

Stupid undersound

Everything significant takes place below. Nothing has changed: in the most primordial epistemological topography, truth has always been subsurface. One must dig down for it, one must not be distracted by superficial effects. Power itself works subversively, under cover, indeed under the cover of one's own consciousness. It burrows under one's skin, insinuates itself parasitically within the human organism, eating away at its autonomy and transforming it into a parasite as well, affixing it symbiotically to the host apparatus. One must be vigilant without rest: in the slightest lapse of attention, the slightest weakening of one's defenses, at the very moment when one thought oneself alienated to the point of immunity, some viral bit of advertising, some invisible hook, [164] some cultural lure one had never even noticed before expropriates one's desire and turns one forever into one of them, lusters after supermodels, foreign cars, stock portfolios, leather jackets, sculpted delts and pecs. It is always the case that one swallows the lure before one notices that it is a lure; and that is why the mechanisms of the lure, reaching into us under our defenses, tunneling under every critical Maginot Line, must be decoded and catalogued relentlessly. It is here that we encounter another sense of the subliminal: not only the zone of the id, the unconscious, the underground itself, but the subliminal means that what we call capital uses to colonize us, its technologies of suggestion. If stupid research is especially alert to mechanisms of subliminal manipulation, it lags behind the Christian fundamentalists who knew years ago that Satanic lures were coded into the lyrics of the pop albums spinning endlessly in their teenager's rooms, driving

them to drugs and suicide, which of course their parents could never do. Whole court proceedings have hinged on the possibility of turning these fleeting backwards messages into hard evidence, and no doubt the paranoid projection of such messages onto what may in some instances have merely been noise—although it is axiomatic in the stupid underground that there is no such thing as simple noise, that signal to noise ratios are absolutely overbalanced, that noise, indeed the unheard, the interval between noises, is dense with information that has simply not yet been decoded. The imagination of such forms of subliminal suggestion inspired bands and recording engineers subsequently to put them there, in the technique referred to as "back masking." Arid long before Judas Priest (remember them?) went from marketing Satan to paying his dues, Muzak Christmas carols droning in mall elevators indicated to certain hypersensitive ears that the most banal is also the most insidiously powerful—more terrible because of its prevalence than the vague threat of criminal violence, always there, eroding our self-control, indeed our very being. "We managed to get hold of some Muzak records ..., and they had the whole chart of frequencies and tempos and things like that you should use at particular times of the day."²⁵ Key words can [165] be distributed fractally through a cover text in such a way that you are manipulated by messages you do not even know you are reading. Sexual organs and the mere word *sex* are not quite hidden in billboard gestalts all along the freeway, in commercials, in magazine ads, perhaps in the textbooks you once brought home from school, perhaps in secret arrangements of letters on this very page. The certainty that these messages are out there trying to get in puts the stupid underground on a particularly aggressive defensive, caught

up in a perpetual double reading and double interpretation of an already overloaded screen, subjecting itself to the ceaseless vigil in which absolutely nothing can be taken for granted, lest, in a weak and passive moment, the crucial message gets in and reduces one to an automaton of the commodity (which in any case has long since occurred), or of even more nefarious and perhaps extraterrestrial forms of mind control and body snatching.

There is an extraordinary recurrence of this theme in fanzine interviews with a certain cohort of musicians (Throbbing Gristle/Psychic TV/Chris and Cosey, SPK, Non, Cabaret Voltaire, Monte Cazazza), who therefore take it as their mission to alert listeners to the menace of subliminal overcoding, and to provide strategies for countering it. Actually, only a few specific strategies are ever proposed: adaptations of the William Burroughs-Brion Gysin method of cutups ("cut word lines.. . trailing to the better half," rearrange control texts at random in order to disrupt them; here we are not very far from the avant-garde belief in the subversive agency of collage, claims that have long since been rendered insupportable); or a kind of Situationist *détournement* in which one reseeds the semioscape with one's own anarchic messages (a project now entirely without effect). Or experiments in sub- or hypersonic transmission: Mark Pauline or Genesis P-Orridge or members of Cabaret Voltaire poring over obscure technical journals (where, they report, Burroughs believes the only really creative writing is to be found) for information on the construction of subliminal-effects generators. There is in this something like the acephalic materialism of Bataille, a sense that control and [166] its disruption happen not only ideologically, by semiotic

dissemination, but also in the form of the drone, the too-high or too-low frequency, that communicates viscerally before one even knows one is hearing it, purely, one might say, at the level of the signifier, indeed of sound that cannot, strictly speaking, be called a signifier because it has no direct relationship to a signified, to a concept other than the mechanics of control itself, since it encodes its relation to power in another form altogether. "Subliminals" are thus both overcoded and empty. Self-control is obtained by breaking control, by wresting oneself from it, by a rigorous discipline of subversion. The conspiracy is vast, the signs penetrate one faster than one can resist them; even so, that never inhibits one from stupidly exaggerating one's outlaw autonomy.

