

Sound studies have found in noise a subject of deep fascination that cuts across disciplinary boundaries of history, anthropology, music, literature, media studies, philosophy, urban studies, and studies of science and technology. Noise is a crucial element of communicational and cultural networks, a hyperproductive quality of musical aesthetics, an excessive term of affective perception, and a key metaphor for the incommensurable paradoxes of modernity. "Wherever we are," John Cage famously claimed, "what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating" (1961: 3). We hear noise everywhere. But what do we listen to when we listen to noise? What kinds of noises does "noise" make?

The Latin root of the word is *nausea*, from the Greek root *naus* for ship. The reference to seasickness captures the basic disorientation of the term: noise is a context of sensory experience, but also a moving subject of circulation, of sound and listening, that emerges in the process of navigating the world and its differences. Evaluations of noisiness vary widely between cultures and historical contexts: for example, many languages do not distinguish noise as a general category of sound.¹ Words like the Indonesian *rame* instead describe the clamorous noisiness of social life in festivals and marketplaces and imply a healthy and lively atmosphere. Noise is associated with public sociality and carnivalesque performances (e.g., *charivari*) that playfully disturb the norms of everyday life. But as a keynote sound of industrial development and mechanization, noise is also recognized for its anti-social and physiologically damaging effects. It is inherent in technological mediations of sound, but it is also considered accidental and meaningless.

Noise is an essentially relational concept. It can only take on meaning by signifying something else, but it must remain incommensurably different from that thing that we do know and understand. Even in the fundamentally relativistic context of musical aesthetics, noise is defined by its mutual exclusion from the category of music. Yet noise is inherent in all musical sounds and their mediated reproductions; it has been used as musical material and can even be considered a musical genre in itself. Noise is a productive term of many other dialectical binaries of aurality, each of which outlines a different field of social knowledge. But as a discrete subject in itself, noise resists interpretation. It is the static on the radio; the mass of unbeautiful sounds that surrounds the island of musical aesthetics; the clutter of the modern world that indexes the lost sounds of nature; the chaos that resists social order; the unintegrated entities that exist beyond culture.

Noise was explicitly developed as a sound aesthetic in modern music, even as its radical incommensurability with existing musical structures was reiterated throughout the twentieth century (Ross 2007). Italian futurist Luigi Russolo (1883–1947) is often credited as the first to bring noise into music, creating a set of noise instruments (*intonarumori*) to orchestrate the speed and power of industry, warfare, and the city, which he famously rhapsodized in his 1913 manifesto *The Art of Noises*. But Russolo's exemplary influence did not "emancipate" noise into musical history. Instead, the category of noise has continued to symbolize excessive, emergent, and unexplored materialities of sound, even as noise-sounds have become increasingly crucial in musical composition. Noise has been invoked as a modern aesthetic threshold from Henry Cowell to Edgard Varèse to Cage to *musique concrète* and "sound art" (Kahn 1999; Cox and Warner 2004; LaBelle 2006; Van Nort 2006; Licht 2007; Demers 2010; Rodgers 2010; Voeglin 2010). Noise-sounds have become definitive for the timbres of contemporary popular music through the widespread use of effects, synthesizers, samplers, and studio recording techniques (Gracyk 1996; Zak 2001; Moorefield 2005). But the aesthetics of noise also test the

centers of musical coherence against the margins of circulation. Musical styles are scaled according to their noisiness, from the least noisy (i.e., smooth jazz, new age) to the noisiest (and therefore least acceptable) form (i.e., heavy metal, techno).

