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“DON’T THINK, JUST FART”

Noise and the Comic Value of Flatulence

ABSTRACT

Starting from an elaboration on John Cage’s ominous sentence and on the stigmatization of humor in intellectual discourses, this article tries to understand the history of farts being considered funny in Western culture, with an emphasis on the role played by the sound of flatulence in this comical aspect. After all, if there isn’t something inherently funny about the sound of farts, a complex association between senses and social relations has nevertheless made fart-like sounds at best silly and at worst abominable to our ears. What does

this mean for the imagination of fart-like sound effects, such as some of those produced by pedals and modular synthesizers? Isn’t the moralization of intestinal fermentation a constraint to the ways the human body can be used as a musical instrument? And how could an ANT approach enhance our knowledge of how farts “resound” socially?

KEY WORDS: sound studies, flatulence, noise, humor, fart jokes

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TAKING FARTS SERIOUSLY

Vie with each other in producing No.1, or the sonorous, full toned, loud Fart.
Fart loud, I say, and never more be restrained by example age, rank or sex.
—Charles James Fox

There are plenty of good reasons why ethnomusicology—and even anthropology and philosophy at large²—has not been very keen on engaging with the topic of humor. For one, because humor was never considered part of the set of objects that *deserves* study in the first place—it was a lower form of culture, part of its value laying precisely on staying outside of the radar of canonical modes of sociality. The second reason is that an engagement with the comic might itself look like a decoy from the comically-prone, a trick designed to force some sober academics to participate in a discourse that covertly ridicules them. There are also, however, reasons to do the opposite—to take humor dead serious, even if running the risk of suffocating what is funny about it, or yet reading it like a parody of academia, performatively making it the butt of the joke. Especially in the last couple of years, so deeply infused with the comical *ethos*, when memes have taken on a macro-political dimension and the debate about the borders between funny and offensive have been so prevalent,³ it is imperative to finally sit down and see what might be behind a given laughter. What are we usually laughing about, and why? What is it that, in a joke, anecdote or accident, possesses our body and commands it to squeal and bounce uncontrollably?

In this article, I am choosing to be interested in one particular category of humor, which is that deriving from scatological sounds—more specifically, sounds associated with intestinal flatulence. The main working question here is: why has Western culture come to find farts so funny? And, following from that, how do certain social expectations shape the uses (or lack thereof) of fart-related sounds in musical compositions? Even further, one may ask if and how a fart plays out a social role that is conceptually analogous to the role of noise in music. In this sense, I am not interested only in putrefaction and excretion as abstract categories that often figure at the intersections of humorous discourses, neither am I seeking to grasp the humor of bodily fluids and secretions generally speaking, but rather to lay out the relationship between the comicality of some scatological representations and the realm of sound, taking farts as a paradigmatic case and a privileged object of description. There are an almost infinite number of ways of finding something funny, and it seems like a social theory of humor would require not an article but a whole field of study to be devised. The reasons why a fart sound is funny to us, of this particular geography and historical time, though, could be fairly intelligible already.

² See Kirsten Bell, “Silent but deadly: Farting across cultures,” *PopAnth*, May 20, 2014, <https://popanth.com/article/silent-but-deadly-farts-across-cultures/>; Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³ Cf. the relation between the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the use of internet-specific humor, already heavily noted and researched, for example.

To understand the comicality of the fart in relation to sound is to understand, first and foremost, the social life of farts in Western culture. From a medical point of view, a fart is a burp of methane that comes out of the rectum once the intestinal muscles are pressured by the catabolic bloating caused by digestive microorganisms. But, as Latour⁴ would warn us, this scientific perspective seldom exhausts a description of what a fart *is*. In a given social setting, like a gala speech, a fart might be a scandalous blunder; in another, like a military dormitory, it might be a demonstration of strength. These contextual subtleties are still part of what constitutes flatulence in its ontological assemblage. There are elements other than the body’s “natural” machineries, its physiological triggers, at stake. As we know, such a coronal ejection of invisible mass from the anus is indicated by a residual sound as well as by a distinctive smell, immediately perceived by those that surround a farting subject. Because of the archivability and reproducibility of sound via media technologies, however, the primary signal for the social identification of a fart in our time ends up being its sonicity, with fragrance as a secondary, derivative attribute. One might even escape the anti-flatulence surveillance of the crowd by doing it in silence, as long as the smell is not overly pronounced nor clearly tied to one’s spatial position. For the fart is never a series of bowel movements, simply put, but also—and more relevantly so—the signifiers that precede and succeed it, the multiple networks that confine it.

