

# Mineral entrails: phono-material ecologies of the sound-as-physical-assault continuum

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## Abstract

Negli anni '80, i Napalm Death fondarono il grindcore, sottogenere musicale tra metal estremo, anarco-punk e hardcore. Lo stile mirava all'estremità sonora intesa come muro di suono, un'estetica stimolata dalle sue origini operaie. Il grindcore ha successivamente influenzato diverse pratiche musicali estreme che fanno risuonare la relazione tra classe e capitalismo. Dal noise giapponese al jazzcore americano, fino alla musica elettronica britannica, l'approccio del genere si riverbera come una filosofia corporea dell'audio. Con l'intento di inquadrare questo fenomeno di risonanza tra generi transnazionali, il mio obiettivo è dichiararli parte di un 'sound-as-physical-assault' continuum, basato su un'esperienza estetica estrema dell'audio. A partire dalla nozione di Brar di 'mineral interiors', che descrive come l'intensità del suono nelle correnti musicali afrodiasporiche risuoni sia nello spazio dell'album che nel mondo dell'ascoltatore, suggerisco che la stessa teorizzazione può essere applicata sia al grindcore, al jazzcore e al japoise sia a generi come la dub e il footwork. Se entrambi partecipano allo stesso paradigma di musica basata sull'intensità aptica e sulle questioni di classe, i due concetti li differenziano in termini di priorità nell'immaginazione politica e negli effetti psicofisici della musica. Questo contributo offre la possibilità di evidenziare somiglianze foniche e sociopolitiche mantenendo le differenze tra genealogie musicali diverse ma accomunate da un utilizzo massimalista dei sistemi audio.

In the 1980s, Napalm Death founded grindcore: a musical subgenre at the crossroads of extreme metal, anarcho-punk and hardcore. The style aimed at sonic extremity interpreted as a wall of sound: an aesthetic stimulated by its working-class origins. Grindcore has subsequently influenced various extreme musical practices that sound the relationship between class and capitalism. From Japanese noise to American jazzcore to British electronic music, the genre's approach reverberates as a bodily philosophy of audio. By framing this phenomenon of resonance between transnational genres, my aim is to declare them part of a 'sound-as-physical-assault' continuum, based on extreme/intense aesthetic experiences of sound. Starting from Brar's notion of 'mineral interiors', which describes how the intensity of sound in Afrodiasporic musical currents resonates both a space in the record and in the listener's world, I suggest that the same theorisation of an intensity-based sound ecology can be applied to grindcore, jazzcore and japoise as well as genres such as dub and footwork. While both participate in the same paradigm of music based on haptic intensity and class issues, the two concepts are different in terms of political imagination and psychophysical effects of music. This contribution ensures the possibility of highlighting phonic and sociopolitical similarities while maintaining differences between musical genealogies that share a maximalist use of sound systems.

## Parole chiave/Key Words

*Ecologie sonore; timbro; metal estremo; modelli aurali; filosofia dell'audio.*

*Sonic ecologies; timbre; extreme metal; aural models; philosophy of audio.*

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## 1. You Suffer: Introduction

Press play. Nervous Drum cymbals tremble. A high-frequency guitar feedback lurks in the background. A second, lower feedback enters; the song explodes. Fast-paced, discordant chords and bass hits play frantically buried in reverb. A cavernous growl spells out, barely intelligible: «Multinational corporations, genocide of the starving nations». No virtuosity, no technique, no structure, no metronome. Just sonic hostility; music as a punishment. I'm only 13 seconds in. I listen to the music's pressure in my eardrums for the remaining 53 seconds and look at the album cover (Fig.1): a skeletal angel of death looms in the background above an industrial wasteland. In the foreground, five suits sneer complacently at a group of impoverished BIPOC surrounded by a dumpster of human skulls and corporate logos such as McDonald's, IBM and Coca-Cola. The only colored element is the sky: a rancid, atomic yellow.



Fig. 7. Cover art of *Scum*.

Everything in this first track of debut album *Scum* (Earache 1987) by English band Napalm Death sounds physical. From the crudeness of the artwork to the lyrics to the wall of electrified, instrumental and vocal noise, piercing distortion, sonic impurity, timbrical overdrive and neurotic speed just seem to be trying to total the listener. Music and imagery become a mesh of metal and guts, terror and electricity.

To refer to this sonic ambience, the band is credited to have coined the term grindcore (Blush 2019): a subgenre emerging in the 1980s by mixing extreme metal's and hardcore punk's stylistic elements; a sonic extremity merging with punk attitude and politics (Overell 2010). Napalm Death's style has inspired other bands such as Nasum and Cattle Decapitation, which mostly embraced the subgenre as a conceptual compass. Yet, their activity did not remain confined to metal nor punk, reaching other socio-musical phenomena as an inestimable turn in the experience and conception of extreme popular music. Crucially, Napalm Death's sound influenced key projects in genres such as jazzcore, noise, industrial and even club music across Europe, North America and Asia with musicians like Merzbow, John Zorn and The Bug.

The band attained success in providing a new perspective for 21<sup>st</sup> century's extreme sounds. Indeed, music scholar Liam Dee, in a paper about grindcore's political realism (2009), noted that the aforementioned genres are in debt with an approach he terms sound-as-physical-assault (SAPA henceforth) which Napalm Death developed. Inspired by bands such as Throbbing Gristle and Swans, the SAPA aesthetic pushes the limits of experimentalism towards an uncontrollable psychophysical overdrive. This is an approach via which extreme sonic pressurisations vibrate objects through their qualities related to timbre, frequency and loudness: the phono-materiality of extreme sounds. In his work, Dee offered a glimpse into what I interpret as a sonic model, SAPA, to explain how the aesthetics and sound of grindcore try to express a bleak, realistic vision of society under late capitalism: a dystopian aural tone-feeling for a dystopian age (2009).

