

Silence Plays the Melody:

William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops*

I: CREATION MYTHS

At some point this melody was played on real instruments. Breath passed down a horn, a bow across a string. Somewhere in the middle of a symphony. After which, we presume, though can never know for sure, the music moved elsewhere, and other notes came in, notes it is most likely no-one will ever hear again. These notes were all recorded, though we cannot be sure of the technology used to record them, or who did the recording, or, indeed, who was playing the instruments, or when this all took place. An indeterminate amount of time later, an unknown person played the music on an unknown shortwave radio station, which was being tuned into and itself recorded by the experimental composer William Basinski onto magnetic tape. Basinski describes the sounds as 'coming from the sky' (Frere-Jones), mystical, numinous, as though materialising out of thin air: as though origin-less. Then the moment passes, the tapes are put away in storage and forgotten about, the source of the original music not noted down, and subsequently lost.

All of this is to say that the origin of *The Disintegration Loops* is tied up with a process of forgetting. The music as we finally hear it – spread across four parts, nine tracks, five hours – would not exist without these initial acts of forgetting. By the time Basinski puts his recordings into storage, a process of amnesia, of memory decay, has already begun, and the still nascent music, thirty years before it will be 'composed' in 2001 by a digitisation process yet to be invented, has already undergone a series of translations and transformations: from orchestra to recording, from recording to radio signal, from radio signal through radio receiver to radio speaker, and from radio speaker to magnetic tape. With each stage the previous stage is partially forgotten, the sounds further removed from the initial process of their creation in human hands and mouths. At the same time, they are preserved and remembered through the twice-occurring process of recording. Forgetting and remembering go hand-in-hand.

All this is mostly forgotten when *The Disintegration Loops* is discussed. It is not until thirty years later, in 2001, that we get to the heart of this work. Its initial origins are lost to us, existing only as traces, accessible only by articulating the *mythos* that has come to surround the work, its origin *story*. Below is my attempt to weave a tapestry, sourced from various articles and interviews, depicting this story, telling not my own version but something like a collective version of it. In italics are Basinski's own words, drawn from various interviews; in regular type are others' retellings. The story goes like this:

PART ONE

In late 2001, he was reviewing old tapes old tape decks going through his archives
The Land That Time Forgot, we used to call it old work from the 80s *and I found all*
my old tape loops an old pile of old recordings to salvage loops he'd made in the
early eighties *some wonderful pastoral pieces I had forgotten about* big cases of them back
in the storage room beautiful, lush, cinematic, truly American pastoral landscapes
so grave and so beautiful which he had completely forgotten about He decided to
digitize the decades-old loops to preserve them decided to start transferring the loops
he'd made in the early eighties to CDs for posterity to start the process of archiving
and digitizing *I didn't want my old work to be destroyed, so I was trying to digitize it*
He started a loop on his digital recorder and left it running When he returned
a short while later he discovered that the tapes themselves were literally falling apart
the tape itself was disintegrating gradually crumbling as it played *'Something's changing,*
what the hell is going on?' The fine coating of magnetized metal was slivering off, and the music
was decaying slightly with each pass through the spindle *And I thought: 'Oh. My. God.'*
I had to check that it was really recording and it was the iron oxide particles were gradually
turning to dust fragments of iron oxide spalled off the tape's surface and became
dust dropping into the tape machine, leaving bare plastic spots on the tape silence
in these corresponding sections of the new recording *I sat there watching as this thing over*
the length of a CD-R completely disintegrated in the most profoundly beautiful way gradually
breaking down the music into a ghost of its former self *that melody just decayed right in front*

of my ears and eyes slowly deteriorating like wood planks on abandoned houses, letting wind and silence slip through the cracks *And I remember thinking, 'This is not about you. You don't need counter melodies. Keep the recorders going and let's see what's going to happen here. You don't need to add a thing.'* The sustains sort of fell away, and yet somehow the core of it stayed – the attack and the basic rhythm of the melody – hanging on desperately until the very end *And I was on the phone burning up the line, calling Antony, calling my other friends, 'Get over here. You won't believe what just happened.'* The music was decaying The music was dying

PART TWO

Shortly after All of a sudden The next day In the next days and weeks Almost simultaneously On September 11 On September 11th On September 11 2001 less than 1 nautical mile from the World Trade Centre *our beacon, our compass* Basinski had a job interview with the arts organization Creative Time at the World Trade Center *And I saw a plane flying very low across the sky. It was very strange. I'd never seen anything like that.* All of a sudden the world changed *There was a commotion at the door and it was my friend who was babbling: 'The two towers are burning. The two towers are burning.'* The appalling events of 11 September were unfolding *We saw those towering structures collapse before our very eyes* the incomprehensible change of landscape: like a volcano disappearing behind trees *We just ran to the roof* the roof of his building and played the loops over and over all day long the collapsing loops the impossibly melancholy music, the gradual fade *while everyone was staring at what was going on* watching the slow death of one New York and the slow rise of another *while we tried to work out what the hell was going on* the death of one music and the creation of another *watching as my friends and I disintegrated in our own personal loops of fear and terror* filming the last hour of daylight and the project suddenly had a sense of purpose: a requiem for the twin towers