A loud fart (not in the sense of “high in volume,” but in the sense of “sonically perceptible”) occurs when a friction is produced between flanked buttocks, causing them to rumble in their area of critical distension—the anus—colliding sequentially, in a hyper-accelerated rhythmic pulse that projects itself in the air as a single granular oscillation. This frequency can be mimicked or signaled through the onomatopoeic rattling of the tongue when blowing raspberries (a tightened “thbptttt” vibration). Thus, sound-wise, intestinal expels are characterized by a roaring reverberation formatted into soundwave by the asshole’s embouchure, as it is enforced by the contraction and quick stressing of the sphincter. On average, the sound of a fart sits in the 200-350 Hz range, and produces around 80 dB of SPL. Although flatulence appears in a handful of pitches and scales, a “fart orchestra” by Australian comedy composer Loz has had him farting precisely into a B flat major 7th arpeggio,⁵ so there are ways of farting in tune if one intends to. What is certain is that a blow of gas gets caught between the cheeks, compelling the mucous membrane of the integument to shake and thus produce this immoral paroxysm of acoustics: *flatus*, wind traversing the *gluteus maximus*, the body out-bubbling from behind and from the bottom.

An attentive reader might note that even the most dry and tentatively impersonal summary of the sonority of farts is inevitably permeated by humorous tones. Willingly or not, farts are connected to our society’s notion of the comical. This is not a problem as much as it is a feature of my article here. In the notebooks of

⁴ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵ Listen to it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tk-5RVMerfl>.

American composer John Cage, one famous and quite ominous sentence would catch some more serious students by surprise: “Farting: don’t think, just fart.”⁶ Despite disconcerting in the bibliographic *corpus* of such a renowned figure of the world of avant-garde music, the advice is actually paradigmatic of John Cage’s own philosophy of art, predicated as it is on the supremacy of the aleatory. Farting in this case is the opposite of thinking because it implies unruliness, unrestraint, a predilection for inventive anarchy over ceremonious systematicity. Academics are so averse to fun that the prospect of writing a serious analysis that does not lose track of its own humor is blasphemous to many of them. Reading the history of the fart as a history of anti-philosophy or of anti-musicology, as Cage might have hinted, is a barrier an academic shall not cross—not because the hypothesis is wrong per se, but because it is *too fun*. While this leaves me with less to work with and more to overcome in terms of conceptual elaboration, it also means there is a serious absence of good ethnomusicological literature on the theme of farts, which I would now like to start correcting.

WHAT IS SO FUNNY ABOUT A FART?

A couple of major theoretical currents inform what we all know about the logic behind humor. The first well-known one, from Thomas Hobbes, is a “theory of superiority,”⁷ according to which we would laugh at the other’s expense, due to the other’s inferior position in relation to us. For Hobbes, in the height of his power-obsessive insights and auto-projective arrogance, events and stories would be funny as long as they presented the shame and inadequacy of some in contrast with the self-pride and perceived adequacy of others (and the more latent and alienated the inadequacy, the better, for the more heightened the difference that underpins this comic undercurrent). In that case, a fart would be funny precisely by being a manifestation of weakness and humiliation from others, a witnessed incapacity to control oneself and to follow the conventional rules of behavior. Albeit widely applicable to cases of *schadenfreude* (and illuminative of the sense of sovereignty that usually accompanies laughter), this theory does not explain why our own fart may seem funny to us and others, or how some “acousmatic” fart sounds may induce laughter on their own, with no farting subject in sight.

The second recognized theory of humor is the one scarcely rehearsed by some 18th century German philosophers (namely, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer), and which is usually called the “theory of incongruity.”⁸ For them, so used to the idealist habit of squandering and parceling the world of spiritual affairs, humor would be the experience of a paradox, of a juxtaposition of antipodes that would produce a tension between an object and its representation. In 1924, in a book of a little more than 100

⁶ John Cage, *M: Writings '67-'72* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

⁷ Carroll, *Humour*, 2014.

