Semiotics in Noise Music

[F0UN9a] Cultural Semiotics

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction of Noise Music ........................................................................................................... 3  
   a. ‘Noise’ vs. ‘music’ ......................................................................................................................... 3  
   b. History of Noise Music .................................................................................................................. 4  
   c. Indeterminacy and Performance in Noise Music ........................................................................... 6  
2. Application of Semiotic Models ....................................................................................................... 8  
   a. Saussure’s Semiology .................................................................................................................... 8  
   b. Klinkenberg’s Tetradic Sign Model ............................................................................................... 9  
   c. Greimas’ Semiotic Square ............................................................................................................ 10  
   d. Peirce’s Semiosis ......................................................................................................................... 14  
3. Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 17  
4. Bibliography ...................................................................................................................................... 18
1. Introduction of Noise Music

Noise music is a musical genre that features a fusion of traditional instruments and electronic sounds, recordings and machines. It is sometimes described as soundscape, for rhythm and structure are of minor importance. In this paper, I will discuss noise music as a problematic sign in a semiotic approach, given the ambiguity of the concepts of ‘noise’ and ‘music’. As noise music is usually less known to the public, following introduction should provide a general overview. Firstly, I will point out how the differences between ‘noise’ and ‘music’ are perceived by scholars. Secondly, I will give a short historical introduction on noise music and its current state as a music genre. Thirdly, I will discuss the importance of indeterminacy in performance for the long-standing success of noise music.

a. ‘Noise’ vs. ‘music’

In the word ‘noise music’ two opposite concepts of sound are united. ‘Music’ is perceived as desirable, harmonious and aesthetically pleasant, while ‘noise’ is seen as undesirable, chaotic and disruptive. Because of the constantly changing preference for certain musical elements depending on time and place (culturally and socially), it is hard to provide a suitable definition for the concept of ‘music’ (Nattiez, 1990), what makes it even harder to define ‘noise’. Moreover, the human voice and all musical instruments also contain noise as an important component of sound. Hence, “the point at which noise loses its noiseness and becomes meaning, music and signification” (Hegarty, 2001) is utterly vague and potentially non-existent. Or in other words, “noise is the ultimate ambiguity” (Collis, 2008).

Noise on itself, however, does carry a certain meaning. In electronics it is the irregular vibration of mechanical waves, compared to the periodical, structured pattern of what we call music. In communication systems a source of noise disturbs the transmission of useful information signals (Shannon, 1971). Several noise types can be observed, and the perception of noise differs as well. According to Roland Barthes (1985) noise can be perceived physiologically (feeling the vibrations) and psychologically (consciously aware of noise). In short, “(t)he trouble is that noises are never just sounds and the sounds they mask are never just sounds: they are also ideas of noise” (Kahn, 1999).
As noise elicits a physical reaction of pain (covering the ears for example), it is associated with violence, rebellion and the breaking of social norms. Music on the contrary is a tool to unify and solidify. Attali (1977) states: “(w)ith noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion.” What Attali does not point out is that noise can bring power, for it is significant in se: Those who choose noise over music bear the power of otherness for not belonging to the mainstream. The punks, for example, “(c)lothed in chaos, they produced Noise in the calmly orchestrated crisis of everyday life in the late 1970s – a noise which made (no) sense in exactly the same way and to exactly the same extent as a piece of avant-garde music” (Hebdige, 1979).

b. History of Noise Music

Considering what is said above, this is the point where noise music enters the scene. This music genre explores the boundaries between ‘music’ and ‘non-music’. It originated during the 1910s in Europe, influenced by Futurism and Dadaism, in particular by Luigi Russolo, an Italian futuristic composer, painter and builder of experimental musical instruments. In his manifest L’Arte dei Rumori (The Art of Noises, 1913) Russolo points out that noises are a crucial part of today’s civilization, for musical sound has reached its limits and has to be developed into the ‘the complete sound’, a complex and polyphone soundscape of infinite varying timbres. Especially industrial noises, sounds of the everyday urban environment we live in, must be imported in futurist music. As these noises are still perceived as unwanted, noise music is solely a matter of accustoming. Russolo predicts a future wherein the musical scene, and culture in general, is ruled by noise.

