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CONFRONTING THE OTHERNESS OF NOISE RUSSOLO, CAGE AND RATMAN

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Abstract

Noise has such a negative connotation that even the word conjures up feelings tension, anxiety and fear. This is due to the fact that it often symbolizes danger. In this context, noise represents the *other*. Nevertheless, many artists began to use noise as an art material. One of its earliest advocates was Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo, and he worked with this *otherness* calling for new sonorities as documented in his manifesto *The Art of Noises*. He constructed noise instruments, which he called *intonarumori* for this purpose. However, the music they produced was not accepted in the context of the concert hall. Later, twentieth-century composer, John Cage collaborated with other disciplines pairing his noise-music with the visual arts. He created compositions made from the noises of everyday objects, which he often revealed in his performances. The visuals provided an anchor, which allowed audiences to gain new perspectives on the aspects of noise. This labor then permitted other artists to use and evolve the form by exploring the rich possibilities of noise. This was witnessed in Gilad Ratman's *The Workshop*, presented at the 2013 Venice Biennale. Here, Ratman has taken up the gauntlet laid out by Cage in pairing noise-music with visual elements in the form of installation art. Audiences witnessed video panels, sculptural elements in architectural space connected with his noise composition. Therefore, the pairing of noise-music with the visual arts aids to reconcile the *otherness* of noise thus bringing new understandings and possibilities for artistic expression.

Noise has such a negative connotation that even the word conjures up feelings tension, anxiety and even fear. This is due to the fact that it often symbolizes danger and discord. In this context, noise represents the *other*. Nevertheless, many artists beginning

with Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo worked with this *otherness* in order to create new sonorities. However, he was unsuccessful in elevating his compositions to the level of traditional Western music, so noise remained in *otherness*. Later, twentieth-century composer John Cage had a different approach to noise. In collaborating with other disciplines such as theater and dance, he paired his noise-music with the visual arts. This allowed audiences to gain new perspectives on the aspects of noise, by demystifying some of its *otherness*. This labor then allowed other artists to use and evolve the form by exploring the rich possibilities of noise. This was witnessed in Gilad Ratman's *The Workshop*, presented at the 2013 Venice Biennale. Here, Ratman has taken up the gauntlet laid out by Cage in pairing noise-music with visual elements, this time, in the form of installation art. Here, I will argue that Cage and Ratman are able to confront the fear and anxiety of noise by pairing it with the visual arts in order to bring a new understanding to the *otherness* of noise.

I will support this claim by contextualizing my point with the writings of artists and philosophers such as, Bowie, Cage, Kojève, Lacan, Levitin and Russolo. Russolo provides the foundation of noise-music elucidated through his manifesto. In attempting to tame noise, Russolo engaged in a Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic as illustrated in the writings of Kojève. On the other hand, Lacan notes that the *other* is really the self, which is demonstrated through the mirror-phase. Therefore, this *otherness* of noise-music can teach much about one's identity. Bowie also supports this claim. Finally, the writings of Levitin will be used as support from a neurological standpoint.

Key Words

Before I continue, it is important to define some key terms. *Otherness* is an important concept in relation to noise. Kojève via Hegel, views the *other* as another person who is not the self, which is defined through the Master/Slave dialectic. On the other hand, for Lacan, the *other* is a projection of the ego, which is realized in the mirror-phase.

The self or subjectivity can be broadly defined. Andrew Bowie in his book *Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche*, suggests that, music contributes to its definition. Daniel Levitin concurs. In his book, *This Is Your Brain On Music*, he states, "Music and musical preferences become a mark of personal and group identity and of distinction" (232). Therefore, music plays an integral part in defining the self.

Which leads me to music, which is a complex term that has a broad range of definitions that vary amongst different cultures, but many aficionados would base their definition on the formal elements of traditional Western music, which include melody, harmony and rhythm. However, Cage expanded the definition by describing it as an organization of sound (3). This, along with the use of non-traditional instruments enriched music production.

A seemingly opposite term to music would be noise, and it is generally viewed as negative. Technically, noise is an aperiodic waveform, meaning that it is irregular. This signifies that it lacks a pattern and is thus, generally unpleasant to hear. Though, artists such as Russolo, Cage and Ratman viewed noise as a compositional material.

The form of Ratman's piece is installation, therefore, I find that it is necessary to spend some time on its definition. Installation art is an amalgam of mediums that could include: architecture, painting, photography, sculpture, video, sound, etc. arranged in a

meaningful manner by the artist. Claire Bishop in her book *Installation Art: A Critical History*, defines a key element of installation as immersion of the viewer in the work (6).

The viewer not only observes the work, but upon entering it, becomes a part of it.

Finally, this brings us to noise-music and its pairing with the visual arts as a means to foster a new understanding of the *otherness* of noise. In Ratman's installation, I will focus on how the understanding of the *otherness* is fostered through the auditory/visual experience and relate it to the work of Cage, but first a brief history of noise-music might prove helpful.