Yet, the scholar never conceptualises what such a sonic model entails and how it can be abstracted from grindcore. Hence, refocusing on the properties of sound that Napalm Death disclosed, by analysing insight emerging from my own listening and reading across scenes and musical movements I theorise this aesthetic sonic model based on timbre and sonic pressure: the SAPA continuum. I answer the question: what are the characteristics of this sonic model? How do extreme sound pressurisation and noise as an overpowering entity



relate to the psychophysical and the political? How does this model represent a subcategory of extreme music? What kind of genres belong to it and why? Indeed, the importance of SAPA is not only musicological. It also taps into what sound studies scholar Salome Voegelin has termed 'the political possibility of sound': «the possibility of the possible in relation to sound in the sphere of the political» (2019, p. 4).

Born out of an impoverished, de-industrialising Birmingham, grindcore linked the need for expression of psychological turmoil generated by the ongoing suffering caused by capitalism and the extreme physical properties of sound. When looking at what has shaped the sonic aesthetic of independent but interrelated genres such as noise in Japan or jazzcore in the US, an interconnection between human geographies influenced by late capitalism, emotional intensity and ear-shattering sonics appears. These genres all share a peculiar relation of marginality to class and urbanism alongside the will to traumatise the listener to elicit extreme psychophysical and sociopolitical reactions. Therefore, I argue they all belong to the SAPA continuum.

Such interrelations demonstrate a connection between psychophysical subjectivity, audio-properties and anti-capitalist politics, hinting at issues of class and economic exploitation. Yet, such a model also shows how sound enacts politics beyond aestheticisation. Genres like grindcore, jazzcore and janoise offered musicians and fans a series of new sonic ecologies, a concept by scholar Dhanveer Singh Brar indicating a non-equivalent correspondence between music, sociality, and geography (2021). In his work about genres and artists like Footwork, Actress and Grime in London, Brar argues that scene participants, typically black working-class at odds with institutional politics, practiced alternative social ambiances through sound's sensory epistemologies, creating a temporary sonic architecture and re-gain agency.

Thus, by analysing the links in terms of aesthetics and urban experience of some SAPA continuum's iconic projects and transposing Brar's theories on sonic ecology from black musical sociality to noisy transnational and trans-class positions, this paper has several aims. The first is to frame music genres as audio-experiments based on stylistic canon: music genres like metal are not only important because of what they represent (transgression, masculine empowerment etc) but also because they offer distinct sensory experiences of sound that can be abstracted and replicated in other genres to obtain the desired effect. Therefore my argument is that there is a world of sociopolitical expression and sensoriality to be uncovered when we strip a genre of its symbolic meaning and we focus on what it does to

listeners. Such a rationale allows one to fit in a continuum genres that are engineered towards obtaining similar effects and constructed around similar aesthetic priorities.

Secondly, I advance the subfield of metal studies, by (a) proving the relevance of affective overdrive as a sensory aesthetic valid beyond genre boundaries, (b) engaging with metal via sensory-affective analyses over musical intellectualisations; an attempt that, despite praised by many scholars, often rebounded into continental philosophy (Masciandaro 2010; Thacker 2011). Thus, metal is liberated from its genre insularity, becoming an aesthetic sonic model, made of vibrations acting on bodies. Given this work's peculiar angle of analysis, the text occupies a peripheral position to decades of theories emphasising the ecological circuitry of the sensory and perceptual organs through embodiment (Csordas 1990), embodied cognition (Shapiro 2011) and enactive value (Hutto 2013) of cognitive and aesthetic processes. While there is no doubt that such theories contribute to the overall focus on the haptic and the vibrational, further analysis and implementation of these theories findings would reveal other insights that can't appear in this paper due to issues of length.

Third, the paper aims at bridging the break between diasporic bass subcultures and transnational extreme genres by arguing that, though these sonic worlds display consistent differences, a link between these sonic ecologies can be found in similar practices of institutional opposition expressed through the relationships with urban centres - and how producers and musicians working in noise and dub, between the extremity born out of the wall of sound and the intensity of a diasporic bass materialism (Goodman 2009), conceive of the relationships between these two sonic paradigms. To this end, I'll combine interviews with artists such as Mick Harris, Kevin Martin and Aniruddha Das (Dhangsha); musicians who, by engaging with the two sonic models, developed an acute understanding of the sensorial and social similarities they entertain. This is something I explain through the category of 'mineral entrails' – an extreme sonic experience locking the listener in the responsibility and anguish of concrete human dystopia. Mineral entrails is a theoretical expansion of the notion used by Brar of 'mineral interiors' - the relation between the sonic space inside a record and its adjective production of space within the world of the listener/dancer (2021).

While mineral interiors describes how intense audio-pressurisations of genres such as footwork, jungle and dub as an escape route, a line of flight forming from the listener interiority, help to reimagine the space around them in order to re-gain agency and control, the

concept says nothing about what happens when these extreme audio experiences lock listeners into their own bodily world of organs and a wasteland-like reality. Since intensity-based black-diasporic movements vert on utopian musical abstractions, sound as creation (Eshun 2018), it is worthwhile constructing a paradigm to interpret what happens when similar aesthetic experiences are guided by a will to obliterate all lines of flight from this world, trapping listeners into asemic noise as a physical fact. This new concept, mineral entrails thus implies that while both continuums employ psychophysical audio-intensity as a way to generate sociopolitical outputs, they do so with wildly different priorities and scopes.

The paper will first consider analyses of timbre in music and the genealogy of Napalm Death's sound to conceptualise the SAPA model and its differences with extreme metal. The second section analyses different interviews with pioneers of genres and projects linked to the SAPA continuum: Japanese noise (Merzbow) and American jazzcore (John Zorn). Bridging their thoughts with the idea of a 'hardcore continuum' – «a continuum of musical culture that emerged out of the British rave scene» (Reynolds 2013b) - will prove that the need for sonic extremity bridged hostile landscapes with psychophysical turmoil, bringing together phenomena with different histories through their political undercurrents. Furthermore, in this section, I explain how these music movements generated sonic ecologies matching Brar's theorisations.