In this respect, Cassidy & Einbond rightly state that “(t)he problem with noise is that it is everything” (2013). This is supported by Kahn’s definition of sound (“sounds, voices and aurality”) and by avant-gardist artists who do not make any differentiation between ‘noise’ and ‘music’. To say it with the words of John Cage: “There is no sound, only music.” Cage is

1 Futurist Marinetti introduced the term ‘Bruitism’ which stands for noise music, noise making and sound poetry. Noise was presented as a view of life, a spontaneous and direct call for action. The Dada movement adopted ‘Bruitism’ as an abstract art, ergo disregarding the Futurist philosophy (Hülsenbeck, 1920).

2 Russolo built the Intonarumori (‘noise makers’), a group of acoustic instruments shaped as boxes with horns attached. He composed pieces for this noise orchestra and performed for the first time in 1914.
particularly known because of his work 4"33’, composed in 1952. Throughout the three movements and for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the performing artist does not produce a single sound. The performance is perceived as silence, although the concert hall is (and never will be) entirely silent: the piece is constituted of accidental sounds or surrounding noises. “In place of a concert the world intrudes, the world of all sound, something Cage tried to harness for music, so that the world could become musical” (Hegarty, 2008 in The Guardian).

At the same time, 4"33’ is an outstanding example of far-reaching indeterminacy, a term coined by Cage himself, and defined as “the ability of a piece to be performed in substantially different ways” (Pritchett, 1993). Indeterminacy will be discussed further in this paper in the context of performance.

The concept of noise music instigated by Russolo was further developed in Musique Concrète ³ (1940s) and Fluxus ⁴ (1960s). Various classical composers incorporated noise sounds ⁵ in their compositions (Varèse, Hindemith, Satie), while experimental musicians frequently made use of electronic noise. Where in the past only consonance was perceived as music, Schönberg’s dissonance and atonality of the twelve-tone technique made their way into modernist compositions. In popular music too, musicalized noise or unconventional sound was incorporated in songs (The Beatles, The Beach Boys, The Velvet Underground). During the 1980s rock music started to mix in noise sounds⁶, and influenced by no wave⁷, this resulted in the genre of noise rock. Lou Reed played an important role as a pioneer with his album Metal Machine Music in 1975. Noise rock in turn triggered genres like shoegaze, noise pop, Japanese noise and post-rock.

Noise music today is characterized by diversity and fusion. The genre expands in various subgenres and fusion genres like harsh noise, death industrial, glitch, power noise and

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³ The term ‘Musique Concrète’ was introduced by Pierre Schaeffer and refers to the incorporation of tape-recorded natural and surrounding sounds in a musical composition.
⁴ Fluxus, sometimes called Neo-Dadaism or Anti-art, is an intermedia performance art that often involves experimental music.
⁵ These are often called found sounds, analogous with the found object (objet trouvé). Sounds that are normally not considered music because of their non-music function (like noise) are incorporated in a musical work.
⁶ “Noise was gradually being accepted by rock musicians as a musical element that can be controlled” (Voorvelt, 2000 cited in Collis, 2008).
⁷ No wave (late 1970s – mid-1980s) was a punk subculture that rejected the popular and commercial new wave genre.
Nowadays, noise elements are most of the time incorporated in main musical genres like rock or metal. This is certainly the case in the West, while in Japan “pure” noise as a genre on itself still enjoys a certain popularity and influence. Japanese noise (or ‘Japanoise’) was introduced in Osaka during the late 1970s and peaked in the 1980s and 1990. Without fail, every noise music fan can list some Japanese noise bands like Merzbow (a.k.a. Akita Masami), Hanatarash, Boredoms, Melt-Banana or Hijōkaidan. According to Hegarty (2001), Japanoise has its roots in experimental rock, free jazz and contemporary classical music, as well as in traditional Japanese music. Today, new noise bands around the world emerge, every year noise music festivals are being organized\(^8\) and the noise scene still counts many fans. One of the explanations for this success is the indeterminacy of noise performances.