Noise-Music: A Brief History

The Italian Futurists made strides in the area of noise-music. Instead of viewing noise as a nuisance they were fascinated by it and began to use it as an art material. In 1913, Russolo published his manifesto *The Art of Noises*. In it he called for another means of music making. To this, he stated,

We must break out of this limited circle of sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds... We futurists have deeply loved and enjoyed the harmonies of the great masters. Beethoven and Wagner have stirred our nerves and hearts for many years. Now we have had enough of them, and we delight much more in combining in our thoughts the noises of trams, of automobile engines, of carriages and brawling crowds, than in hearing again the "Eroica" or the "Pastorale" (25).

This boredom and restlessness led Russolo to invent new tonalities to be played with his custom-built instruments called *intonarumori*. They were constructed of electronics, conical horns and various mechanical elements to produce new types of sonorities using

noise. He gave them colorful names that described their functions, for instance: *ululatori* (howlers), *rombatori* (roarers), *crepitori* (cracklers), *scoppiatori* (burststers), *gorgoliatoru* (gurglers), etc. (75). With them, he composed symphonies of noise-sounds.

Russolo gave the first concert of futurist music in 1914 with his *intonarumori*, and it ended in violence (Thorn 415). The compositions were too radical for the audiences of the day, and it overly challenged their understanding. However, it should be noted that this basic reaction was not entirely unwarranted.

Some deviation in music creates interest, but there are as expectations as Levitin notes by saying, “Most of us are very discriminating listeners, and when the composer gets the balance just slightly wrong, our expectations have been betrayed more than we can stand, and we switch radio stations, pull off the earphones, or just walk out of the room” (75). Or in the case of the Russolo, cause riot. However, Russolo laid the groundwork for other artists and composers like Cage.

Cage, like Russolo, found traditional compositional structures too confining, so he first became interested in the freedom of percussion music (Silverman 26). His performances later expanded to include everyday objects. There was also a theatricality to his pieces as noted by Peter Yates. He states that Cage was “a great showman as well as a great composer” (qtd. in Silverman 193). This proved that Cage’s music paired well with movement, and this led him to collaborate with dancers, choreographers and theater people who were appreciative for the accompaniment (Cage 86).

This theatricality can be witnessed in his piece *Water Walk*, 1959. The audience observed a stage full of objects including a grand piano, an electric fish, a bathtub, an iron pipe, a tape recorder, blenders, radios etc. In the performance, Cage walked between

these objects while keeping time with a stopwatch, sonically activating the objects as part of the composition. The visual paired with the noise-sounds fulfilled some of the audience's expectations, thus making the piece more accessible. Ratman's *The Workshop* does this in a contemporary context. But before embarking on the analysis of the work, I feel that it would be pertinent to first describe it.

The Workshop - The Experience

While walking through the *Giardini* on the grounds of the 2013 Venice Biennale, ambient music is heard while passing the Israeli pavilion, and it lures one inside. Then one encounters, a complex, two level installation with five channel HD video, sound and sculpture. On the first level, there is a life-sized video projection depicting a soundman working in front of a custom-built mixing console. He is apparently generating the music that is being heard through out the installation. A few moments later, as ones eyes adjust to the darkness, other objects become visible. These objects include: a hole in the middle of the floor, the actual mixing console enclosed in a glass case, and several clay busts with microphones embedded in them. The sculptures are situated in a darkened alcove next to a staircase, which leads to the second floor where three large-scale video projections are encountered. On the left, the participants of *The Workshop* are seen hiking through a darkened cave to emerge out of the hole witnessed on the first level. The right panel depicts an artist workshop where the participants fashion their clay likenesses and insert microphones.

The video progresses to show the participants vocalizing and even screaming into the microphones. The raw sound is not heard, but it can be assumed that these noises have been used as some of the compositional material in the noise-music emanating

throughout the installation. Upon turning to descend the stairs, the viewer sees the remaining video panel of the participants traversing the Israeli wilderness, and if one listens, the environmental sounds as well as the vocalizations emerge for brief moments in the music. Though out of order, a complete narrative of the piece can be constructed. Perhaps this disjointed experience further speaks of the fragmentation and anxiety that is experienced in the mirror-phase. But here, I will focus on the noise-music component and relate it to the visual elements as a means of reconciling the fear of the *other*.

Fear of the *otherness* of Noise

It is commonly accepted that humans fear what they don't understand, and much understanding is gained through vision. Aristotle notes this in his *Metaphysics* deeming sight to be the most important of the senses (book 1 part 1). But hearing provides much sensory data as well.

The auditory system is finely tuned and adds key information to our sensory perception. It should be noted that sight could be limiting, as it is directional, meaning that it is front dominant. Hearing is omni-directional; meaning that sound can be heard from all directions. This makes it an ideal early warning system, as danger is often heard before it is seen. Levitin explains this by saying, "The auditory startle is the fastest and arguably most important of our startle responses. This makes sense: In the world we live in, the sudden movement of an object-particularly a large one-causes an air disturbance" (185). He further explains that, "A vestigial or supplementary auditory system also appears to be in place involving the cerebellum. This preserves our ability to react quickly-emotionally and with movement-to potentially dangerous sounds" (185). These

“dangerous sounds” to which Levitin refers, humans would find loud, distasteful, and frightening, and it would produce a flight response to ensure one’s safety.