(Sources: Basinski (2013), Doran, Frere-Jones, Friedlander, Gotrich, Heumann, Medwin, Richardson, Simmons)

The twin halves of this creation myth are repeated over and over, in every article and interview and think-piece on *The Disintegration Loops*, reasserting the story as the work's origin. The almost ritualistic repetitions collectively weave a prelapsarian, pre-9/11 world: the false Eden we hear, in the music, the collapse and decay of. Yet exact details differ, particularly in regards to the timeframe of the work and its relation to 9/11 (see the first line of Part Two, above). The story, inseparable from the actual music, itself undergoes a process of partial destruction. It is told on loop, altering slightly with each repetition, details lost or left out, forgotten, the exact facts of the story decaying and leaving its outline, its trace: the basic mythic shape of it. To tell a story is partially to forget: to omit details and thus shape the chaotic, impenetrable denseness of reality. Kathleen Gough notes that the general shape of the story itself is a movement from 'death and disintegration to saving and remembrance' (94). The former must be passed through to understand the latter. Destruction precedes creation, or re-creation.

The process mirrors that of magnetic tape itself, which both *attracts* information to it, magnetically, but also *loses* it. The two go hand-in-hand. David Keenan calls it 'mediumistic' (8): that is, the tape is a channel, an *intermediate* agency. The word chimes with the idea of being caught in an interval, a *midst*. In the immediate shock of 9/11, in what Žižek describes as the 'unique time between a traumatic event and its symbolic impact, like in those brief moments after we are deeply cut and before the full extent of the pain strikes us' (389), many felt unable to grasp the reality of what had happened. In this space, Basinski's music first dwells, itself initially incomprehensible. But as it advances, and the loops decay, it becomes not less but *more* intelligible. It does this through its *slow* loss of information, like a story being simplified and shaped out of an excess of detail. Ellis Jones sees the music's function as gradually making the inexplicable explicable: it 'offers a step-by-step journey between then and now, travelled in such a way as to make distinguishable the potentially infinite moments of transition between the two states' (10). In slowing the moment of loss down, in making the movement from music to silence (from presence to absence, from tower to no-tower) so gradual, Basinski allows us to process the shock of sudden destruction. The music is a *medium* through which we might, as listeners, travel to understanding. And the evolving, mythic story of *The Disintegration Loops* is the same: a process of comprehension through slow change, through partial, cumulative acts of forgetting.

II: THE LOOPS AND 9/11

I want now to explore in more depth the music's connections to 9/11. In different retellings of the origin story the music is held at different distances from the event: finished moments before, or the day before, or the week before. That this timeframe is unclear speaks to the uneasy relationship between the work and 9/11. It is difficult to say to what extent *The Disintegration Loops* is 'about' 9/11 – it was, after all, made before the event. And yet the work cannot help but recall (or perhaps pre-call) the destruction of the towers. I want to discuss a few ways in which we might construe this 'aboutness'.

Both loops and towers are simple in form and aesthetics. The loops are simple circles of melody; the towers rise in straight lines into the sky. And yet both are dependent on a high degree of hidden structure. Notes are played in a certain order, rather than randomly or all at once, creating melody. Instruments in the orchestra are balanced – harmonically, in timbre, in volume – rather than clashing against each other or drowning each other out. Likewise, the simple-seeming towers are held up by a high level of organisation and structural integrity: they are opposed to randomness. Behind both lies an enormous amount of human endeavour, not just the work of specific architects and engineers, composers and orchestras, but the entire history of skyscrapers, of buildings, of architecture, of structure itself; the entire history of Western music, the evolution of violins and horns, of particular melodic and harmonic principles. All this engineering, all this history, is undone in the destructive acts that produce and constitute these two phenomena – *The Disintegration Loops* and 9/11. Their essence lies in an act of destruction, de-structuring, in an entropic movement from organisation to chaos. We literally hear this destruction in Basinski's music, as the nostalgic sounds of the orchestra decay into both noise (the increasing distortion as the tape is damaged) and the antithesis of noise: silence. The towers, likewise, disappear into both noise (the chaotic, static like detritus floating in the sky, as haunts videos of the event) and silence (the absence of the towers in the New York skyline.)