⁸ Carroll, 2014.

pages titled *Laughter*—to this day, the only major philosophical endeavour exclusively dedicated to the subject—Henri Bergson⁹ outlines and expands this theory of incongruence, stipulating on the basis of it a kind of vitalist-mechanicist framework for the comprehension of laughter. According to Bergson, humor would be generated by a tension that, once suspended, suddenly broke into its counterpart, or by the abrupt exposition and dissolution of suppressed incompatibilities. It would be the immediate formation of a void under an interpretive dispute for the Real. Now the fart would be funny not because it necessarily showcases a flaw in others, but because it cures our collective vanity¹⁰ by disarming us of our expectations, offering some kind of relief. This theory, however, also cannot fully explain the comic value of flatulence: sometimes, farts do make sense; sometimes they are perfectly in context, communicating a clear message; and yet, they can still be funny.

Cage was right: in some way, our irrational bursts of gas really cannot be tamed by the cold gestures of philosophy. This is why we should expand the fart into a *Lebenswelt*, to view it as a world and an organism, a form of life and a non-human agent, inasmuch as it connects the organs and ties the senses together, metaphorizing the mouth through the anus, inscribing smells to sounds and sounds to textures, etc. Considering the part played by sound in fart's comic value means salvaging all comic possibilities of the fart: penetrating into the phenomenology of flatulence to probe the communion of valences insinuated by its explicit form as if it were a symbol. In his poetic treatises, Gaston Bachelard claimed that only irreverent reveries were able to present objects of study in their full potency.¹¹ Bachelard asked himself: what is water, earth, salt, wine, blood, as hollow totalities? And once we uncover the complex set of myths associated with these elements, how should we describe them without essentializing relations or dissolving their lifelike qualities?¹² In our case, I would ask: what is the fart, how does it “resound” in a sort of coherent whole, and how might we, holding no academic prejudice, dive into that sonority? In what sense is the sound of a fart capable of stressing a meta-experience (a sociability, let's say), unlike, for example, that of a burp?

As I have argued, various phenomena, audible or not, surround a fart (and so too the fart joke and the fart *qua* joke), living in-between flatulent occasions, in the internal, pre-fart fermentations of the intestine and in the external, post-fart restrictions of the community. A fart is caused by an irritation of the body, which stages hostility against invading particles, substances that are alien to itself or that saturate its capacity to the point of provoking pain and eventual incontinence. It brews between psychochemical deflations and as a reaction to foreign vectors, to an Inside-Outside (or body-world) compression, as if the self was corrupted by some sort of parasite that distended it to its limits. The fart is what is beyond the body, what it

⁹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Connecticut: Martino Fine Books, 2014).

¹⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, 2014.

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *Apoética do espaço* (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2008).

¹² Bachelard, *Apoética do espaço*, 2008.

releases when it is squeezed by external reality.¹³ Its inevitable association with faecal matter and with the symbolic darkness of detritus¹⁴ might help to explain why it is almost universally reviled:¹⁵ in some Amazonian tribes, flatulence is a sign of the companionship of harmful spirits, that must be responded to with a complex ritual of spitting and coughing to dispel the maladroitness;¹⁶ Berbers may be compelled to suicide if they are caught farting in public, so strong is the taboo of farting.¹⁷ While, according to Benjamin Franklin's satirical essay *Fart Proudly*, it is the foul scent and the breach of personal space that makes farts inexcusable in various cultures, others¹⁸ speculate about an instinctive biological apparatus against attributes of the fart like its diminishing of sniffing capacity, flammability and closeness to organic decomposition and rottenness (and perhaps even, on a larger scale, its environmental damage).

An early historiography of the comic value of flatulence could be traced by looking at the runes of literature. Fart jokes are overcoded there, forming a sedimentary pocket dissociated from the moral worries of contemporary urbanites. Indeed, canonical geniuses the size of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Twain have all wandered with their art into the anomalous territory of fart jokes. The first of these illuminating icons, possibly the master of the fart joke, would have to be Aristophanes, whose play *The Clouds* repositioned, against Socrates' methodical irony, a geology of scatological consciousness that closely resembles Cage's dictum: no dialectics, just farts. Aristophanes is also notable for later influencing the works of first-tier jesters like Rabelais, Swift and Sterne in their integration of scatological vulgarity into the highest form of literary craftsmanship. In Rabelais' *Pantagruel*, a metaphysics of nourishment and gluttony outlines the explosiveness of farts, human organs reorganized into a heat bomb of stoic gaiety. In Swift's *The Benefit of Farting Explained*, a kind of pro-fart manifesto and farting manual *avant la lettre*, the many categories of flatulence are hierarchized according to their social and medical uses. Above all, the fart is for these writers a biopolitical emancipatory tool of sorts, against which no coercion sticks, no gravity stands.