c. Indeterminacy and Performance in Noise Music

“Noise raises the question of an avant-garde as such. (...) It should be ahead, but it quickly dissipates as avant-garde, as it is accepted, recuperated, understood. Even to recognize something as avant-garde (or noise) is to reduce its noisiness, its disruption” (Hegarty, 2008). This is the problem that Smith (2005) sceptically recognizes as the “desperate but spectacular failure” of noise music when he refers to the mechanism of modernity absorbing artistic expressions and relocating them in consumer culture. Others as well regard the future of noise with pessimism, but those who solely judge by aesthetic values, fail to grasp the meaningfulness of noise. Considering Smith’s view, Hegarty (2007) states, ironically, “noise is all about failure”. According to Cascone (2000), “It is from the “failure” of digital technology that this new work has emerged”. Noise artists themselves who take a critical stance towards progress within the genre reject the commoditization Smith touched upon. Moreover, Klett and Gerber (2014) emphasize in their research, conducted by interviewing American noise practitioners, the experience of meaningfulness. Indeterminacy, as the central and most prominent feature of noise music, can be observed as the key to success: it enhances creativity, ensures an intimate relation between the performer and the audience (the community) and makes clear the uniqueness of the genre and its idiosyncratic interpretation of the concepts ‘noise’ and ‘music’.

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\(^8\) ‘No Fun Fest’, for example, is a three-day noise music festival.
According to Klett and Gerber, live performance plays a crucial and vital role. A cultural performance is defined by Alexander (2004) as “the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation” and by Hennion (2001) as “an actual phenomenon made by people in a temporal space”. The meaning-making noise performance, deprived of any distracting instrumentality, “becomes a direct conduit of interaction” with the audience.

Noise music is not subject to any formal musical structure, which invites the audience to participate and interact with the performing artist. Therefore, a noise performance differs drastically from any other musical performance and appears closer to an avant-garde act. When indeterminacy is perceived as the most important feature of noise music, it should not surprise that artists and audiences “devalue recorded media because of the possibilities for obfuscation”. The average noise fan essentially visits live performances and barely listens to CDs. There is also lack of a noise canon (Hegarty, 2008). Most of the time, noise practitioners perform alone. Each set takes only up to fifteen minutes, while most audiences stay for hours at a noise venue. This is due to the disappearance of a borderline between ‘backstage’ and ‘frontstage’: moments when no noise music is played (setting up instruments, artists chatting with spectators…) are also considered part of the performance. Another characteristic of the noise scene is the far-reaching openness. The noise audience tends to reject virtuosity (“mastery can lead to stagnation”, the absence of failure) and to prefer amateur performances, which brings forth egalitarianism and non-competitiveness. Highly valued is the creative exploration of the source of sound. The audiences are fairly small and often exist solely out of noise practitioners.

While Klett and Gerber sketch the impression of a cosy and peaceful performance nowadays, in Japan during the 1980s, the noise scene was notorious for its controversial and disturbing live shows. Especially the performances of Osaka-based band Hanatarash caused an uproar. Hanatarash made primarily use of heavy machinery and left the venue partly destroyed by a backhoe bulldozer at one performance. Before being forbidden to perform, other infamous shows included cutting a cat in half with a knife, attempting to throw a molotov cocktail and the front man almost cutting off his own legs with a circular saw. Hanatarash translated their violent noise sound into a distorted and demolishing performance.
2. Application of Semiotic Models

Noise music is regarded as a ‘complex sign’. Its meaning is subjective, constituted by culture and hard to define. As was explained in the introduction, it appears that the signification of ‘music’ is inherently divergent to the signification of ‘noise music’. According to Peirce (1931), “we think only in signs”, which makes it clear that the application of various semiotic models are needed to enlighten this concept (Chandler, 2007).

