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Introduction: Popular Noise in Global Systems

»Retiring from the popular noise,
I seek this infrequent place to find some ease.«
(Milton)

The papers collected in this special issue are based on lectures presented at the conference »Popular Noise in Global Systems« in Bielefeld, fall 2003, which was sponsored by the »Institute of Global Society Studies«, Bielefeld. Maybe it would be best to introduce the conference topic with some remarks on the three central concepts of the title: Popular, Noise, and Global Systems. These remarks do not try to fix the meaning of these concepts or to put them into one particular theoretical vocabulary. Rather, it is the »theoretical noise« or the reciprocal interference of the concepts combined in the title, which might have become a productive provocation, as the contributions to this volume indicate. To start with: the ›Popular‹ is a well-known concept – a concept that has become crucial to the British tradition of Cultural Studies, but which also figures prominently as descriptive category in many empirical studies. The notion of the popular has become popular itself – and often it seems an enigmatic concept precisely because of this success. Looking at the conceptual history of the ›popular‹, one becomes quickly aware of its contested nature: there are different frontlines in these semantic fights of demarcation. One of the crucial conceptual distinctions is that between the popular and the crowd or mass. The conceptual history of the Popular shows that it is marked by this crucial distinction (Shiach 1989). While the Popular refers to a disciplined form of ›being popular‹ (e.g. the popular will of the people), the notion of the crowd (e.g. crowd psychology) refers to a particular mode of unruliness, as it is exemplarily highlighted in Gustave Le Bon's (1957) influential *The Crowd. A Study of the Popular Mind*. It is, for example, not the unruliness of a people fighting for their liberation, but rather a strange logic of contagion and affectivity which characterizes the crowd. Recently, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) have re-introduced the notion of the multitude in order to grasp this moment which is the outside of the people. It is also in this context that the postcolonial concept of subalternity becomes crucial (Spivak 1988): it is again the attempt to think an identity which is not (yet) a popular political identity, but rather the outside of established identities.

A second distinction which is crucial to the Popular is that between the popular and the serious («ernsthafte»). This distinction is closely linked with that between high and low culture. It actually seems that distinguishing these two cultures also means their mutual constitution: there can be no high culture without a low culture. Certainly, Cultural Studies have claimed that there is no longer a distinction between high and low culture – still, one has to distinguish between the aesthetic and cultural-historical claim. There might be no normative basis for delimiting popular culture from high-brow culture – but the rhetoric and discourses which are organized by this distinction seem to function rather well. Why is this distinction, despite its problematic aesthetic status, so successful? What function does this distinction fulfil in various social spheres (e.g. the role of science fiction or rather fantastic scenarios in politics)? A micro-analytic perspective on the popular might help us to figure out how popular communication works: What does it mean to communicate popularly? What are the advantages and disadvantages of popular communication? Rethinking the Popular in terms of communication theory points to the concept of noise, which might help to avoid an essentialist notion of the Popular. That is why the title of this special issue speaks about «popular noise». We certainly have not invented the notion of popular noise. When searching for it on the Internet, one will find a non-profit organisation called «Popular Noise» (www.popularnoise.org) which fights against the disintegration of the local music scene of San Francisco. This points already to at least at three possibilities of conceptualizing «popular noise» which are not necessarily in line with each other:

First, noise seems to be a political concept. It is the noise of the people which is supposed to fight against (in our example) the global music industry. This meaning is quite close to the anti-hegemonic notion of the Popular which has been suggested by Cultural Studies (Hall 1981). But how does this concept become political? It is worthwhile to recall the meaning of noise in classical theories of information. Here, noise designates interferences, something that hinders the signal to fully reach its receiver (Shannon / Weaver 1969). There are different possibilities of conceiving of this noise: be it, classically, the noise of the channel or be it «semantic noise». The production and reduction of noise can become political because it is intimately linked with power: Noise reduction as power technology – this seems to have a long tradition. The Bible, for example, can be read as a manual of noise reduction: Jesus tried to make sure that his followers were able to understand him – and not to be seduced by satanic noise (Luke 24: 45).¹ Thus, noise reduction becomes linked to the problem of power as symbolically generalised medium of political communication: who marks one signal as «official» and another as a noisy distortion of

1 cf. Ted Slater: A Definition and Model for Communication. <http://www.ijot.com/ted/papers/communication.html>

otherwise clear and straight routines of communication? Which position allows one to observe acts of communication as perturbations?