Apart from the cultural canon, though, fart jokes or funny uses for the fart are prominent in the popular folklore of various geographies. The world's first joke book, the *Philogelos*, a compendium collected by Hierocles and Philagrius in the 4th century Greece, already indicates the comical richness of the fart and its historically marked uses. Fart jokes are abundant in the book: some of them might even go back to the first

¹³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966).

¹⁴ Gilbert Durand, *As estruturas antropológicas do imaginário* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2012).

¹⁵ Bell, "Silent but deadly: Farting across cultures," 2014.

¹⁶ Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁷ See Bell, "Silent but deadly: Farting across cultures," 2014. See also: Jim Dawson, *Who Cut the Cheese?: A Cultural History of the Fart* (Berkeley, Calif: Ten Speed Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Dawson, *Who Cut the Cheese?*, 1998.

jokes ever recorded, in Sumeria, 1900 BC.¹⁹ Fart jokes are not a forged or newly established tradition, then: a brief archaeology of concepts should demonstrate the spectral presence of the fart joke in popular customs. The drolleries drawn in the marginalia of Medieval manuscripts—including songbooks such as the *Cambrai Chansonnier* (1542)—would often include farting figures.²⁰ Court jesters and clowns are also common figures of the Medieval worldview, permeated by a carnivalesque *ethos* not foreign to the realm of the comical.²¹ In terms of popular music, uses for the fart as a theme appear in the English catches of the 17th century.²² English composer and publisher John Playford’s infamous catch club, founded in 1649, met in private homes and was thoroughly against the Puritans’ prohibitions, so it was able to employ numerous fart jokes and other scatological references.²³ Another extremely famous catch singer, who would entertain five monarchs and be highly praised by Alexander Pope, Thomas D’Urfey’s most well-known composition was about a queen who farted.²⁴



To the left, the “bonnacon,” an imaginary animal that was very present in Medieval bestiaries, believed to defend itself by farting. To the right, a figure from the *Chansonnier*. Public domain.

With the emergence of music-halls and vaudeville in the United States and the renewed popularity of circus shows in the 19th century, fart jokes that circulated as popular creed for a long time would soon be recorded, stored and distributed as the historical accounts they constitute. Sound and visual media are particularly important to this passage, the annals of stand-up comedy being directly tied to the success of

¹⁹ Carroll, *Humour*, 2014.

²⁰ See images below. See also: Valerie Allen, *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²¹ See note above.

²² Ian Pittaway, “A brief history of farting in early music and literature,” *Early Music Muse*, July 27, 2016, <https://earlymusicmuse.com/a-brief-history-of-farting/>.

²³ A contemporary reconstitution of Playford’s writings can be found on YouTube: TheNightWatchMusic, “The Night Watch: My Lady and her Mayd (William Ellis) 1652,” YouTube, July 27, 2016, video, 02:07, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=po9WpDJXkM&ab_channel=TheNightWatchMusic

²⁴ TheNightWatchMusic, “The Night Watch.” See also: Dawson, *Who Cut the Cheese?*, 1998.

albums like Bill Cosby's *To Russell, My Brother, Whom I Slept With* and Richard Pryor's *Live on the Sunset Strip*. The fart jokes these LP formats stored and the mass culture they integrated and enabled are somewhat interchangeable: mass culture is precisely the elevation of the sort of fart joke that freely roamed in the Middle Ages into a proper art form, by way of such humorous personae as that of Cosby and Pryor (and before them, legendary comedic actors like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and the Marx brothers). To some degree, the invention of modernity is the officialization of humor as a form of rhetoric, as newspaper cartoonists and caricaturists started to release latent libidinal currents, long constrained by Victorian morality, upon the public discourse. The absurd and the bizarre will then provide new conceptual categories for art, in opposition to the Kantian dogma of the “beautiful and sublime.” One should also not understate how capitalism, industrialism and the general acceleration of social life in the 19th and 20th century also retrospectively affected the small intestine so as to unintentionally produce more farts,²⁵ and thus more fart jokes.