Last, I relate the SAPA model's theorisation with the one defined by producer and theorist Steve Goodman as 'bass materialism' (2009); a definition benefitting from the work of scholars like Fred Moten, Kodwo Eshun and Paul Gilroy. The scope of such analysis is to highlight differences and similarities between paradigms to delineate future trajectories for the politics of sonic ecologies. Hence, I offer a perspective of alliance between different sonic models without forgetting the different degrees of marginality differentiating each subculture.

## **2. Horrible Noise: from the wall of sound to sound as physical assault**

To grasp Napalm Death's sonic core and how it differs from extreme metal, I begin with descriptions by Mick Harris and Mark 'Barney' Greenway, current singer of the band, experiencing Napalm Death live in the 80s before becoming band members. Let's consider Harris':

Something hit me there! And then, it was the sound...I don't know! That moment, I just can see it now. [...] just: wow! [...] And there was an energy. (Volohov 2020)

Greenway's own memory of seeing Napalm Death shows similarities:

I saw the band in the very, very early days as a three piece and I could tell then that this is something special, you know? [...] Above and beyond those kinds of classifications, they just had a special something that was one of those special somethings that wasn't easy to explain. (Collins 2020)

The excerpts depict an undefinable music's energy; a sonic opacity which can be only codified by the concepts of extremity and noise. Napalm Death's members have stressed on a few occasions that the band's musical priority is sonic extremity (Franklin 2015). Of course, the extreme is not only a defining trait of NP but of metal worldwide (McCraw 2024). Described as the need for musical shock-and-awe (Moore 2013), in metal the extreme is conceptualised as going beyond one's own limits to listen or execute music with increased complexity (Calder 2018), indicating virtuosity, loudness and distortion (Walser 1992). Extremity then represents an aestheticization of 'mainstream' beauty and pleasure's transgression (Unger 2016). Pushing the boundaries of these acoustic features generates 'heaviness': metal's defining element (Fales & Berger 2005). Heaviness is a flexible sensory metaphor used by metalheads in alternance with terms such as aggression, intensity, chaos and brutality (Herbst & Mynett 2022). Being a sonic metaphor, extremity lends itself to interpretation; there is no 'correct' way to 'go extreme'. Indeed, for participants it is often difficult to verbalise metal's sound properties and most fans see conceptualization as unnecessary intellectualisation of music's viscosity (Hjelm et al. 2011). Metal is something that people need to experience to understand. Thus, the sound of metal is embodied: a being that resides in doing, that issues from and is expressed only in doing (Strathern 1996).

Given this difficulty of verbalizing confirmed by Greenway's and Harris' comments, I argue that the idea's core rests in the genre's timbre: how the physical effect of being assaulted by extreme sounds is expressed discursively. Although in the guide to sound *Keywords in Sound* (Novak & Sakakeeny 2015) there is no chapter on timbre, several mentions and parallel theorisations clarify the concept's relevance to music practice. Music timbre is a fundamental feature of sound alongside pitch (frequency) and dynamics (amplitude) (Fink et al. 2018). It is commonly referred to as an instrument's voice quality or tone colour, colloquially referred to as its 'sound' (Weidman 2015). But differently from other features of sound there is no physical measure that can be correlated with timbral identity's perception

(Fink et al. 2018). Music listeners refer to an instrument's sound as 'warm,' 'bright,' 'open,' and so on, implying timbre's subjectivity and highly culturally variability (Weidman 2015).

Although timbre is associated with instruments as perceived by listeners, it is also possible for it to describe the 'sound' of a music genre through polyphonic timbre; the sum of a genre's timbral features (Hartmann et al. 2013). Albin Zak distinguished two categories of scholarly research on timbre: those examining 'physical properties' and those studying 'rhetorical properties' (2001). Although metalheads appreciate virtuosity (Allett 2011), it is timbre's rhetorical properties, «how a piece is received by a listener and how specific sounds can draw references to specific works, genres, or even meanings» (Blakeley 2017, p. 34) as part of what Walser termed «the discursive significance of timbre as a means of articulating power and affect» (1993, p. 44) that interested Napalm Death. If sound enacts power through physical pressurization and symbolic territorialisation (Attali 1985; Goodman 2009), metal's timbre acts as an aggressively empowering or overpowering agent (Pelletier 2018) generating affective overdrive. According to Wallach, Berger and Greene (2011) metal's sheer loudness and timbres fill the sound spectrum generating affective overdrive leading to catharsis.

Yet, if Napalm Death would seem to participate, at first, in the large polytimbral qualities of extreme metal, their sonic paradigm is defined by noise. When interviewed on metal outlet Invisible Oranges, Napalm Death singer Mark 'Barney' succinctly expressed the centrality of the concept:

Q: What should a first time listener to Napalm Death's live set be prepared to do?

A: Just pin your ears back. Experience the outburst of fucking horrible noise. (Campagna 2022)

This definition is proof of an interest going beyond genre and stylistic canons. Musico-logically, the need for evermore extreme sound pressurisations, as Dee notices (2009), came into being by pushing the rock music form through extreme velocity, discordances, arrhythmic tempo changes, and unusually slow beats with the goal of reducing musical humanism to an unstable core of minimal chord progressions, attenuated or non-existent guitar solos & unintelligible vocals. Although these elements still place Napalm Death stylistically in the canon of punk and metal bands, the project has always tried to remain flexible, refusing any simplification into preconceived genres (Campagna 2022). As Justin Broadrick, co-founder of Napalm Death and founder of Industrial pioneers Godflesh confirmed in an interview: «I don't think we consider ourselves anything really. [...] We're just extremely fast and power-



ful thrash with filth metallic bits» (Fischer 1987). Whereas other genres of extreme metal (death, black, doom) elaborate on extremities appealing to classic ideas of musicality (harmony, melody, virtuosity) (Walser 1992), grindcore pushed towards pure audio terror.