This leads us to a second crucial dimension of noise: Noise is somehow in between communication and non-communication. It is, as Michel Serres (1981) has wonderfully shown, produced by communication itself, making it possible and impossible at the same time. Noise as borderline phenomenon is not simply outside of communication, but it also denotes a particular way of communicating: how do interferences communicate? Moreover, noise is (similar to the example of ›satanic noise‹) also a seduction – a noisy seduction which seems to follow a different logic than that of well-established circuits of communication: be it, for example, legal or scientific communication. But then, what happens if communication follows the offers of noise? What emerges from selecting the noisy signal as a long sought and awaited information? Noise, it seems, is – following and extending Serres' fundamental definition of ›noise‹/ *bruit* as a wild card, at the same time a nuisance and a seduction: a nuisance because it hinders the efficiency of communication, at least from the point of view of authorities interested in communication control; a seduction since one would like to know what this noise is about and what it is announcing.

This leads to a third dimension of noise: noise can also be understood as a highly sensual phenomenon. Taking noise seriously, i.e. following the word's own meaning, also opens up the question of thinking noise outside of a modern paradigm centred on vision and visibility. How to think the sensuality of noise? How does noise affect and seduce? Noise is such a fascinating phenomenon since it seems to affect us directly. This becomes quite clear when we compare it with vision. Seeing something disturbing we do not want to see, we can just close our eyes or turn around to look at a more pleasant sight. It is totally different with noise: it is quite difficult to close one's ears (earplugs are not that successful in this respect!) – and turning around does not really help. It seems that noise as popular phenomenon is also linked to its »massivity« and its suspension of distance, which is so crucial for the visual – noise ignores social and cultural differences and it is, at the same time, difficult to ignore. It is perhaps this aspect of noise which often makes it a political weapon. One might just recall that the protests in Belgrade against the Milosevic regime did not primarily use political speeches, but, as Dejan Stretenovic has called it, a »deafening noise«: »whistles, trumpets, saxophones, guitars, sirens, bells, fire-crackers, voices, hands, drums, snares, rattles, cowbells, pots, kettles, pans, rubbish, bins, vacuum cleaners, motorbikes, megaphones, radio ...«²

Now let us turn to the last concept – global functional systems. The papers in this special issue address the problem of the Popular and noise in different

2 <http://www.guelman.ru/xz/english/XX22/X2205.HTM>

functional systems such as science, the economy, the mass media and art. Functional systems belong to the most important structural characteristics of a world society (Stichweh 2000). But how do they relate to the Popular? On the one hand, they are often observed as rather unpopular. Modern society seems to function according to dull, bureaucratic, procedural or merely technical operations, the principles of which are only known to few specialists. One might ask, using Steve Redhead's (1995) notion of »unpopular culture«, how, for example, the unpopular cultures of social systems such as law or science refer to popular discourses. The juxtaposition of the ›Popular‹ and a unpopular functional differentiation adds a third distinction to our two initial distinctions (crowd / popular and low / high). Although social systems seem to be so utterly unpopular, they seem to have at least some attraction nonetheless: political thrillers, court-room TV, stock market advertising and a certain discourse in media theory all take advantage of observing some genuine characteristics of the sphere they refer to. They do so selectively: some of the characteristics are used over and over and become popular clichés about the system in question. Others remain ignored, no matter how important they might be for the system's actual operations.

One could say, strangely enough, that such ›popular noise‹ reduces the complexity brought about by the specific differentiation of a system. Such an assumption may be odd since noise is normally seen as too much complexity, respectively as a growth of information value. But perhaps it is this restraining assumption that blocks the possibility of getting a grip on the structural functions of popular communication in social systems. Still, from the point of view of ›high culture‹, this is only due to the ›simplicity‹ of popular communication that evokes the illusion that the complex processes of modern society can be grasped by everybody. It is here that the question arises of how popular noise interferes with unpopular communication, or of how elementary aspects of the system's mode of operating, such as universality and universal inclusion, can only be fulfilled by popular communication. Thus it would be a misconception to refer to the popular as a secondary communication, for it allows a growth of complexity instead of interfering with it. Furthermore: by making the procedures of unpopular communication popular, ›popular noise‹ also increases the ›visibility‹ and ›observability‹ of each of the systems.

It is worth noting that the ›globality‹ of these systems is intimately linked with the popular and popularity. On the one hand, popular communication becomes one of the privileged symbols for the possibility of global communication; on the other hand, the globality of functional systems becomes attractive as a topic of popular culture. This points at some crucial questions, addressing the role of the popular within world society. How is it possible that popular communication is so much ›faster‹ when it comes to dealing with acute problems of world society? Why is popular culture often more successful

in creating global self-descriptions, such as by transforming scientific theories into global myths of modernity?

Speaking about »popular noise in global systems«, then, does not claim to offer a ready-made tool for dealing with these problems. Rather, the conference and the papers collected here aim at experimenting with the possibilities opened up by such a rethinking of the Popular. The papers offer a broad range of case studies working with different concepts of noise – in the sense provided by information theory or in a literal sense – and of the Popular – beyond the often substantialist definitions given by the different facets of Cultural Studies.

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