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R.I.P. 2020: Universal Spiritual Renewal Through Noise—Funeral Rebirth in Boris and Merzbow's 2R0I2P0

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R.I.P. 2020: Universal Spiritual Renewal Through Noise— Funeral Rebirth in Boris and Merzbow's 2R0I2P0

Luca Proietti

‘This year was a period of trial for everyone in the world. This work becomes a monument to the requiem of the previous era. From here, a new world begins again.’¹

These words were used to present the release of 2R0I2P0, a collaboration between the experimental rock band, Boris, and noise artist Akita Masami, aka Merzbow. Released on 11 December 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, this album, with its title an anagram of ‘2020 Rest in Peace’, expressed solidarity in a complicated moment for humanity. It also incited to overcome the crisis by turning the page, creating a new chapter to depart from a society whose weaknesses had been highlighted by our collective powerlessness.

To fully understand the social message of 2R0I2P0, the songs focus on sounds and effects created by a combination of instruments and vocals rather than on lyrics. These play a secondary role in an album that aims to catch and shape the listeners’ mood through sonic power and harmony. By taking into account both the background of the release and the tracks’ structure, as well as their fitting as a whole concept, I suggest that this album illuminates universal musical engagement in a period of crisis as well as its specific context. More specifically, that of Japan through the work’s retracing of historical and spiritual concepts and elements which can be found by listening to this experimental music album.

Having already collaborated with Megatone (2002), these Japanese artists express their feelings sonically in such an extraordinary situation, creating an original combination of ambient-like sound and harsh noise that surpasses generic boundaries resulting in an intimate musical style. According to Boris’ vocalist and bass guitarist Ohtani Takeshi,

as the social situation worsened at a rapid rate, people’s mental states were also thrown in a bad direction. We felt the same way. Anxiety, fear, hatred, anger, sorrow... surrounded by such negative emotions, playing extreme music became a form of healing.²

¹ Relapse Records, *Boris with Merzbow 2R0I2P0*, 2020 <<http://relapse.com/boris-with-merzbow>> [accessed 1 January 2021].

² Jon Hadusek, ‘Boris on the Making of NO, Pandemic Existence, and the Uncertain Future of Touring’, *Consequence*, 2020 <<https://consequence.net/2020/11/boris-interview-2020>> [accessed 1 January 2022].

Considering the links of Merzbow with environmentalism and underground culture, it is no surprise that the band continues to choose Takeshi as a collaborator. They find in social crisis a sonic harmony that reprises Jacques Attali's invitation to uncover the nature of societies by listening to the noise. By understanding noise as a natural source of life, 'we can better understand... what hopes it is still possible to have.'³

The album reworked songs previously released in albums including *Dear* (2017), *Unknown Flowers* (2018), and *Love & Evol* (2019), with the addition of cover songs from Melvins and Coaltar of The Deepers. The tracks were composed prior to the pandemic, yet the conceptual tracklist foregrounds the need to create a new world from the ashes of the old. This message is carried out by the artists with a long escalation of sounds, lasting 77 minutes. These sounds touch the listener's soul allowing them, through shifting moods, to imagine a story about a desire to build a more genuine life, detaching from the material illusions of consumerism.

The listener perceives this detachment from the outset. In the first track, 'Away from You' (7:35), Merzbow's noisy sonic distortion is placed at the service of Boris' evocation of nature through lead guitarist Wata's mellow song and Takeshi's gentle bass. In the background, there is bamboo in the wind and whirls of wings, squeaks of animals and cries of birds. The ensemble creates a unique atmosphere that introduces the album, immersing the listener in *mono no aware*. This phrase from the Heian period (794–1185), translated variously as 'the pathos of things' or 'a sensitivity to ephemera,' describes the awareness of impermanence (*mujō*) or the transience of things.⁴ This aura is disrupted by the gradual abrasiveness of 'To the Beach' (7:10), a counterbalanced cataclysmic doom of devastating rhythm section and delicate noise. The following 'Coma' (3:14) and 'Love' (6:43) continue a mood of inner reflection, taking form in reality through distortion and chanting voices. Consciousness materialises in action in 'Absolute' (4:31), a monolithic block of noise and riffs that represents not only the turning point of

³ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 29.