Indeed, the most innovative side of the band was the fascination for the 'wall-of-sound' (Dee 2009). The wall-of-sound was a production style pioneered by music producer Phil Spector<sup>1</sup>, «a dense, lushly constructed barrage of instrumentation modeled after gospel choirs and scientifically engineered to fill every audible sonic frequency» (Hughes 2007, p. 64). Yet, when mentioning this production style, Napalm Death were thinking more about outfits such as Throbbing Gristle and Swans, described by Greenway as «not metal and not even punk arguably, but a different kind of extreme» (Mittur 2015). Such sonic extremity is depicted as «a real force to the guts» (Franklin 2015). While Spector's strategy was to overwhelm listeners with a luxuriant saturation of audio giving an energetic effect, Throbbing Gristle had turned this approach from a pleasurable wall-of-sound into a revolting wall-of-noise. As Khoumhout notices, «Their music was performed — always for exactly one hour — at an almost unbearable volume, deliberately offending the listener in the most physical way possible» (2011, p. 26).

Hence, I argue that Napalm Death's sound is a sensory extremity powered by a wall-of-noise hitting the listener physically. The desired 'guts-effect' shifts theoretical discussions about the extremity from a discursive psychologisation of noise as a social construct - an attack to the hypocrisy of mainstream beauty - to its power as a sonic entity. This is confirmed by Greenway's perception of why their music should be extreme:

I like the annoyance factor. That's why we still do our best to make things really abrasive, because there's a certain percentage of people who it's going to annoy the fuck out of. (Franklin 2015)

As Cuicisk's work on sonic torture in Guantanamo confirms (2015), noise is not only a metaphorical opposition. For instance, the exposition of one's body to loud music for extended periods of time contributes to a sense of being touched without being touched, causing sensations of displeasure lasting for hours, a nexus of pain (ibid.). Even when stripped of its cultural values and meanings, noise and loud sounds are overpowering entities with an autonomous ontology and sensory effects. Certainly, Napalm Death's sound is synonymous with progressive political stances, entailing the use of sound as symbolic opposition. Yet, I argue that the band has understood this separation between noise as a physical effect and noise as a cultural entity. Let's con-

sider Greenway's comments on the music's significance. In the interview with Invisible Oranges, after suggesting diving into Napalm Death's horrible noise, Greenway continues:

Once you can live with that [horrible noise] you might just dig into the music and get into the layers. The ideas expressed in the music are just as important as the music itself. Take the observations and chew them over and see what you think yourself. (Franklin 2015)

Political values are conceived as an independent layer. The first, introductory layer hitting the listener is noise. I argue that Napalm Death are aware of what Fred Moten termed phono-materiality of sound: a material audio ontology with autonomous force, irreducible to its conceptual and theoretical representations: both an art form and a way of being in the world (2004). Further evidence of this is provided by the band's collaboration with artist Keith Harrison on the work *Bustleholme* (2013, Fig.2), where Napalm Death were invited to improvise through a public address system placed inside of clay sculptures, using the materials to test the power of the sound they produced. Let's consider comments of the artists about the project, provided by the De La Warr Pavillion (Bexhill), where the performance was held:

Harrison said: Napalm was my band of choice, they really understood the project. We needed a group with a lot of attitude to show the power of sound and the energy it has to destroy. It's interesting to see how electrical power can change material, like clay. It can warm it up, break it down or completely change its state [...].

Mark Greenway, vocalist for Napalm Death, said: Sound as a weapon – or a weapon of change – is a very interesting concept and I think that the whole process of our sound gradually degrading clay sculptures is captivating. (De La Warr 2013)

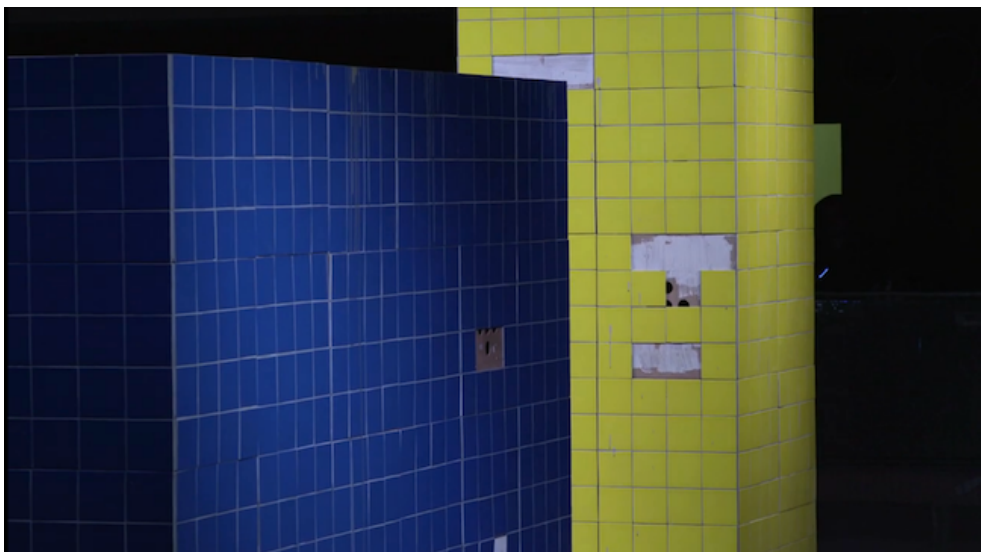


Fig. 8. *Bustleholme*.

The concept of sonic weapon is quite a literal one in research. Volcler demonstrated how since Nazi Germany, military organisations have researched the power of sound to manipulate affection and behaviour (2011). The scholar explains that a sound combining the engineering of frequency (pitch) and intensity (volume) in a way that exploits the human pain threshold (around 120 decibels) and a physical body's resonance frequency, a frequency that makes it vibrate maximally, is able to become a weapon, destroying physical entities from their insides or outsides even beyond the threshold of audibility (*ibid.*). Sound is not only an acoustic and aesthetic phenomenon, but also a physical one. By considering the physical weaponisation of audio as something reflective of their activity, in the terminology of philosopher Christoph Cox (2018), to make extreme music Napalm Death tapped into a sonic flux: a nonlinear flow of matter and energy (43). Napalm Death's sonic flux developed from noise as aesthetic displeasure in a biological sense (Attali 1985); a 'too much', an «excess overwhelming the system with energy, information and potentiality» (Cox 2018, p. 46). This way, Napalm Death built on metal and punk to develop Throbbing Gristle's and Swans' wall-of-sound, implementing this physical aesthetics of noise to deflagrate genre canons.

