

Even if one has no desire to hear his intuitions, it is impossible to avoid seeing this painting as a reminder that in the past the signification and role of music were conceived differently than they are today. Brueghel cries out that music, and all noises in general, are stakes in games of power. Their forms, sources, and roles have changed along with and by means of the changes in systems of power. Music trapped in the commodity is no longer ritualistic. Its code and original usage have been destroyed; with money, another code emerges, a simulacrum of the first and a foundation for new powers.

To establish a political economy of music, then, we must first rediscover this old code, decipher its meaning, in order to see how it was transformed by exchange into a use-value—a retrograde form, an impoverished memory of its ritual nature, the functional mode of the decline of the religious.

A sign: music has always been one. But it has been a deritualized, autonomous, commercial sign for too short a time for the study of its production and enjoyment to begin there. The political economy of a mode of human production cannot be elaborated without first inquiring into the social utility it had before being turned into a commodity, without first inquiring into the production of its usage. For example, the political economy of the chair presupposes an analysis of its usage, conducted prior to the study of its conditions of production. A priori, the usage of a chair is simple.²⁶ But the usage of music is obviously much more hermetic than that of the chair, even if there are more than enough pseudo-specialists around who still confine themselves to defining its usage by the pleasure derived from listening to it. In fact, it has no usage in itself, but rather a social meaning expressed in a code relating to the sound matter music fashions and the systems of power it serves. The concepts of political economy, designed to analyze the material world, are totally unsuited to this. They are blown apart by the study of the production and usage of signs.

To my way of thinking, and this is what I would like to establish in this chapter, the fundamental status of music must be deciphered through that of noise:

Noise is a weapon and music, primordially, is the formation, domestication, and ritualization of that weapon as a simulacrum of ritual murder.

In the succeeding chapters, I would like to demonstrate that music, after becoming a source of wealth, foreshadowed the destruction of codes; that is, I would like to show what capitalism—private or State—did to music and the noises of the body, and how it channeled, controlled, and repressed discourse and attempted to destroy meaning. Beyond that, I would like to ascertain what subversive renaissance is now under way.²⁷

The Space of Music: From Sacrificial Code to Use-Value

*Before exchange, we see that music fulfills a very precise function in social organization, according to a code I shall call *sacrificial*. Codification of this kind*

gives music a meaning, an operability beyond its own syntax, because it inscribes music within the very power that produces society.

All music can be defined as noise given form according to a code (in other words, according to rules of arrangement and laws of succession, in a limited space, a space of sounds) that is theoretically knowable by the listener. Listening to music is to receive a message. Nevertheless, music cannot be equated with a language. Quite unlike the words of a language—which refer to a signified—music, though it has a precise operability, never has a stable reference to a code of the linguistic type. It is not “a myth coded in sounds instead of words,” but rather a “language without meaning.”²⁸ It has neither meaning nor finality.

Thus when Saussure wants to fit music into the double structure of language, by distinguishing within it a signifier and a signified, he superimposes a semantic system on sounds: “We do not see what prevents a given idea from being associated with a succession of sounds”; Derrida implicitly does the same thing when he writes that “there is no music before language.” This reasoning is not simply a theoretical hypothesis. For if it were accurate, music would not only necessarily be a transcribable, thus readable, discourse; but in addition all music separate from speech would have to be judged “degenerate” (Rousseau).²⁹

To my mind, the origin of music should not be sought in linguistic communication. Of course, the drum and song have long been carriers of linguistic meaning. But there is no convincing theory of music as language. The attempts that have been made in that direction are no more than camouflages for the lamest kind of naturalism or the most mundane kind of pedantry. The musical message has no meaning, even if one artificially assigns a (necessarily rudimentary) signification to certain sounds, a move that is almost always associated with a hierarchical discourse.

In fact, the signification of music is far more complex. Although the value of a sound, like that of a phoneme, is determined by its relations with other sounds, it is, more than that, a relation embedded in a specific culture; the “meaning” of the musical message is expressed in a global fashion, in its operability, and not in the juxtaposed signification of each sound element.

Use-Value and the Sacrificial Code

The operability of music precedes its entry into the market economy, its transformation into use-value—the appropriation of “the materials of nature in a form adapted to [man’s] needs.”³⁰ Its primary function does not depend on the quantity of labor expended on it, but on its mysterious appositeness to a code of power, the way in which it participates in the crystallization of social organization in an order. I would like to show that this function is ritual in nature, in other words that music, prior to all commercial exchange, *creates political order because it is a minor form of sacrifice*. In the space of noise, it *symbolically signifies the channeling of violence and the imaginary, the ritualization of a murder*

substituted for the general violence, the affirmation that a society is possible if the imaginary of individuals is sublimated.

This function of music gradually dissolves when the locus of music changes, when people begin to listen to it in silence and exchange it for money. There then emerges a battle for the purchase and sale of power, a *political economy*.

This hypothesis has many ramifications. It will be developed throughout the book; in this chapter, I will state it only in enough detail to give a glimpse of its theoretical range. The reader will perhaps have recognized it as an application in the domain of music of René Girard's broader discovery of the role of ritual sacrifice as a political channeler of and substitute for the general violence. It will be recalled that Girard demonstrated that the majority of ancient societies lived in terror of identity; this fear created a desire to imitate, it created rivalry, and thus an uncontrolled violence that spread like a plague—the "essential violence." By his account, in order to counteract this destruction of systems of social differences, all of these societies established powers, political or religious, whose role it was to block this dissemination of violence through the designation of a scapegoat. The sacrifice, real or symbolic, of the scapegoat polarized all of the potential violence, recreating differences, a hierarchy, an order, a stable society. Whence the peculiar status of the sacrificial victim, at once excluded and worshipped. Power and Submission. God and Nothingness.

In order to show that, before the commodity, music was a simulacrum of the sacrifice of the Scapegoat, and that it shared the same function, we must establish two things:

First, that *noise is violence*: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder.

Second, that *music is a channelization of noise*, and therefore a simulacrum of the sacrifice. It is thus a sublimation, an exacerbation of the imaginary, at the same time as the creation of social order and political integration.

The theory of noise's endowment with form, of its encoding, of the way in which it is experienced in primitive societies, should thus precede and accompany the study of the artifact that is the the musical work, the artifact whose end-form is a sound-form that is the musical work.

The political economy of music should take as its point of departure the study of the material it highlights—noise—and its meaning at the time of the origin of mankind.

Noise, Simulacrum of Murder

A noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission. A resonance is a set of simultaneous, pure sounds of determined frequency and differing intensity. Noise, then, does not exist in itself, but only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed: emitter, transmitter,