On the other hand, the institutionalization of the joke will also bring up an awareness of the fart and its comic potential. In the beginning of the 20th century, as the vanguardists were spreading their manifestos across Europe, a curious French entertainer would present himself as a self-declared “flatulist,” that is, a performer of flatulence. Joseph Pujol called his character Le Pétomane, which literally translates to “fart-maniac,” and was able to mesmerise Parisian audiences with the absolute control of his anus, playing a variety of songs (including the French national anthem) through a specially-designed rubber tube, like a reversed ass-trumpet.²⁶ Not only did Pujol manage to make a lot of money with his act, which became a staple at the famous Moulin Rouge cabaret, but at one point he became close to important personalities like the Dadaist painters and Sigmund Freud. In this case, however, it would seem like it is not that fart sounds are funny because farts are made through the use of funny sounds, but that they are funny because they are inevitably associated with farts, which are already funny in themselves. While certainly part of a larger context where fart sounds are nothing if not mere components of a wider social assemblage, Le Pétomane's art makes one wonder: what constitutes a funny sound? And how does the sound of the fart relate to its apparently inherent comicality?

FART AS SOCIAL NOISE

It is not surprising that Mozart's proneness to scatology dumbfounds music scholars two hundred years later.²⁷ Described as “bizarre” and “obscene,” some of Mozart's compositions, such as *Difficile lectu* and *Lass froh uns sein*, originally included coarse references and coprophilic language, with a focus on butts and defecation, and at least

²⁵ Dawson, *Who Cut the Cheese?*, 1998.

²⁶ Dawson, 1998.

²⁷ David Schroeder, *Mozart in Revolt: Strategies of Resistance, Mischief, and Deception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

six direct references to farts.²⁸ A common “academic quick fix” for this perplexing fact is the speculation that Mozart had Tourette Syndrome, something that would make sense if only Tourette appeared in his writing. However, the clinical consensus is that it does not, and yet thirty-nine of Mozart’s letters included this sort of lewd material.²⁹ The same evasive behavior that falls upon interpretations of Mozart’s scatology falls upon researchers of James Joyce in relation to the letters to Nora Barnacle, which clearly indicate the greatest Irish writer had a fart fetish. While many other artists freely explored the boundaries of hygiene and associated themselves with an idea of dirt or with this type of borderline pleasure, as Laporte³⁰ demonstrates, the arousal caused by a passion for farts is too embarrassing and can damage an artist’s reputation. The same reason why Mozart’s lyrics had to be changed from “lick me in the arse nice and clean” to “nothing refreshes me more than wine,”³¹ then, might explain why the “fart” tag in SoundCloud shows a total of only 48 results. Because scatology is cringe, and we feel an intense need to hide its emergence.

Scatology is even more repressed in social situations than some steady taboos like mental illness and violent fetishism.³² An explanation for this social aversion to poop and flatulence might have to do with the easy association between a lack in physiological and a lack in moral control: incontinence is an all-encompassing attribute. Accordingly, whenever a fart “resounds,” it is against a very strict code of social restriction against that rattling pulsation. Fart is a forced penetration of the shared environment of a community, a forced invagination of the nose and ears of others—just as much as humorous affections are forced infiltrations of the mind, against which the flesh has little power. Like monstrous apparitions, farts cannot “resound” without disturbing the monotonic system of civility. They are, like Kristeva’s “abjection”³³ or Latour’s “quasi-objects,”³⁴ hybrids that destroy the illusion of pure bodily autonomy and separation between nature and culture. As I stated above, what precedes and what succeeds a fart in the social and political dimensions is in no way removed from what the sound of a fart is. The way the participants of a society regulate a fart, the way they deal with it, gives clues to the models of homogenization of life with which this society is imbued as well as to the internal pluriverse of a fart’s sonic meaning. How do your ears react to absorbing the sound of a constellation of fecal coliforms being expelled in a subway train? How do you behave when someone lets a brutal blow break the silence of a church mass? What happens to a girl when she farts loudly at her bourgeois family’s dinner table?