Yet, Throbbing Gristle were especially interested in taboos. As founder Genesis P-Orridge explained: «We're interested in taboos. What the boundaries were, where sound became noise and where noise became music and where entertainment became pain, and where pain became entertainment. All the contradictions of culture» (Kromhout 2011, p. 26). Throbbing Gristle's wall-of-noise is then still deeply enmeshed in his conceptual and subcultural value, tied to what noise means. When compared with Napalm Death's interest for the most extreme horrible noise devoided of any direct conceptual significance, it's clear that, despite not in musical scope (the listener annihilation), the two sonic paradigms differ greatly, the latter being specifically interested in *what noise does* and not *what it is*. The need for an extreme paradigm abusing formless noise defines both the band and projects inspired by Napalm Death yearning for the same sonic experience. Such appeal from Japanese noise and jazzcore reveals how SAPA links different scenes and performers elaborating on class and urban positions.

### **3. Interiors and Entrails: Phono-material Ecologies of Extremity & Intensity**

Napalm Death and grindcore influenced experimental scenes transnationally. This is the case of at least two artists coming from Japanese noise and free improvisation: Masonna,

Merzbow (Dee 2009) and one from American jazzcore: saxophonist John Zorn (Cluness 2016). Considering these artists' takes on grindcore and extreme aural paradigms furthers the understanding of the SAPA continuum. Starting with Merzbow, monicker of Tokyo-born Masami Akita, a musician known for developing a range of self-made instruments and techniques to create a unique spectra of noise and feedback, the artist begun playing under the influence of European and American free music and jazz (Burnett 2013). Coming from a 'rock' background, he began Merzbow as a mixture of improvisational performances and harsh aesthetics such as extreme metal and grindcore, an interest that he kept through the years (Burnett 2013) and which pushed him to not only release his music on renown US metal label Relapse, but also to collaborate with grindcore projects such as Man is the Bastard and Gore Beyond Necropsy (Cornils 2022). Yet, metal is just another aesthetic interest. It's useful to note how Merzbow foregrounds sonic pursuits in respect to genres. In an interview regarding what he thought of some Japanese noise artists such as Hanatarashi and Masonna, he stated:

[...] these projects [...] It wouldn't be quite correct to speak of a subculture, though: these are free radicals who find each other now and then, bonding over a desire to explore the boundaries between sound and noise. (Cornils 2022)

Once again, this confirms how, despite rightfully occupying the aesthetic space of extreme music, such works transcends classification. But if Merzbow's art opposes taxonomy, his influences resonate with the ones leading composer John Zorn to collaborate with grindcore artists such as Extreme Noise Terror and Napalm Death's Mick Harris. John Zorn's career is definitely signed by the exploration of what extreme and intense approaches to music can be despite their genre. In this sense, Zorn's interest for the avantgarde and the experimental overarching categories develops on a spectrum of musical composition and execution to which both acts like Napalm Death and classical composer Morton Feldman belong. In fact, we can see how the word 'extreme' is usually employed to describe Zorn's works whether they are more stylistically kin to metal or jazz<sup>2</sup>. This is useful not only to underline that the saxophonist's interests for the excessive are not only confined to the former genre, but also that completely different ways to make music still participate in the aesthetic category of the extreme, whether through Napalm Death's extreme pressurisations or Morton Feldman relationship with minimal composition.

As for the fascination with metal, named Painkiller and born out of the collaboration between Zorn, producer Bill Laswell and Mick Harris, the trio introduced the world to a fusion of dub, jazzcore, industrial and extreme metal sonorities (Cluness 2016), as part of Zorn's attempts to introduce jazz improvisation to the intensity of punk and metal (Reid 2008). In interviews, Zorn has stated that attending the legendary New York punk venue CBGB and discovering Napalm Death inspired him to try such experiments (Shteamer 2020). This was a way to reawaken the innovative potentials of jazz, which the genre had long lost after its canonisation:

I've been listening to hardcore for about 10 years [...] People in the jazz idiom are less interesting these days. [...] they seem to have forgotten the revolution that happened in the 60s with, people like Albert Ayler, Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. [...] Albert and Cecil and all the free jazz players of the 60s appeal more to the punk hardcore crowd. [...] there is a clear connection between the energy music of the 60s and hardcore punk in terms of energy, sound and tension. [...] He acknowledges his work has a political subtext and in the mixing of genres and styles he is saying: all these things are the same and there's no hierarchy in music. (Reid 2008)

What is interesting is that both for Merzbow and Zorn we can trace kinships between sonic aesthetics intersecting with the SAPA model through concepts of energy and intensity. Additionally, given the fact that Merzbow has also published on Tzadik, John Zorn's own label, and that Japanese noise artists have both collaborated with and influenced the saxophonist (Shteamer 2020), an aesthetic link between free music, grindcore and noise is established.

If one dismisses stylistic elements as taxonomical tools, what is left is that certain paradigms of intensity, freedom to experiment, social ambiances and political subtexts connect genres transnationally and transhistorically united by the need to transgress previous musical boundaries. Once again it is productive to understand why musicians from different times and contexts conceived similarly of this new sonic aesthetics and how such impressions inform the understanding of music development as an extension of certain modes of urban living.

Thanks to different scholars and journalists, a relationship between extreme music and a post-capitalist, post-industrial urbanity emerges, qualifying the extreme sonics of Japanese noise, American jazzcore, English grindcore and Industrial (Broadrick's Godflesh) as reactions to their surroundings. For Napalm Death and Godflesh, music voiced the distress of living in a de-industrialised Birmingham of council houses and difficult family situations; before it was a claim to progressive, anti-systemic politics, it was anger release and existential pain (Gitter 1992). For Tokyo and Osaka, as Novak noted in his book *Japanoise*, the scene was not neces-



sarily one of lower-class workers but also of white-collar, middle-class dwellers (Novak 2013). Yet, Japanese noise's aseptic language refuted metaphor and meaning privileging the straightforwardness of extreme auralty as an implicit critique of the techno-utopian vision of a future, industrially competitive Japan and its technocratic urban management (Novak 2013). Finally, in New York, despite Zorn coming from a middle-class family<sup>3</sup>, the social humus from which his style was born was firmly the one of blue-collar American hardcore youth who populated CBGB (Ambrosch 2015; Novak 2013).