a. Saussure’s Semiology

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was a Swiss linguist, particularly working in the field of structuralism. He was the founding father of French semiotics, or ‘semiology’. According to Saussure, signs are double or dyadic and exist out of a signifier (sound image) and a signified (concept or mental image) (fig. 1). This system can also be applied to non-verbal signs. If we take a look at noise music, the signifier is ‘noise’ (sound) which is interpreted as a ‘music genre’ (fig. 2).

Of course, the term ‘noise’ in Saussure’s sign system also requires some explanation. In this case, it would imply ‘a mix of electronic sounds and musical instruments that disregards the traditional structure of what is perceived as music’. It is at the same time ambiguous because two (traditional) opposites, ‘noise’ and ‘music’ are inextricably linked. Although noise and music belong both to the domain of ‘sound’, the sign of noise music is still ambiguous: here noise is not perceived as a ‘bother’, something repulsive and undesirable, but as a specific music genre. In other words, it shifts towards a different paradigm, the paradigm of fine arts.
The sign of noise music is relational and differential – it is defined by what it is not. What we experience as music or noise is based on convention and relies heavily on cultural and historical thought. Godt (2005) offers following definition of music:

“(1) Unwanted sound is noise. (2) Music is humanly organized sound, (3) organized with intent (4) into a recognizable aesthetic entity (5) as a musical communication (6) directed from a maker (7) to a known or unforeseen listener, (8) publicly through the medium of a performer, (9) or privately by a performer as listener. (10) As far as I know, ethnologists have never found a human society that does not make music.”

Requirements that are problematic for noise music are (1), (4) and (5). Unwanted and unappealing sound is transformed into a sound performance of which creativity, performance and indeterminacy is far more important than any aesthetic purpose. In that respect, noise music is more likely connected to modern performance art. Is it even music?, we wonder, as Godt states “I know it is not prudent to disagree with those who wrap themselves in the mantle of avant-garde, but I don’t hesitate to declare that such exercises are not music”. Furthermore, Grant (2003) suggests “that there is a definitive difference between “experimental music” and other forms of contemporary composition”. He points out that there is “a change in the dominant mode of signification from the symbolic to the indexical\(^9\)”, which means that it draws attention to the concept of music as a “social practice” itself rather than to its aesthetical content and symbolical significance. It questions the “traditional” characteristics of music. Hence, the Saussurean model interprets ‘noise music’ as a ‘music genre’, given the resemblance with other music genres as a humanly organized sound medium being communicated from a maker to an audience with the intent to create meaning.

b. Klinkenberg’s Tetradic Sign Model

Jean-Marie Klinkenberg (*1944) is a Belgian semiotician and linguist. He expanded the sign theory of Saussure to four elements: the stimulus (the physical signal), the signifier (the model of which stimulus is a manifestation), the signified (the context, either logical or

\(^9\) The term ‘index’ was first coined by Peirce, and “designates a special kind of sign, which has a direct causal link to the referent but may not have any visual resemblance to it” (Furuhatata, 2009). In the case of experimental music, it is about the lack of audible resemblance.
psychological) and the referent (what we actually mean when we use this symbol) (fig. 3). The dotted line indicates that there is no direct, but an arbitrary relation between the stimulus and the referent (Signosemio).

The noise sound we use here as a sign is physically perceived. This particular sound misses, unlike sound we conventionally comprehend as ‘music’, any kind of harmony or controlled rhythm, and is produced by human beings by means of (electronic or musical) instruments. In contrast with aesthetically appealing sounds, we call it ‘noise’. We learn that this sound is part of a performance, intended to convey meaning. As the purpose belongs to the domain of fine arts, it is classified as a music genre (and sometimes as avant-garde art, cf. supra).

