

LISTENING TO DISINTEGRATION:
THE SOUNDS OF SMOKE
(OR ONE HOUR, THREE MINUTES AND 36 SECONDS,
AND THEN SOME MORE...)

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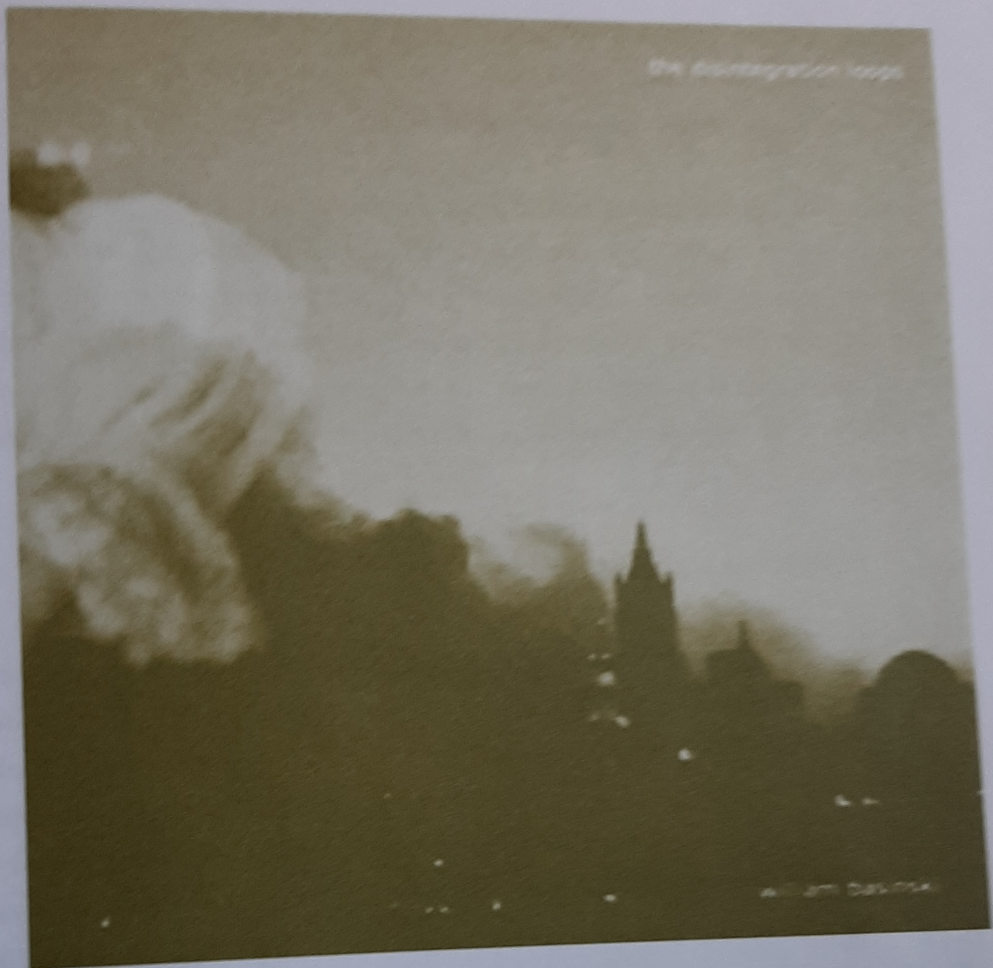
The Disintegration Loops 1.1

Initially, William Basinski's ambient, avant-garde composition *Disintegration Loops* gave me a feeling of nausea. Was it because as soon as I pulled the album cover up on Spotify the images of burning towers announced themselves on the screen? Was it this, coupled with the hissing, crackling materiality of a magnetic tape in a state of disarray – the sound impure, the tempo uneven?

Basinski's piece was in a sense accidental. He was trying to digitize an early recording of one of his compositions. However in the process, the magnetic tape literally fell apart. What caused the "disintegration" was the detachment of the ferrite (iron oxide) in the tape from the plastic backing. The disintegration, in other words, was based on a divorce of previously alloyed materials: metal and plastic. The fraying tape produced a repetition, but the erosion was uneven; the loop entrains, but then hesitates unpredictably. Basinski reworked the piece, adding reverb, and finished it on the day of the 9/11 attacks, a day of elemental and social disintegration. It subsequently became the soundtrack of national trauma.

I began to get a headache.

Listening to Basinski is, for me, a decision to linger in the space of discomfort. While 9/11 was an event that punctuated history, *Disintegration Loops* takes us into another temporality, a longer duration, a slower violence. But let's return to the image. It is not the Twin Towers portrayed on the album cover after all, but a lot of billowing smoke in a skyline not immediately recognizable (to me) as lower Manhattan. The smoke itself is in the shape of a butterfly – dense but diaphanous, animal-like, a kind of ephemeral memorial to those falling out of the sky, those falling through the rising smoke that is eclipsing the view of the crumbling towers.



What is smoke made of?

And why does it, being partially solid, float?

How long must I listen to this?

One hour, three minutes and 36 seconds of "remastered"
disintegration.

"Smoke is a collection of airborne solid and liquid particulates and gases emitted when a material undergoes combustion or pyrolysis, together with the quantity of air that is entrained or otherwise mixed into the mass. ...Smoke is an aerosol (or mist) of solid particles and liquid droplets that are close to

the ideal range of sizes for Mie scattering of visible light. This effect has been likened to three-dimensional textured privacy glass ... – a smoke cloud does not obstruct an image, but thoroughly scrambles it.”¹

Perhaps this accounts for my nausea; my brain waves are being scrambled, my body/mind “entrained” like the air when it is mixed into the promiscuous skew of three elements – solid, liquid, gas. Smoke, caused by fire, the fourth element, agitates the previous three and incites and rouses the fifth – aether, spirit (what is called “akasha,” in Hinduism – which is also the medium of sound). Smoke invites perplexity. *Disintegration Loops* is smoky. And I am suffocating.