All these artists participated into the constructions of new social ambiances offered by extreme sounds. These, in turn, emerged as the perfect invisible architecture to reconfigure the relationships these musicians and fans entertained with the urban landscape. This idea of a space that is deeply constructed by sound is not only metaphorical: as audio philosopher Micah Silver has argued (2019), sound is able to create invisible architectures based on sociality that superimpose on geographical space, modifying the relationships that individuals have with each other and guiding their movement. To reframe this through the words of producer Nkisi, providing an artist's perspective: music influences our environments vibrationally (Worthington 2024). This has ringed true for various social contexts in which different public address systems (Jamaican soundsystems, The Grateful Dead's wall of sound, club culture's venues etc.) remodulated how people came together. So, although the SAPA continuum's architecture created by such extreme auralty is one of hostility, it was precisely this unprecedented sonic ecology that remodulated the connection between sonic intensity's aesthetics and an underlying, sensory political commentary, providing participants with renewed agency over their own relationships with urbanism and capitalism.

To prove it, I want to transpose scholar Dhanveer Singh Brar's theoretical framework which he developed to analyse the new black sonic ecologies born in London from footwork, Actress and grime. In his book *Teklife / Ghettoville / Eski* (2021), Brar analyses different scenes and artists developing new genres of black music in the UK in the early 2000s. By dissecting these productions, he links black electronic music and its birth to market-driven cities where ghettoization had been embedded into the territory's geographical and social composition. By untangling the fold between the music productions and the environments in which they were assembled, Brar theorises how Footwork, Grime, and Actress generated new styles marking the cities' race and class geographies, transforming participants' system-

atically concentrated and patterned antagonism into a sonic ecology: a non-equivalent correspondence between music, sociality, and geography (Brar 2021). Shaped by its participants' status as urban working class and surplus labour, and thus giving the music an impetus of self-determination, these genres gave the impression that music was a response to a sustained period of urban crises, thus giving each soundscape a strong territorial injection.

Yet, echoing the words of Louis Moreno on Detroit techno (2014), Brar observes how these genres eschew aestheticisation of urbanity as a problem. They become instead countervailing renegade projects: an entry into the crises of racialised labour to create new possibilities through sound amidst racial capitalism's crises. Through these sonic ecologies, music communities obtained intense reconfigurations of blackness through everyday, underground, aesthetic practices of black populations operative within precarious urban zones. Artists were able to reconfigure their place in the city and regain power and agency both on the urban territory and its sociality.

Even if these styles took from the geographical conditions of the city, Brar notes how there was also something inherent to the music's form and content that activated these reconfigurations. Brar zooms in on the idea that sound was a purveyor of social recompositions referring to Fred Moten's phonic materiality: a means for discussing the sensory operations and shapes of black electronic dance music as a continuum which is primarily non-verbal, and that relies on the minute yet potent manipulation of audio frequencies to create affects (2003). Brar explains how this black aesthetic ontology is, following Steve Goodman's theories (2009), a philosophy termed 'bass materialism'. According to Goodman, although instigated in the soundsystem culture of Jamaica, bass materialism, or the 'vibrational nexus' that is animated through the site-specific arrangement of people, equipment, buildings, and territory, «the media of the earth, built environment, analogue and digital sound technologies, industrial oscillators and the human body» (ivi, p. 28), became the general affective modality of genres such as House, Techno, and Jungle, but also of the sonic ecologies Brar describes in his book.

I argue that this theoretical framework can be transposed and applied to genres participating in the SAPA continuum. Looking closely, many focal points of Brar's analysis reflect the SAPA artists' experience: from the difficult relationship with urbanism to the strong relationship between landscape and music production, from the strong territoriality and pres-

ence of working-class participants (from low to middle class) to the underground's encoding as a renegade project of musical intensity. Moreover, as I have argued through my analysis of Napalm Death's polyphonic timbres, just like the sonic ecologies analysed by Brar, distortion, volume and noise as extremity emphasise a certain phono-materiality. I argue that the SAPA phono-material features and their arrangements of people, technologies, buildings, and territories delineate a sonic ecology paralleling the ones theorised by Brar. If Footwork, Grime and Actress, according to the author, generated ecologies based on the bass frequency and its materialism, the SAPA continuum worked with what I term as sonic assault materialism: a model for which through the manipulation of distortion, volume and other physical features of sound, experimental artists in England, the US and Japan managed to channel the affective overdrives necessary to bring about a new form of sociality, which in turn fuelled new political, sensory commentaries.

When it comes to continuums, music critic Simon Reynolds has already tried a similar operation for genres of what he calls the "hardcore continuum". It's thus interesting to learn from his attempt. Reynolds has argued that electronic genres based around bodily galvanising the audience (Jungle, Two-Step, Hardcore etc.) are:

[...] a musical family tree that emerged at the end of the 1980s and rapidly mutated across the 1990s and 2000s, resulting in a succession of UK dance genres: hardcore, jungle, drum & bass, UK garage, grime, dubstep, bassline, funky. At one further level of complication up, it is also a subculture, a kind of macro-scene, whose continuity resides in its enduring infrastructure of pirate radio stations, clubs, rave promoters, and record shops, but also in rituals and procedures that persist across each musical phase. (2022, personal communication).