### c. Greimas’ Semiotic Square

Algirdas Julien Greimas’ semiotic square (or rather, rectangle) visualizes a certain concept by determining the relation to its opposite and contrary meaning (see fig. 5). The semiotic square was inspired by Aristotle’s square of opposition and is applicable to a wide range of terms like concepts\(^{10}\), objects\(^{11}\) or narratives\(^{12}\). Since its introduction in 1966, it has been a popular tool for studying complex or vague signs. Nevertheless, opinions about the advantages of the semiotic square are divided among semioticians. Jonathan Culler, for example, doubts Greimas’ “reliance on oppositions” (Corso, 2014).

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\(^{10}\) e.g. consumption values (Floch, 2001)
\(^{11}\) e.g. toys (Fleming, 1996)
\(^{12}\) e.g. Charles Dickens’ Hard Times (Jameson, 1972)
Term A and term B are binary contraries (‘the complex axis or term’) and when contradicted defined as term not-A and term not-B (together the neutral axis or term’). Greimas calls these ‘schemas’. Combining term A and term not-B or term B and term not-A results through implication in positive or negative deixes. The diagonal dimensions of the term and their contradiction are optional and unnamed.

I attempted to apply the semiotic square to the concept of noise music (see fig. 6). As was stated in the introductory chapter of this paper, noise music is contrary itself, leaving us to indicate ‘music’ as term A and ‘noise’ as term B. But what is music exactly? According to Thomson, it is constructed from basic elements such as rhythm, melody and harmony (Erickson, 1957). These parameters can be separately manipulated. Rhythm is defined as ‘a strong, regular repeated pattern of movement or sound’ (Oxford Dictionary) in its most rudimentary form. Melody is a mix of pitch and rhythm, harmony is the combination of pitches or chords. As long as the sound is disturbing or unwanted, these elements can also be considered noise. The neighbours playing loud metal music late at night, for example. Or the
ticking sound of a clock, which can be a real distraction when you need to concentrate on something. In that sense, whether a certain sound is interpreted as music or noise, always depends on the context.

White (1976) adds ‘sound’ as a parameter for music, including timbre, pitch, intensity and duration (Owen, 2000). ‘Sound’ is in the application of the semiotic square above perceived as the combination of ‘not-music’ and ‘not-noise’ on the neutral axis. Indeed, sound covers the whole spectrum of audibility. Footsteps are rhythmic and interpretable in different ways or contexts. For many African tribes, for example, it is part of a musical performance. During a classical concert, on the contrary, footsteps are perceived as disruptive noise. We can say that particular sounds, once introduced in the musical paradigm, are accepted as music. What sets music really apart from pure noise is a contextual matter.

Merriam (1964) researched on the field of ethnomusicology and contributes the aspects of sound, concept and behaviour to music. The definition of music is dynamic and bound to societal factors.

“One of the most important of such concepts is the distinction, implied or real, made between music on the one hand, and noise, or non-music, on the other; this is basic to the understanding of music in any society. It is logical to assume that if no distinction can be made there can be no such thing as music, for either all sound will be music or no sound at all will be music and thus music cannot exist. Further, what is considered to be music or non-music sound determines the nature of music in any given society. If one group accepts the sound of the wind in the trees as music and another does not, or if one group accepts the croaking of frogs and the other denies it as music, it is evident that the concepts of what music is or is not must differ widely and must distinctively shape music sound. (…)The problem of the distinction between music and non-music is one of high importance in the understanding of any music system. It delimits what is musical in the society, and it shapes not only music itself but even stories about music and concepts of the origin of music.”

On that account, “(m)usic is made of socially accepted patterns of sounds” (Farnsworth, 1958). The supply of music genres is so diversified today that socially accepted patterns have never

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13 Rhythm in general proves to be a very important feature in traditional African music. “Every step we take is rhythm. Every word we speak is rhythm. Everything is rhythm” (a quote from a documentary about Malinke music (Roebers & Leeuwenberg, 2010).