No wonder the social repression of fart sounds (and the inevitable wave of

²⁸ Benjamin Simkin, “Mozart’s Scatological Disorder,” *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 305, no. 6868 (1992): 1563-1567.

²⁹ Simkin, “Mozart’s Scatological Disorder,” 1563-1567.

³⁰ Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

³¹ Simkin, 1992.

³² Laporte, *History of Shit*, 2000.

³³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

³⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

constipation that ensues) are much more related to women and their social positionality than to men. The whole first half of Swift’s *Benefits of Farting* is dedicated to this specific confluence of femininity and flatulence, drawing a misogynistic image of, in his words, “the fairer sex” and its “distempers,” allegedly caused by farts “not adequately vented.”³⁵ The old and ever present notion that “girls don’t fart,” still a current joke in some internet circles,³⁶ is an obvious case of gendered disciplining, part of a larger attempt to qualify women as antiseptic, docile, fragile pets, while men would be intractable, crude and wild animals. That is, this type of inequality in dealing with health and cleanliness only serves to reinforce the idea that women are transparent subjects malleable to social pressures whereas men cannot be educated to do better, being thus freed from the responsibility of acting in any way other than their “spontaneous” urges. Even beyond that, Mary Douglas³⁷ shows how there is a link between the purity prescribed to women and a broader notion of order—attacks on a supposed ideal of cleanliness, such as a fart, would also pose a danger in a broader sense, to the whole established law of men.

A fart sound is then an attack on governmentality in two senses: by bringing up the taboo implied by the very imposition of a silence or of a structured auditory ambience, and by tackling social control in a wider sense, posing a danger to a retroactive ideal of purity. One might then begin to understand the position of fart sounds in Western art music, as Western art music is itself predicated on a similar ideal of order. The Greek goddess Harmonia, upon which the concept of “harmony” ended up based, is a symbol of concord and the cosmic balance of contrasting elements that the Greeks valued in their art. It is hard to imagine Harmonia farting. On the other hand, her sister and opposite Discordia, symbol of confusion and intentional malevolence, could be easily pictured farting, even if only to provoke the other gods. In fact, in Discordianism, the pataphysical religion created in 1963 by Greg Hill (aka Malaclypse the Younger) and Kerry Wendell Thornley (aka Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst), and which venerates Discordia, jokes and scatology are as much part of the dogma as saints and prophecies. So of course farts will not belong to the realm of music and Harmonia but to its diametric polar: noise and Discordia.

Music is precisely the control of certain frequencies so as to intentionally build pleasant patterns and relations between them. Noise, on the contrary, is the unwanted disruption of a sonic arrangement, giving rise to an aleatoricity that fractures the homogeneity of the soundscape.³⁸ If theorists of cybernetics have posed that noise is an inevitable loss of information and definition in a negentropic process of self-regulation,³⁹ in the most recent debates over noise as a conceptual category⁴⁰ it

³⁵ Jonathan Swift, *The Benefit of Farting Explained* (London: Alma Classics, 2016).

³⁶ The 2008 CollegeHumor sketch “Why Girls Don’t Fart” now has over 35 million views: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxxsP7VWVN8&ab_channel=CollegeHumor.

³⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966.

³⁸ R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1993).

³⁹ Claude Shannon, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Cecile Malaspina, *An Epistemology of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

becomes synonymous with an ontological variation at the edge of normativity, with turbulence, complexity, and ambiguous consistency. A limitless, perpetual space in motion, fog of all mixtures, ground to all figures, noise is the intermediary state before a metamorphosis, when one thing is yet two, three, hundreds.⁴¹ In French from which its English etymology is derived, “noise” also retains an implication of conflict, of quarrel. For Hegarty,⁴² the separation between music and noise is tied to such a moral divide: while music is any noise that is deemed acceptable, noise compels any music to a destructive collision. A fart is a form of both social and musical noise: it is no coincidence that a misplayed note is called “a bum note.” This means the note does not belong to the harmonic or melodic order that is external to it, it is not acceptable in its context. The bum note is a “sound out of place”⁴³ exactly like dirt is matter out of place,⁴⁴ or like a fart is out of place in a social situation or in a classical piece. It should not be there and feels immediately wrong to our ears.