In this case the notion of a continuum is, according to Reynolds, necessary to underline the similar scopes, functions, desires and contexts such genres of electronic music were creating. The parallelism with the SAPA and the bass materialism continuum is relevant since such a definition implies the kinship of certain sonic paradigms; in this case the ones allowing the 'energy-flash' of dance music and its social configurations (Reynolds 2013a). But despite intriguing, it would be intellectually dishonest to avoid mentioning that Brar's black sonic ecologies were possible thanks to a racialisation of class and an Atlantic diasporic blackness (Gilroy 2022) which give music precisely its brilliance and indeterminacy; the energy of inexhaustible possibility (Eshun 2018), making up much of the work's theoretical backdrop.

Indeed, such a difficulty resonates with the critique scholar and musician DeForrest Brown Jr. has relatively to the idea of a hardcore continuum. In his history of techno music (2022), DeForrest Brown Jr. re-theorises the genre as part of a centuries-long legacy of Black acts rejecting white history and detach the term “techno” from the electronic dance music culture industry and the British lexical standard of the hardcore continuum reconsidering its origins in the community of Detroit and its context within African American history. The scholar argues that to assimilate the history of black techno into the one of white-background electronic dance genres would result in negating techno’s and black subjectivities’ possibility to delineate their own; thus, once again renouncing to a possible, radical decolonisation of dance music.

The issue then is to probe the possibility of a continuity between different class and subject positions to affirm, where present, a wider inter-genre and inter-class alliance; a choice providing both theoretical and political benefits to the conceptualisation of why strong musical movements happen. But as DeForrest Brown notes, such endeavour comes with a price: overlooking the racial and class separations engendering different music scenes. Therefore, I want to stress that a bridging between the intensity of bass materialism and the extremity of the SAPA model is possible. Besides my argument that Brar’s theory of sonic ecologies is homologous in both contexts – the one of London’s black electronic dance music and the one of international, inter-scenic extreme genres – it is possible to see how both in Grime and Drum and Bass there have been stresses of links between these sonic worlds. In his book on the history of grime, journalist Dan Hancox reminds of its own interest in the genre, interpreting youth turmoil as the core generating interest towards metal or grime, thus putting them sonically on the same level: «that was *noise*. Like that was not easy listening. But when you’re a 13- to 14-year-old obnoxious, rebellious kid, that’s all you want to hear. It’s kinda the equivalent of someone listening to really dark heavy metal. That was our version of that.» (2018, p. 42).

Additionally, producer Aniruddha Das, founder of noise electronics project Dhangsha and member of pioneering drum and bass outfit Asian Dub Foundation, stated that such link is possible because music’s politics are not only engendered by lyrics, social contexts and themes, but also because certain interactions between sound and listener already hint at political subtexts. Let’s consider comments he made during an interview with journalist Daryl Worthington:

My entry point into music was reggae because of the social and lyrical content. That was before I got into the fabric of music. Before I realised the music itself can be political. It can convey certain meanings aside from the emotional content. You can have virtuosic percussion playing. [...] That insistency has a political meaning to it. Then the production, how it's been compressed to intensify and dirty up the sound. [...] As a dub bassist I was trying to do that. You've got to convey the militancy, the dread. [...] The function of noise is to impact on people, socially, politically, emotionally. [...] there's political meaning being conveyed. There's massive connections between all of these musics. (Worthington, 2024)

If we wanted to limit such a theorisation to England for now, artists like Kevin Martin, some of the main propellers of the grindcore and industrial scene, have become pioneers of new, experimental declinations of dub and other genres of the bass materialism spectrum saying that such a choice was guided by the necessity of exploring different realms of sonic intensity (Brown 2021). Arguably an opposed but homologous choice to the one of Dhangsha – who went from dub to noise - Martin stressed that such feature, along with the one of 'purity' belongs to both grindcore and dub (Joffe 2017). Such statements and connections link to Hancox's account of the historical British punk love affair with reggae that was skin-head music, where class unites people from different ethnic backgrounds (2018); an encounter allowed by urban multiculturalism manifested in youthful conviviality. But to theorise such connection more soundly and save both argumentative dimensions by delineating these sonic ecologies' differences and similarities, I want to present the concept of mineral interiors (2021) embraced by Brar in his book, theorising the one of mineral entrails as a companion expansion to provide tools to analyse the SAPA continuum under similar terms.

Mineral interior(s) is a term coined by writer Dan Barrow in a review of the record *The Seer of Cosmic Visions* (Planet Mu 2014), by Hieroglyphic Being and the Configurative or Modular Me Trio to magnify the relation between the sonic space inside the record and its adjective production of space within the world of the listener/dancer. According to Brar, such a concept makes clear how within black electronic dance music as experimentation in sound, sociality, and ecology has been at stake since its beginnings. The term maps how a set of improvised musical structures and kinetic patterns allowed such genres to become a continuum wherein aesthetic innovation, technological (mis)appropriation, organization of social space, and the institutional aggregation of race–class were mediated through the production of soundscapes so intense they could never be adequately read against these constitutive features.

The SAPA continuum relies on similar features: (1) an improvised, free innovation out of the stylistic canon; (2) a kinetic relationship to sound – let's think of extreme metal thrashing



(Riches 2011), punk-hardcore physicality (Rapport 2020) and japonoise's performativity for musicians like Masonna and Yamantaka Eye (Novak 2013), (3) a technological misappropriation evident in noise's repurposing of hijacked consumer electronics (ibid.) and extreme music's development of distortion systems originally obtained by pushing amplifiers' clippings to the extreme (Bryant & Smaldino 2024); (4) the necessity for unorthodox spaces where these sounds and socialities could exist. As I have briefly explained in the introduction, this concept acts as a companion in the sense that parallelly describes genres which similarly build from these features but with different intents to what sound should do to the listener and, consequently, what kind of sociopolitical output it offers, therefore expanding the theorisation of what kind of different articulations the relations between sound, spaces and political power can be while still dwelling the realm of sound intensity and extreme pressurisation.