14 This is reflected in the more extended definition of Godt (cf. supra).
been as wide-ranging. The differentiation between music and noise happens therefore mostly on a subjective base, influenced by culture and education. One can easily consider well-established music genres such as death metal or dubstep as noise when not exposed to it very often or not personally attracted to it. For the same reason, many Western people will not like Chinese opera singing or Japanese gagaku the first time they hear it, although these are performed with traditional voice techniques and instruments. This is what I indicate as ‘real music’: it is the subjective interpretation of sound elements. Vice-versa, ‘real noise’ is the personal rejection of noises unfitted in a musical context of one’s liking. Umberto Eco (1977) points out that music is highly open for interpretation and therefore inextricably connected with the perceiving subject. In that way, the social and cultural context of the perceiver creates an “openness” which obviates any form of objectivity (Kessler & Puhl, 2004).

The concept of ‘noise music’ originated from all forms of avant-gardist performance. Its purpose was mainly to create a new ‘sound’ and to make an artistic statement. Still, noise music nowadays is very hard to like; in the first place because noise artists select most of the time only those noise sounds that are in all contexts repulsive and unappealing. Harsh electronic sounds, violent screaming, crackles and hisses… Noise music lacks rhythm, melody and harmony. Nevertheless, it uses sound, and it is presented as a musical concept. Since I prefer to stick with Merriam’s view of music as featuring a sound, concept and behaviour, noise music can actually be regarded as a fully-fledged music genre. The context is the same, the content and actual sound, on the contrary, is completely different (see fig. 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of music</th>
<th>Possible in ‘noise’?</th>
<th>Element of ‘noise music’?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rhythm</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>melody</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harmony</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sound</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concept</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behaviour</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 7: schematization of three theories on the elements of music, applied to the concepts of ‘noise’ and ‘noise music’.
d. Peirce’s Semiosis

The American mathematician and philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce (1893-1914) is known as the founding father of pragmatism, a philosophical tradition that attributes meaning to a certain statement or idea only if there are observable practical consequences. According to Peirce, “logic is formal semiotic” (1931). He developed a triadic sign relation in which the relationship between the ‘sign’ or ‘interpretamen’, the ‘object’ and the ‘interpretant’ are defined as ‘semiosis’ (see fig. 8).

The ‘interpretamen’ represents something that refers to an aspect of reality, the ‘object’. The sign is interpreted by the ‘interpretant’ and functions as a new ‘sign’. By doing so, the triadic sign relation becomes a perpetual process. It has to be noted, however, that meaning is not fixed: it transforms over time and place and there can be multiple interpretants.

![Fig. 8: Peirce’s semiosis](image)

![Fig. 9: Peirce’s semiosis applied to the concept of ‘noise music’](image)
As shown in the application of Peirce’s semiosis here above (see fig. 9), the sign which we eventually will interpret as noise music, is a noise sound. We are culturally used to interpret this sound as unwanted. In this context, however, we notice that noise sound is deliberately produced by one or more ‘noise artists’. They make use of an electronic device, sometimes combined with traditional instruments, vocal fragments or unconventional sound. The artists appear to be totally immersed in their production of noise sounds, which is psychologically perceived by the artists and, optionally, by a public. As a result, this noise sound meets the requirements to count as a ‘music’ concept, according to Merriam’s definition (cf. supra).

“But noise music acts as if it could be noise, as if it can stay outside of time, and as if it can participate in the stately time of musical progression and change, in the same way that it acts as if were music (performances, works, recordings, bands) and as if it were noise (disobeying or exceeding ‘acceptable’ musical practice).” (Hegarty, 2008)

Nevertheless, the approach is so different and requires some explanation. Grant (2003) points out that in traditional ‘music’ sounds of birdsong or waterfalls and such – “which have unmistakable aural characteristics” – are musically imitated and therefore “mediated, indeed mitigated” instead of being directly integrated in the work.