We might also read these acts as not just destructive but deconstructive, in that they reveal structures that had previously lain hidden: the silence behind the music, the vacuum behind the American dream. Music is structured by silence, is only possible because of silence. As the loops are gradually filled with pockets of silence, most markedly at the end of 'd|p 3', Basinski reveals this structural bind. Pre-9/11 America, it

might be argued, was also built on a foundation of silence, made possible only because of it. Žižek evokes this when he describes the invisible 'borderline [separating] the digitalized first world from the third world desert of the real' (387), upon which it depends but which it cannot hear or acknowledge. He posits 9/11 as the moment when this previously unheard reality inevitably intrudes into the dreamland it made possible. Both Basinski's seemingly infinite loops and the seemingly infinite towers (and all they symbolised) are found to contain within themselves the conditions of their own destruction. The format of the loop – circular, symbolic of infinity – reiterates this connection. Steven Connor writes of how loops are 'pockets of time and space which are held apart from the general conditions of propagation and passing away'. And yet Basinski's loops *do* pass away. They are a symbol of the infinite (America's conception of its own power) meeting death, decay: the finite. What is more, we find that this destruction was in fact built into the symbol to begin with, that the symbol was only made possible because of it. The loop works by devouring itself, again and again, so that it is always becoming, always new, even in the gaps that it creates, the spaces it leaves behind' (Keenan, 4-5), like the snake of ouroboros, another symbol of infinity, eating its own tale. Jones calls this the 'double surprise' of *The Disintegration Loops* – 'something arrives to disrupt the totality, which is then discovered to have been part of that totality all along' (7).

Such a reading, though, risks portraying the *Loops* as anti-American, or as despairing, when in fact they feel quite the opposite. Many have experienced the music as deeply and profoundly moving. Antony Hegarty described it as the 'the most helpful music I have ever known' (Frere-Jones). That the infinite loop contains within itself the possibility of its own destruction might be read politically, as Žižek does, but it might also be read spiritually, or even mythically. This, I think, is the root of the *Loops*' affective power: they remind us how intertwined creation and destruction are, how 'any act of destruction, even at the level of the symbolic, must be only a reconfiguration of a fixed amount of material, and therefore in some sense a creation' (Jones, 7). They remind us things are made possible only by their opposites: life and death, forgetting and remembering, music and silence. To listen to *The Disintegration Loops* is to undergo something of the process of the Twin Towers' destruction, to take through the senses that destruction into our bodies. But it is also to remember them. Again we return to the idea that the music is a medium through which we might pass in order to understand the events of that day. It is impossible, then, to explain the music's connection to 9/11: one must listen to it, pass through it.

III: THE ACTUAL MUSIC

I want now to describe the music, to analyse the actual sounds, but it is in ~~the~~ ~~end~~. As soon as I put the first loop on, I lose the power of thought, of language. I well up. I am in that ~~of~~ ~~back~~-moment between event and comprehension, that space which precedes understanding. I have listened to ~~this~~ music many times and it still floors me, still stops me in my tracks. It is devastating. It stops time. Twenty minutes into 'd|p 1', and you would imagine the effect has begun to wear off. It has not. I still cannot write, ~~cannot~~ ~~write~~ ~~the~~ ~~words~~ continue to fill with ~~words~~. In the accompanying video, smoke billows across a vivid orange New York sunset, and though it feels wrong to take any pleasure in it, it is haunting in a kind of pure, elemental way. And yet, the music, by this point, has barely changed: it is just the same five seconds over and over. I should be ~~used~~ of this by now. It should have lost its power. But it has not. There seems to be a high horn playing a slower melody, harmonising at points with the five-second one. But no, it is just an illusion, a phantom, created by the process the five-second loop is undergoing. Thirty-five minutes in, it no longer sounds like a horn at all, but a ghostly echo, like the 'sunken cathedral' Debussy depicts in his preludes for piano - 'a city that chants beneath the waves' (Ross, 562). By the forty minute mark it has taken on the quality of feedback squall. In the accompanying video, the sky has almost completely darkened. The decay is speeding up ~~now~~, becoming more pronounced. The second note of the initial horn melody is barely audible. The third is cut off after maybe a quarter-second, leaving a clipped blip of ~~silence~~ ~~with~~ ~~a~~ ~~short~~-second of silence, filled with nothing but reverb and distortion, pure texture. When the ~~silence~~ ~~ends~~, it has a percussive feel, like a surprise dropped down carpeted stairs, or soft thunder in a distant sky. By the fifty minute mark, these percussive hits are all that is left, a few shimmers and flecks of the original harmony sticking to them. The phantom horn from earlier has vanished. The smoke, on the video, is barely visible against the sky. By the hour mark, there is no melody or harmony left, really. Just the ghost of it, the memory of it. The myth of it.

At the start of each track, I feel unable to think, choked up, shattered by the sounds I am hearing. But by the end, I am able to breathe again, to think through what I can now only barely hear. This is the very odd process of listening to *The Disintegration Loops*. As parts of the music move purely into imagination, so it becomes more ~~real~~. We glimpse the music behind the music: its meaning, its ~~myth~~. Silence starts to play the melody. It is the silence through which we can enter.

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