A detail of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* shows a notation written on a man's butt. Public domain.

Besides being a metaphor for the way a fart resounds in the social sphere, noise is also closely linked to farts—and to dirt more generally—by way of the history of punk rock and its particular sensibility. The aesthetics of punk demand that one plays music as if it was a big fart, in terms of social adherence. Instead of promoting a transcendent contemplation, punk music needs to be as uncomfortable as possible, and its catharsis

⁴¹ Michel Serres and Lawrence R. Schehr, “Noise,” *Substance* 12, no. 3 (1983): 48–60.

⁴² Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

⁴³ Hugh Pickering and Tom Rice, “Noise as ‘Sound Out of Place:’ Investigating the Links Between Mary Douglas’ Work on Dirt and Sound Studies Research,” *Journal of Sonic Studies* 14, 2017.

⁴⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966.

is a physical discharge not unlike that diarrhetic prolapse announced by a wet fart. The punk creed will open the doors of culture to a myriad of fart explorers in a deep sense: radically transgressive punk icon GG Allin not only intended to “sound like shit,” but quite literally shat and farted on his audience, taking performance and stage interaction beyond any perceived ethical limit. Punk inverts the pseudo-religious basis of classical art, with its camouflaged solar symbolism,⁴⁵ into a glorification of a negative, nocturnal disintegration of morals. Not the celebration of life, but of death in its concentrated aspect: debris. The equivocation between scatology and eschatology is here reanimated, excrement being a tool for the communication of an apocalyptic aura. This is apparent not only in the use of dirt as a thematic axis in punk songs and as part of punk’s lifestyle and fashion, but also in punk’s lo-fi production, which lets mistakes and noises come through the track instead of silencing them in a studio. In *Songs About Fucking* and other works of American producer Steve Albini, most notably, the engineering of sound is not focused on the purification of the recorded material, but on the manipulation of the artistic potential of glitches and failures.⁴⁶

In terms of literal fart sounds, however, punk did not commit very much to scatology, both because farts are not a particularly flexible sonic resource and because their work could then take on a humorous tone that punk musicians were generally trying to avoid. When farts sounds are not abominable to our ears, like punk intended its scatology to be, they are simply silly, childish, even somewhat innocent. If the vulgar aspect of flatulence impedes it from being integrated to Western art music, its juvenile comicality also does not help at all. This makes it so that a flatulist like Le Pétomane is never considered a musician first and foremost, but at best a clown with a sonic verve. Within a talent show, a musician with artistic intentions for the use of fart sounds would only appear as an eccentric character doing a ridiculous comedy sketch.⁴⁷ It should not be strange to ask ourselves, however, if this is not a constraint to the way the human body can be used to produce sounds. We are already past the point of considering the voice as the only manner of instrumentalizing the body.⁴⁸ Heterodox applications for the corporeal sounds have also been put into place by avant-garde musicians like Hermeto Pascoal, whose composition *Brincando de Corpo e Alma* uses stomach vibrations, chewing and belly-banging as musical devices. The body farts, it burps and sneezes; restricting the use of these sounds in performance seems rather narrow-minded, prohibitive of what a body can do and become.

Prejudice in relation to the sound of farts may or may not impact the

⁴⁵ Durand, *As estruturas antropológicas*, 2012.

⁴⁶ Samantha Bennett, “Songs About Fucking: John Loder’s Southern Studios and the Construction of a Subversive Sonic Signature,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 2 (2017): 1–14.

⁴⁷ A good example of this happened in an edition of the television show *Britain’s Got Talent*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFLw8aH-M2w>. I would also like to highlight the first, semi-facetious comment of judge Simon Cowell after the presentation: “You are a disgusting creature.”