A specific genre called has "Noise" developed since the 1980s among a transnational group of practitioners and fans who used the term to describe an extreme strain of electronic music (Hegarty 2007; Bailey 2009; Cain 2009; Atton 2011; Goddard et al. 2013) whose circulation between Japan and North America gave rise to the subcategory "Japanoise" (Novak 2013).² Since Noise intentionally lacks most features of musical sound and structure (tone, rhythm, structural development, etc.), the noisiness of Noise was difficult to qualify. But recordings are nonetheless evaluated as "good" or "bad" examples of Noise, described as deliberate products of distant music scenes, and aestheticized through particular aspects of their sound. Listeners identify their own affective responses—that a noise, for example, felt "harsh"—as aesthetic terms that help construct Noise as a global network of underground producers and fans. Through their attention to the special differences of noise-sounds, Noise was named and circulated as a capitalized musical genre (albeit a contested and endlessly emergent one), which was further endorsed by subgenres based on sound aesthetics (e.g., "Harsh Noise") and assignments of cultural origin (e.g., "Japanoise").

Noise also provides a kind of metadata that informs listeners about the context of reproduction. The level and quality of noise reveals whether the source of a phone call or radio transmission is local or long-distance, or how and when a recording was made: a sonic "glitch" can expose the contingencies of inscription and playback, even in the purportedly "lossless" transparency of digital media (Evans 2005; Chun 2006; Kelley 2009; Krapp 2011).³ Noise also describes extraneous distortions and fluctuations in the electronic transmission, inscription, or storage of images, films, television, and video (e.g., "snow"); as in sound, visual noise has been harnessed for aesthetic productions. As such, noise becomes a signifying property of informal or underground media distribution, from Nigerian bootleg video markets to DIY networks of U.S. "independent" music (Larkin 2008; Novak 2011).

Noise is strongly associated with the built environments of industrial cities. While the term can refer to sounds of nature (e.g., thunder and lightning, animal sounds: Rath 2003), noise is usually understood as a technologically produced field of sound, which is superimposed on a natural or social environment. In ecological terms, noise is "pollution" that degrades the sonic balance of nature. But before its harmful subliminal effects can be corrected, noise must first be located and brought back into human consciousness from its ubiquitous but subliminal position in the modern soundscape. Although R. Murray Schafer used decibel meters to measure and map noise in urban soundscapes through pure volume, he further distinguished the effects of noise in the artificial mechanical continuities of background "lo-fi" noises (such as the "flatline" noise of highway traffic or the hum of a refrigerator) that blocked the discrete and transient "hi-fi" signals of nature and community.⁴ For Schafer, it is not attention that brings noise into being but an entrained "deafness" to its debilitating presence: "noises are the sounds we have learned to ignore" (1994 [1977]).⁵

As noise was brought further into social consciousness, its recognition contributed to the inexorable fragmentation and privatization of urban space, through zoning, sonic surveillance, and acoustic shielding from public noise (Smilor 1977; Thompson 2002). But although projects of noise abatement helped to establish scientific measurements of noise and legal standards of loudness, regulations typically failed or were found unenforceable. Instead, noise was increasingly characterized as an inevitable byproduct of technological progress.

The creative force of noise is not only essential to the politics of cultural identity but also in developing alternatives to capitalism. Jacques Attali influentially described noise as a "prophetic" form of difference, which precedes the disciplining "sacrifice" of musical "channelization." As a revolutionary project of disorder, noise reveals the coercive repetitions of musical commodification: "change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society," and because of this, "power has always listened to it with fascination" (Attali 1985: 5, 6). Noise also circulates as a critique of globalization. As a symbol of irreducible cultural difference that persists within a universalist socioeconomic agenda, noise inscribes the incommensurabilities of multicultural liberalism (Povinelli 2000). But

In technological media, noise is a subject of excess and disruption. Information theory established a semiotic difference between meaningful signal and accidental noise (Shannon and Weaver 1949). Noise was the byproduct of technological reproduction that interfered with reception of message (i.e., static in a radio transmission, distortion over a loudspeaker or hiss on magnetic tape). The "signal-to-noise" ratio identified the balance of interpretable to uninterpretable sound, in which noise should be reduced as much as possible to maximize the efficiency of communication. But even in its pure distinction from signal, the presence of noise, sound communication is far from meaningless. Attention to noise helps listeners to perceive authentic relationships with technologically mediated sound and resituate music and speech in new "discourse network" (Altman 1992; Kittler 1992; Sterne 2003; Clarke 2010; Mills 2011).

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