⁴ Fiona Macdonald, 'Seven words that can help us be a little calmer', [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190124-seven-words-that-can-help-us-to-be-a-little-calmer), 2019 <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190124-seven-words-that-can-help-us-to-be-a-little-calmer>> [accessed 1 January 2022].

the album but also a sonic tombstone signifying a spiritual death in 2020—the voice becomes a hymn to impermanence.

The second part opens with an attempted return to quiet. ‘Journey’ (7:45) invites the listener to recover their energy. The successive ‘Uzume’ (6:51) recollects inner conflict through excruciating distortions. After this disorientating internal clash, the atmosphere returns calm and confident in the album’s longest track, ‘Evol’ (13:05). It vibrates with hope and positivity and invites us to sit down and wait for the chaos of modern life to pass. Its refreshing vocal and melodies represent a joy as genuine as the nature evoked in the first song. Melvins’ cover ‘Boris’ (8:50) is a tribute to the chosen name of the Japanese band itself, reworked to shape the image of ritualistic destruction through intertwining feedback and electronics. It is a cascade of junk from which to build on a new radiant future.⁵ The closing song, ‘Shadow of Skull’ (12:09), with its slow and noisy pace similar to doom metal, is the final sum of a sonic trip. It leads the listener to a reconstruction that departs from the junkiness of chaotic metropolitan life, becoming aware of how disaster can turn into opportunities to recollect our human feeling.

Considering the album as a whole concept, 2R0I2P0 embodies characteristic themes of noise artists. Humanistic critique of technoculture; a battle against technological dehumanisation through cultural resistance, renewed by the anxiety caused in the 1990s by the asset price bubble collapse and the subsequent economic crisis. The comparison with society’s decline in the pandemic is evident.⁶ That being said, some criticisms may be underlined. Reworking tracks that were not intended for the COVID-19 pandemic do not address Japanese issues related to this specific moment. For example, the pressure to host the Tokyo 2020 Olympics ‘for domestic political and economic purposes—ignoring scientific and moral imperatives—[that are] contradictory to Japan’s commitment to global health and human security.’⁷ However, the release’s presentation was intended not just for Japan but for the world and has a permeable transcultural and universal intent. Rather than anything concrete, it relies on an abstract message leading to spiritual discovery. Nonetheless, in hearing the composition’s story of resilience, the

⁵ William York, ‘Boris | Biography & History’, *AllMusic*, n.d. <<https://www.allmusic.com/artist/boris-mn0000075383/biography>> [accessed 1 January 2022].

⁶ David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁷ Kazuki Shimizu, Devi Sridhar, Kiyosu Taniguchi, Kenji Shibuya, ‘Reconsider this summer’s Olympic and Paralympic games’, *BMJ*, 373.962 (2021).

listener may notice connections with Zen mysticism and the concept of ma. That is, the notion of the existence of sound only in conjunction with silence. There is also a revolutionary intent whose roots can be traced back to ikki; the peasants' revolts during Edo feudalism which continued to inspire protests even after the 1868 Meiji Restoration.⁸

Thanks to its continuous counterbalancing of abrasion and quietness, 2R0I2P0 intervenes in the pandemic world to create a sonic connection with matsuri and kami—the shrine festivals that celebrate the beauty of nature and the spiritual phenomena that can be both deities and landscape elements.⁹ These Japanese historical and spiritual aspects intersect with modern industrial society and guide people through a rediscovery of purity. By reworking foreign influences, highlighted also with a mixture of English and Japanese lyrics, this Boris and Merzbow collaboration demonstrates how a transnational approach to noise during a period of crisis.

[It] can serve to startle, threaten and annoy; and is often associated with feelings of stress and frustration; however, it may also contribute to feelings of belonging, community and nostalgia.¹⁰

YouTube link to the full stream album provided by Relapse Records: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvi6mDyVqZw>

⁸ Richard B. Pilgrim, 'Intervals ("Ma") in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan', *History of Religions*, 25: 3 (1986), pp. 255–77; Savitri Vishwanathan, 'IKKI: Peasant Uprisings in Japan', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 58 (1997), pp. 755–71.

⁹ James W. Boyd, Ron G. Williams, 'Japanese Shintō: An Interpretation of a Priestly Perspective', *Philosophy East and West*, 55: 1 (2005), pp. 33–63.

¹⁰ Marie Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 10.

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