Let me remind you that we have already encountered the subliminal in the form of the *trace*, which is not the source of control but there in its place, obscuring access to it, covering over a ground that cannot even be said to exist "there," according to a certain now-standard logic, only as the supplement of an originary *différance*, neither absent nor present but the constitutive space (and time) between them. Disruption of control is a reaction to a control grounded on its own disruption. Behind the record company, the government; behind the government, Satan, or the extraterrestrial. There is always some crime, some transgression, something deeper and more primordial than the forms of control one manages to discover. The absolute is out there, down there, indicated by the very fact that one can disrupt *this* level of control, or *this* one. No matter how deeply one penetrates, absolute control lies deeper. Subliminal transmission demands it.

Loud

There is a certain justice to giving the job of discovering the silent forms of control to people whose primary modus operandi is enormous volume. The trajectory from loud rock music to even louder industrial music (Boyd Rice/Non [167] played too loud even for much of the stupid club scene) to experiments in subliminal sound is direct and continuous. There is, in a certain sense, no difference, no line between sound so loud it is all one can hear and sound so deep and pervasive it cannot be heard at all. Loud is critical. Or perhaps we should put the same matter differently: if we have taken critical to imply a certain distance, a certain non-identity with the object, loud proceeds, as the stupid underground always proceeds, in the opposite direction. Rock music becomes, in *intensity*, at the most extreme volume, not a critique of social reality (whatever the pretensions of its lyrics) but its stupid reduction, the limit of its tolerability. Critical then not through distance but, as we have seen, through proximity, through what would appear to be the most uncritical embrace. Here again Zizek is helpful. "Although functioning as a support for the totalitarian order, fantasy is then at the same time the leftover of the real that enables us to 'pull ourselves out,' to preserve a kind of distance from the socio-symbolic network. When we become crazed in our obsession with idiotic enjoyment, even totalitarian manipulation cannot reach us" (Zizek 1991 a, 128). Zizek's example here is precisely popular music, the inane ditty that anchors the fantasy, that runs endlessly in one's head; what one wishes to add here is the criterion of force, of intensity, of sound so loud that, even though it is a cultural product from top to bottom, it nonetheless enfolds the audience and isolates it within the symbolic order. The intensity of

loud drowns out the Other. It is the limit of the symbolic, its null point, experienced in the very onslaught of its signs. Perhaps we could appropriate a Lacanian term for this fantastic volume that goes beyond fantasy: the *sinthome*. Zizek calls it "subversive," but that, unfortunately, is to offer it to those who wanna-be subversive, to see themselves seen as subversives, to be (to fantasize being) political agents in an older and ever more current sense.²⁶ Let us nonetheless pursue the concept for a moment.

[T]he signifier permeated with idiotic enjoyment is what Lacan, in the last stage of his teaching, called *le sinthome*. *Le* [168] *sinthome* is not the symptom, the coded message to be deciphered by interpretation, but the meaningless letter that immediately procures *jouissance*, "enjoyment-in-meaning," "enjoy-meant." . . . [W]hen we take into account the dimension of the *sinthome*, it is no longer sufficient to denounce the "artificial" character of the ideological experience, to demonstrate the way the object experienced by ideology as "natural" and "given" is effectively a discursive construction What we must do... on the contrary, is to *isolate* the *sinthome* from the context by virtue of which it exerts its power of fascination in order to expose the *sinthome's* utter stupidity [It] produces a distance not by locating the phenomenon in its historical totality, but by making us experience the utter nullity of its immediate reality, of its stupid, material presence that escapes "historical mediation"... [I]t is a little piece of the real attesting to the ultimate nonsense of the universe, but insofar as this object allows us

to condense, to locate, to materialize the nonsense of the universe in it, insofar as the object serves to represent this nonsense, it enables us to sustain ourselves in the midst of inconsistency... . (Žižek 1991a, 128-29,134-35)

One might be used to the leaping and screaming frenzy of rock concerts, but unless one has experienced, at the same time that one experiences its destructive frenzy, the utterly euphoric, calming, peaceful effect that discordant electric music played at excessive volume can produce, one cannot grasp the possibility that it might fall into this category. What is merely social, the stupidest string of pop signifiers, becomes intensely material, an exaggerated idiocy, a subideological cocoon, a tear in the fabric of the social world within which it might still be possible to endure it, if one can endure the volume itself. What we must ask then is whether, at its most intense, loud is a thought.²⁷

Notes

25. Interview with Chris Carter, *Vague* 19/20, 143. See also Genesis P-Orridge, "Muzak," *Vague* 16/17 (1984), 176-78, and *Sordide Sentimentale* interview, *Industrial Culture Handbook*, RE / search 6/7 (1983), 82-91. For techniques of countersubliminal subversion, see for instance the Cabaret Voltaire interview, RE / search 1, or the Cazazza, Rice, and Pauline interviews, *Pranks*: RE / search 11.

26. See *Seminaire XX: Encore*.

27. See, for instance, interviews in *Industrial Culture Handbook* and Charles Neale, *Tape Delay*.