⁴⁸ John Baily, “Music and the Body,” *The World of Music* 37, no. 2 (1995): 11–30.

imagination of other fart-like sound effects and thus affect their usage too. Some heavy gain overdrive and fuzz pedals are known to verge into fartish oscillations, and recently a Chicago designer was able to sell a specialized fart pedal that transduces guitar inputs into a range of squeaky noises for a modicum \$165.⁴⁹ Modular synthesizers exploring low-pitch, long-tail, low-frequency square waves (below the 10 Hz range) can present the uneasy yet persistent density of fart sounds. In the same sense, bass fretting may create, deliberate or not, a fart-like buzzing, in case the mid-high presence is too prominent after a back pick-up slap—among jazz players, this is often called a “bass burp.” First-time jazz listeners will sometimes claim they cannot take the genre seriously because the double bass as well as the brass instruments common to jazz ensembles will make it all sound like a giant, orchestrated, convoluted flatulence.⁵⁰ In Dante’s *Inferno*, there is a description of farting as “using the ass as a trumpet,” and in fact by the time Dante was writing the book the Latin word *flatus* (the root of “flatulence”) also meant the specific musical sound that comes out of wind instruments. Nowadays, when a sound engineer wants to manufacture a fart sound for the soundtrack of a TV show, he or she will most likely use the sample of an out-of-tune trumpet or trombone, instead of an actual recording of a fart, because then the sound can create an analogy to the fart, evoke the fart from a distance, instead of posing it directly to the spectator's ear (for this could create an impromptu repulse).

Hence, procedures for the *production* of fart sounds involve technological and social affordances and expectations as much as procedures for the *erasure* of fart sounds. Of course, the body is itself a technology and is inseparably tangled up with technology,⁵¹ but the codification of noise (and the social noise of farts) into the binary flows of electrons of a media format allows for the meticulous extraction and elaboration of those noises. In terms of marketing spaces, the internet has the advantage of not transmitting smells from user to user, so farts spread in its virtual environments can be fully understood and experimented-with as mere sonic units. Sure, music provides a multisensory experience that supposes a degree of synesthesia, correspondence and interpenetration between the senses,⁵² so there will always be some trace of filthiness wedded to a fart sound, since a fart is the reflex of our excretory functions—this is certainly part of the reason why its creative use has not achieved mainstream status. Yet social media has greatly expanded the reach of fart sounds, and some internet-based flatulists like Mr. Methane are now more popular than Le Pétomane could have ever hoped to be. Additionally, TikTok and

⁴⁹ The Fart Pedal was crowdfunded online in the Kickstarter platform:
<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/stevegadlin/the-fart-pedal/description>.

⁵⁰ Khrushchev famously stated that jazz compelled him to fart (see: Priscilla Johnson, *Khrushchev and the Arts* [The Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965], 102), but it is not hard to find reports of similar experiences in online discussion forums:
<https://rateyourmusic.com/discussion/music/halp-cannot-get-into-jazz-sax-sounds-like-flatulence/1/>.

⁵¹ See: Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁵² See: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia da percepção* (São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2018).

Instagram have thrived off of fart endeavours, like the recent trend of using reverb microphones to amplify the gain and volume of dog farts (if the dog is asleep, this will often cause it to wake itself, in a tender and goofy scene—even if slightly irritating for the animal). This abstract consonance between noise and technology, suggested by various theorists,⁵³ might help to explain why asking Alexa to fart has become a moderately common happenstance.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

Unlike Prajapati Daksha, the Hindu god that burped 41 times after drinking the elixir of immortality and gave birth to many entities, the fart still has no mythology for itself, no base around which to found a proper cosmology. It would be wise to start patching this mistake to formulate a new philosophy of scatological forms based on the conceptual category of noise, or rather a new philosophy of noise based on the conceptual category of scatology. For flatulence is only funny insofar as they “resound” as a type of noise—an antithesis to thought, as Cage predicted—in the social, aesthetic, and bio-technical domains alike. If flatulence became inherently funny in Western culture, and if they are centered on an auditory signal in the first place, then the comic value of farts is necessarily tied to its sonic judgment and orientation, with clear consequences to current compositional (and musicological) paradigms. Rather than dispensing with the comicality of the fart sound, however, a more simple solution could be a further assimilation of whimsical motives and playful affections to committed intellectual practices, be it in music or in academia: less thinking, more farting. ▣

⁵³ See: Schafer, 1993; Hegarty, 2007.

⁵⁴ According to Amazon Brazil, there have been more than 1 million such cases only in Brazil in 2021: Amazon (@Amazon.com.br), “’Alexa, solte um pum,’ foi solicitado +1 milhão de vezes...,” Twitter, November 9, 2021, <https://twitter.com/amazonBR/status/1457857905441460230>.

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