Therefore, in light of the perceived danger, a negative value judgment is placed on the term noise. Paul Hegarty in his book *Noise Music: A History* notes this by saying, “...noise happens to ‘me’, is beyond my control, and somehow exceeds my level of comfort with the soundworld I or we inhabit. In some way, noise threatens me, is part of the other I define myself against” (4). However, both Cage and Ratman attempt to explore and even reconcile this fissure in order to gain some control and understanding of noise. They do this by manipulating and composing with it. In addition, pairing it with visual elements aid the reconciliation of the *other* in an artistic mirror-phase.

Noise and the Mirror Phase

It is through the mirror-phase, that the subject realizes that the *other* s/he witnesses in the mirror is really the fragmented self. Lacan explains that, this phase begins from the age of six months and is an essential stage in defining the ego. The child in a state of dependence enjoys the perfect image in the mirror. When the child realizes that the image is actually him/herself, it causes anxiety. However, this is crucial to the development of subjectivity (622). Therefore, looking through the lens of Lacan, noise serves as a metaphor for the *otherness* of the fragmented self.

Ratman confronts the *otherness* of noise through a recreation of the mirror-phase in his installation. This is especially apparent on the video panel of the artist’s workshop on the second floor. The participants are seen screaming into the microphones embedded in their sculptural self-portraits, which represents the traumatic experience of self-realization. In other words, it illustrates the beginning of the separation from the *other* in

order to form one's identity. In the realization of the fragmented self, the participants express their anxiety through their actions depicted on the video screen. Though traumatic, the piece demonstrates an essential step in separation in order to develop the ego.

Manipulation, Control, Understanding, Subjectivity

As stated earlier, the chaotic nature of noise seems to be outside of our control and understanding. It masters us, and this is very reminiscent of Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic as illustrated by Kojève. He claims that the Master/Slave relationship is a necessary part of recognition in human culture. This means, the one willing to fight to the death takes on the role of Master. The other assumes the role of the Slave. This is necessary, as the Master needs to be recognized by the Slave. However, the Master is a static position, as he/she does not wish to lessen his/her status. The Slave is potentially dynamic (22). If the Slave overcomes his/her fear of death and commences to engage in a fight against the Master, the Slave could possibly elevate his/her status.

Russolo embodied the Master/Slave dialectic by attempting to control noise and then inject it into the concert hall. By harnessing and manipulating it with his *intonarumori*, he was able to gain a mastery over noise; however, he was unsuccessful in taking on the music establishment. Audiences refused to accept his compositions on the same level as traditional Western music. Levitin explains why. He notes that there is a strong preference on a neurological level for the consonance of Western music, and it seems to exist amongst all cultures (228). Therefore, a taste and understanding must be developed for dissonance. Artists such as Cage and Ratman sought this understanding in

the dissonance of noise. They too, like Russolo, manipulated and harnessed the material as an art medium but added visual elements as well to facilitate accessibility.

Ratman, I feel, takes this further by relating noise to subjectivity. Bowie notes this essential link between music and subjectivity by saying that music "...[enables] us better to *understand* aspects of ourselves which are not reducible to what can be objectively known and which are not to be written off as being merely inchoate feelings" (10). Therefore, the act of both creating and listening to music, especially new music, challenges us and helps us to better comprehend our identity.

Ratman confronts this directly by engaging in an audio/visual mirror-phase culminating in the realization that noise is part of both individual and collective human subjectivity. Sergio Edelsztein describes this in the work by stating, "Formally, this bunch of cables...and mixer render visible the system of connections that, more than merely transporting sound, links people and created a single sound piece, a common experience, a universal aesthetic statement" (34). Here we see and hear elements of both Russolo and Cage. From Russolo, Ratman's custom sound mixer can be equated to a modern day *intonarumore*, and from Cage, the installation acts as a sort of theater connecting more understandable visual elements to noise-music. The shaping of the noise into a more harmonious composition speaks both to the particular and universal aspects of subjectivity. The particular resides in the material that is generated by the individuals of *The Workshop*, and the universal is revealed in the culmination of sounds mixed into noise-music by the soundman and shared with the public. This promotes reconciliation between the subject and the *other* both in the context of individual and community identity. Furthermore, pairing the composition with the visual elements further aids this

process. Therefore, in viewing *The Workshop* through the lens of Lacan, its significance becomes clearer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, fear and anxiety arise when confronting the unknown aspects of the *other*. This is often due to misunderstandings. Here, it was demonstrated how Cage and Ratman, building on the work of Russolo, were able to confront the fear and anxiety caused by noise by controlling it in the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic. The result is noise-music. Furthermore, by pairing their compositions with the visual arts brings new understanding. Ratman achieves this through a recreation of the Lacanian mirror-phase demonstrating how noise-music helps to define subjectivity.

I feel that further exploration of auditory perception and *otherness* in the realm of art can provide rich new territories for expression. Noise gives the artist additional material with which to work. Furthermore, linking visual and auditory elements make for a richer experience that further immerses the viewer in the work. Noise provides a new means of expression for the artist making it an excellent means of aesthetically reconciling with the *other*.

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