Therefore mineral interiors and mineral entrails are two separate but overlapping paradigms for the extreme/intense-sound-pressure-continuum. In this sense, my own interpretation of the former term is that intensity-based afro-diasporic genres, sounding the metaphorical and literal space, illuminate a primal, geologic structure of the listener interiority, connecting it to the space that the record present. They give listeners the possibility to move in this geologic layer and configure what does this interior looks like and how it relates to the outside; concrete space. Mineral interiors gives space to the listener to use music as a means of imagination. The passage from "interiors" to "entrails", and thus the core difference between the two models, is found in how these deal with the corpo/reality of sound and music and how such interpretations imply different socio-political visions. When we're faced with entrails, there is no interpretation to what this interiority looks like, it is a blunt factual image: just bodily organs, fluids and matter reacting to ecological hostility through a fight-or-flight mechanism.

Indeed, famously, theorist Kodwo Eshun proposed a view of black electronic music as "sonic fiction": the idea that producers and musicians were embodying science fiction's speculative potentialities to express musically entire utopias touching but also surpassing ideas of identity, politics and sociality (2018). This has to do with the fact that music is an imaginative force transcending theorisations of sound as empirical entity. As musicologist Adam Harper noted about Eshun's work:

Sound is fact, music is fiction. Or rather, sound as it exists as an acoustic phenomenon [...]  
Music, conversely, involves manipulation in the generation and arrangement of sounds for

the purposes of contrivance, performance, fantasy, fictions — alternative realities. These alternative realities may in turn become new empirical realities. (Harper, 2018)

Is it perhaps not a case that the introduction written by Steve Goodman (Eshun 2018) titles *Operating system for the redesign of sonic reality*. Eshun frames sonic fictions and the brilliance of black electronic music as an escape route to a yet undetermined future; a move from which Brar draws in describing how these musics managed to change the life and environment of musicians (2021).

When it comes to the SAPA continuum, I have shown that this aesthetics relies on the physical audio terror created by extreme pressurisation; an extreme empiric fact of sound hinting at socio-political distress and opposition. Napalm Death's weaponisation of sound in *Bustleholme* and *Scum* showa how SAPA pushes towards a dystopian realism grounding the listener to the concreteness of an inescapable political brutality. In this respect, Dee noted that such sonic ideologies appealed to a radical realism built on an imagery of brutalized bodies, human tragedies and the concrete effects of capitalism on the earth (2009); all things that *Scum's* cover well depicts. Such interest is also visible in metatextual elements by Merzbow (Fig.3) and Painkiller (Fig.4) featuring, on two of their respective albums, a medical model of a human head and a corpse hanging from a tree.



Fig. 9. *Venerology's* cover (Release 1994) by Merzbow.



**Fig. 10. *Execution Ground's* cover (Toy's Factory 1995) by Painkiller.**

Socially, the diasporic experience at large and the additional marginalisation created by a racialisation of urbanites' class positions confirms an emancipatory history and, imagination for black electronic dance music that the background of participants in the SAPA continuum do not show. Ideologically and musically, such a difference shows itself through how sound deals with realism and utopianism. While the mineral interiors of black electronic dance music disclose a vision of escape and utopian propulsion, the mineral entrails of the SAPA continuum revel in the responsibility and anguish of the concrete human dystopia. Coherently. If the bass-materialism continuum, its mineral interiors emanate an intensity that helps transcend space and time, the sound-as-physical-assault continuum weaponises intensity to collapse the recipient in time and space.

#### **4. Future Tense: Conclusions**

In this paper I have theorised about a sonic paradigm Dee termed sound-as-physical-assault (2009, 64), which English grindcore band Napalm Death developed by combining sty-

listic elements of extreme metal and hardcore punk with the wall of sound aesthetics inspired by Throbbing Gristle and Swans. This theorisation has established that grindcore's sonics tap into an extreme sonic flux made of abrasive sound pressurisations; an overpowering audio terror pushing distortion's and volume's affective overdrive.

Secondly, I have shown how this extremity transcending genres, this energetic intensity was the reason Napalm Death's work resonated outside metal circuits, inspiring jazzcore and noise musicians in Japan and the US. Such inspiration was generated from the fact that the hostile, temporary architectures allowed by the SAPA aesthetic generated new sonic ecologies: social ambiances which offered aural commentary to similar relationships between artistic scenes, urban subject positions and their landscapes as an emanation of late capitalism, which spanned from an impoverished, de-industrialised Birmingham to a rich technocratic Tokyo; two sides of the same coin.

Successively, by reflecting on how these audio-architectures offered a space to respond to capitalism's wrenching clench on the urban landscape and its inhabitants, I have transposed Brar's framework of sonic ecologies, which he employed to describe the multiple social ambiances of footwork, Actress and grime, from the black diaspora's bass materialism to the transnational SAPA continuum. In this respect, while DeForrest Brown Jr. critiques imply that such a transposition is impossible, by siding the new concept of mineral entrails to the one of mineral interiors employed by Brar, I have underlined how such similarities do not imply an appropriation or assimilation, but a fascination with the effect of similar sonic paradigms based on intensity, thus hinting at how different phono-material ecologies share some similarities based on the artists' subject positionalities and their informal, sonic political stances. The difference between these ecologies being that whereas black electronic music imagined itself as an escape route to an undetermined future, thus rejecting any conceptualisation of 'reality', the physicality of the SAPA continuum tended to avoid meaning while pointing at a physical and dystopian framing of the real.

Overall, this paper has emphasised that analysing music endeavours and scenes beyond genre's constrictive boundaries might reveal not only how the phono-materiality of sound is able to represent, engender and develop political commentary, but also that reflecting on the power of sonic paradigms independently from their genre genealogies might

reveal new transnational, transhistorical and transclass alliances while keeping difference as a fundamental point to value intersectional marginality.

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<sup>1</sup> He produced, among others, artists such as The Ramones, Celine Dion and Cher.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Tzadik's description of the musician's *Simulacrum* release ([www.tzadik.com/index.php?catalog=8330](http://www.tzadik.com/index.php?catalog=8330)) and Boomkat's description of album *Mysterium* ([boomkat.com/products/mysterium-7882e627-26dc-497b-b238-14794c8d606f](http://boomkat.com/products/mysterium-7882e627-26dc-497b-b238-14794c8d606f)).

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. <https://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/john-zorn>.

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