What is the sound of smoke?

A nauseous headache is different than a migraine, located somewhere between the sides of the head, the trachea and the stomach. What produces this malaise? For Sartre, it was precisely the experience of being between elements. He talked about it in terms of viscosity. And viscosity – something not solid, not liquid – produces an instability in human perception that has a bodily equivalent: nausea. “Smoke [in order] not to think,” Sartre says. “If I could keep myself from thinking! I try, and succeed: my head seems to fill with smoke ... and then it starts again: ‘Smoke ... not to think ... don’t want to think ... I think I don’t want to think. I mustn’t think that I don’t want to think. Because that’s still a thought.’ Will there never be an end to it?”² (*Nausea*, p. 99).

(Of course Sartre is talking about smoking a cigarette. Remember that weird moment in history when inhaling tobacco leaves wrapped in bleached paper was something sexy? When bringing smoke into the lungs in one form, and pushing it out the nose in another was a way to suspend not just the breath, but thought itself in a sensual-temporal delay? “... my head seems to fill with smoke ... and then it starts again: ‘Smoke ... not to think ... don’t want to think ...’”)



Perhaps smoke does obliterate thought. Perhaps, like physical pain, smoke obliterates language itself.

Following Vygotsky, children do not actually "think" until they have the words to do so, and then their thoughts are constructed in the inter-space of the parent-child relationship. Children's thoughts are necessarily populated by the thoughts of others. The road from co-thinking to inner thinking and subjectivity is one built on words (for Vygotsky), but once achieved, these words also belong to others. "Will there never be an end to it?"

At 24 minutes and nine seconds I pause the piece. I need a break, need to come up for air. Lingering in the space of discomfort has its limits at physical thresholds for pain.

Smoke.

Elements in unusual proximity one to another.

A chemical re-arrangement.

A shock treatment to the brain.

Basinski composed music with smoke loops.

Is it the half-step interval of the two primary notes – G and A flat – that creates this malaise? Is it the echoes of what sounds like a French horn playing a fifth, then a sixth, then a third above the tonic? Is it the forest of thick electronic mesh that underlies the entirety? And if not (only) the intervallic effects, what of the texture? The timbre? That electrical grid of the soul?

And we should not forget the Mie effect – the effect of light meeting particles. "Smoke is an aerosol (or mist) of solid particles and liquid droplets that are close to the ideal range of sizes for Mie scattering of visible light." Mie scattering produces the magnificent chromaticism of sunsets, the orange and reds that suffuse the New York skyline in summer dusk. It is only smoke that makes light bearable at all to the human eye.

But then sometimes the smoke is too thick.

As the piece continues, the attack notes begin to sound like actual attacks – not the pressure of fingers on a keyboard, or the attack of a tongue on a mouthpiece, but explosions in the distance, the sounds of war.

And then everything gets smokier, as if we were inhabiting the head of a soldier listening to gunshot, listening to bombs, listening to the internal echoes of these noises in his head, in ours. [55:16]



And then the electrical buzz, like fluorescent lights over an electro-cardiograph machine in an Intensive Care unit [62:21] until we imagine we hear another bell-like melody in the distance, calling us to a light.

Buzz, Fade out, Death

CODA: The Disintegration Loops 2.1

But is there life after death, a transmigration of souls in smoke?
A transformation of smoke into clouds?
Is there singular life after listening?

In *The Disintegration Loops 2.1*, which is only ten minutes and fifty seconds long, we hear another aesthetic – this time a more reed-like sound billowing like smoke proliferating. It is the butterfly beginning to take wing. Not fifths this time, but a harmonic series built on thirds, where the tonic and a second enter, like steps into the clouds. It is a more angelic yet metallic reverberation, a gong penetrating the body in all its pores.

Consider some other definitions of smoke: to “fumigate, cleanse, or purify by exposure to smoke”; or to “Subdue (insects, especially bees) by exposing them to smoke.”³

Fumigation was synonymous with perfuming in the late Middle Ages. And of course smell, like sound, permeates our being, invading and also transforming our very chemistry.

From viscosity to porosity, human vulnerability has a sound.

Conclusion: Listening to Disintegration

Listening subjects are open subjects. When we decide to listen, as I did to Basinki's piece, we are intentionally opening ourselves to an experience of discomfort (in my case nausea), and we are lingering there (one hour, three minutes and 36 seconds, and then some more...)

Lingering in the space of discomfort is an ethical stance that breathes in the

smoke that, like ritual incense, changes the brainwaves, voluntarily admitting a certain toxicity into the human body in pursuit of another kind of knowledge – an experiential knowledge, a sound knowledge.

Lingering in the space of discomfort is homeopathic.

Such lingering in smoky spaces, however, is not always a decision. It is more often an imposition. And then the response is to run for one's life. Or to jump to a purer, more rarified atmosphere. Indeed, before people are burned in fires, they usually die of smoke inhalation. It is elemental. Lungs can only filter so much particulate matter.

On the other hand, as we watch and listen to disintegration we imbibe a small part of what will eventually overtake us: the perplexity of smoke in which solids rise instead of fall into the unbreatheable yet unavoidable smokiness of being. Lingering in the smoke, just like listening to disintegration, is an exercise in being-with what is completely foreign and yet profoundly intimate. Nausea. Smoke. Disintegration. Is there singular life after listening?

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smoke>, accessed March 9, 2016.
2. Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1964. *Nausea*. Translated by Lloyd Alexander, Introduction by Hayden Caruth. New York: New Directions.
3. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/smoke, accessed March 28, 2016.