener might want to exchange for actual reality? Can emotional involvement deriving from sound alone be sufficiently intense to make unnecessary an additional visual depiction of an alternative reality?

Music's power to put people in a trance-like state is generally acknowledged.[11] I would argue, however, that trance is different to immersion. I understand trance as an altered state of mind in which the person is not fully self-conscious. In this sense it does not differ very much from immersion, yet immersion—as understood in game or film theories[12]—describes a state in which the mind is lucid, perceptive, and fully reactive, whereas in trance the person is typically in a state that resembles sedation.[13] The difference

10   Zach Whalen, *Play Along – An Approach to Videogame Music*, accessed April 4, 2013, http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/whalen/.

11   Gabe Turow, "Auditory Driving as a Ritual Technology: A Review and Analysis" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2005).

12   Nohr, "Rhythmusarbeit."

13   Kay Hoffmann, *The Trance Workbook: Understanding and Using the Power of Altered States* (New York: Sterling, 1998), 9.

between trance and immersion can be described by the presence of *flow* in the latter, and its absence in the former.

Flow is a term from the field of creativity research that has been defined by psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi.[14] It is the "effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness" of a person who is fully concentrated on a specific action.[15] I suggest transferring this model to the context of sonic experience, where *flow* can be seen as the element that differentiates immersion from trance. Listening to *Pop Wall Alphabet* potentially puts the listener in an immersive rather than trance-like state. The immersive effect is supported by two elements: the speaker setup that surrounds the listeners and the sonic texture, which predominantly consists of noise bands in wide frequency ranges. As composer and sound artist Peter Ablinger has stated, when listening to wide range noise bands listeners will readily hear things that are not actually there.[16] Continuous noise, as in *Pop Wall Alphabet*, is prone to evoke auditory illusions. To paraphrase Ablinger, it can serve as a mirror for the imagination of the listener.[17] I refer to this mode of listening as *projective listening*, because the listener projects imagined sonic events into the sound texture.

As explained above, different modes of listening are engaged when listening to *Pop Wall Alphabet*, starting with an abstract sort of listening, passing through various modes of referential listening and eventually, in the second part of the piece where the spectral freezes take over, arriving at *projective listening*: this is the moment when I—as listener—start to hear phantom melodic phrases in the noise. As already mentioned, I have used pop songs as material in *Pop Wall Alphabet* for the greater likelihood that

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14 Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Creativity* (New York: Harper, 1996), 107–26.

15 Csíkszentmihályi, *Creativity*, 110.

16 Peter Ablinger, *Hören hören/hearing LISTENING* (Berlin: Kehrer, 2008), 95.

17 Peter Ablinger, *Rauschen*, accessed June 21, 2013, http://ablinger.mur.at/rauschen.html.

they will create an emotional response in listeners. As the first part of each piece progresses, the individual songs become increasingly recognizable. This in turn encourages a mode of listening that goes deeper into the texture. The mind tries to disentangle the dense noise bands by separating and identifying the simultaneous, superimposed songs. When this mode of listening is applied to the second half, as the spectral freezes fade in and out, *projective listening* is more likely to occur.

In summary, in the context of *Pop Wall Alphabet* noise becomes a catalyst for immersion. On one hand, the continuous broad band noise frequencies, combined with the surrounding speaker setup, provide an engulfing sonic environment for the listener. The sonic texture is expanded in time, space, and frequency range, and offers enough richness and complexity to serve as an "alternative reality" in which the listener is submerged. On the other hand, *projective listening* activates the listener's imagination, which furthers *flow* as opposed to a sedated state of trance. This again happens on the basis of noise, which serves simultaneously as a malleable substance onto which the imagination of the listener is imprinted, and as a trigger of sentiment because of the incorporated pop songs. The immersive experience can be further intensified by choosing a volume setting high enough for the low frequencies to be sensed as physical vibration. This haptic sensation adds a multi-sensual dimension to the sonic experience, which again furthers immersion.

The relatively simple construction of *Pop Wall Alphabet* results in a complex listening experience in which noise goes through various states, as anonymous material with high redundancy, as a carrier of referential meaning and trigger of personal sentiments, and eventually as a model for *projective listening*. In combination with the overall setting, it facilitates a personal and immersive listening experience.

Appendix: text rendition of *Pop Wall Alphabet – Arrival* by ABBA[18]

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18 This text was created using a program that I wrote in C++ that performs a process on the texts of the
songs used in *Pop Wall Alphabet* similar to that performed on the music itself. Here, fragments of words
from the individual songs are juxtaposed. As in the sound version, at the beginning the letters occur in a
dense mix, appearing like a random succession of letters as only two characters are taken from the first
words of each song. This process is repeated cyclically throughout the text of each song. Toward the end of
each text, the character fragments that are copied get larger, with up to ten letters taken from each song.
As with the audio, some texts are shorter than others and drop out earlier. As the character samples get
longer, more and more words can be identified. In the end the longest text remains.

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I'm CarrI am the f thes, my love a littlie not-thtiger
And e days, my lifee money e-kind-ofif I meet
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But I kn
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That's meou, I am tdream you
So g
Money mo
There's he tiger
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must be love
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Yorld
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Still mI had a liu'd-marry day
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That's me
n I kisonly

it's a rised thech man's w teacheorld
It's r
All mya rich man sense h's world
ad flown away
When I kissed the teacher
My whole class went wild
As I held my breath, the world stood still, but then he just smiled
I was in the seventh heaven
When I kissed the teacher
(I wanna hug, hug, hug him)
When I kissed the teacher
(I wanna hug, hug him)
When I kissed the teacher
(I wanna hug, hug, hug him)
When I kissed the teacher
(I wanna hug, hug him)
When I kissed the teacher
(I wanna hug, hug, hug him)

Ryan Jordan

What is noise (music) to you?

Noise music is the freedom to express oneself sonically without the constraints of existing musical structure, tradition, or genre. It also acts as a gateway to many other areas of interest including art, performance, science, philosophy, society, etc., taking the creator away from just musical study. Sound is merely an output of the process.

Why do you make it?

Because it is easy.