“But once imitation becomes a formal organization of noise, then the imitation is, by necessity, impressionistic. The music doesn’t sound exactly like the real noise but gives an impression of it (. . .). And once we’re talking impressions we’re talking conventions, agreements to hear certain musical combinations.” (Frith, 1996)

According to musical conventions, the sea sounds like broken piano chords (Debussy, La Mer), thunder like timpani rolls and brass (Wagner, Das Rheingold), birdsong like a coloratura soprano (Stravinsky, Le Rossignol); a feeling of love is evoked by a slow, passionate and emotional theme song, and we know something scary is going to happen in the movie if we hear ominous, mysterious music. These onomatopoetic sounds are preferred over the original ones because they are performed as ‘real music’ and can be easily manipulated according to the desired sound. Noise music, on the other hand, simply sounds like what it is: noise. Sound is presented in its purest, rawest form. It is not a metaphor for another sound, nor does it endeavour to evoke a certain feeling or scene. In this respect, traditional forms of music tend to ‘represent’, experimental music – and noise music in particular – ‘present’.
We realize that the noise sound we hear is produced on purpose in a context similar to the context of ‘music’. Still, we are not yet certain about the significance of noise and we need to examine its characteristics first. Up till now, we can consider these noise sounds as the crucial elements of an **artistic performance**. Unlike avant-garde artists, noise musicians address sound as the principal component of their work. At the same time, they share the background of experimental arts. To experiment with sounds means to actively engage in the practice of exploring literally every possible sound. **Creativity** is highly valued among noise artists and surpasses ‘normal musical’ standards such as virtuosity, accuracy, emotion et cetera. Indeed, noise music is based on failure (cf. supra).

Noise music cannot be written down; there exists no system such as musical notation for noise sounds. There is, however, no need to develop something like that, for the reason that the main strength of noise music lies in its **indeterminacy**. A noise work is not created in order to be reproduced. Every sound is anticipated but not predicted by the artist himself because the exploration of noise sound happens during the performance. The artist feels inspired by the moment. Hence, interaction with the public enhances indeterminacy as well.

“Making Noise means freedom to create in Alexander’s\textsuperscript{15} sense of liminal space, free from constraints of tradition and the ‘right way’ to create. The demotion of instrumentality means sound becomes a direct conduit of interaction.” (Klett & Gerber, 2014)

For the same reason, recordings are regarded as peripheral. There is no exemplary noise work, never mind a noise canon to master or listen to.

With indeterminacy in noise music we recognize a certain **reaction against the traditional ‘music’ scene**. As became clear when Greimas’ semiotic square was applied, noise music do not comply with any of the ‘musical’ parameters. In that way, it seeks to question the concept of ‘music’. Just like avant-garde, it expresses rejection of this well-established definition of music as aesthetically appealing and strictly determined.

“The noise is the important part: it is a rejection of the primacy of transmission of acceptable signal, it is something that seeks to not be recognized as valid. It does not try to renew, but to undermine, transgress rather than subvert.” (Hegarty, 2008)

Noise music is - almost ironically - presented as a music genre to call attention to this gap of definition and perception. It belongs to the world of music for its greatest interest lies in the performance and exploration of sound. Not only sound us humans like to brush up, embellish and imitate, but all sounds, with a preference for the unappealing ones. It conveys meaning based on creativity, interaction with the noise community and indeterminacy.

3. Conclusion

In 2008, the documentary People Who Do Noise (Brain Phreek) interviewed several noise artists in Portland, Oregon. The documentary portrays the features of noise music as we have discussed by means of semiotic models.

Noise artists realize the difference with ‘mainstream’ music genres, but do not want to persuade people to ‘get into’ noise. Creativity, personal input and a profound interest in sound prioritize over skills.

“People react negatively to noise or say that anybody can do it, you know, I feel like kinda that is part of the point. Anybody can do it.”

“If you don’t like it, there is plenty of other music on the radio.”

“It’s something based on experience. Something you’ve actively engaged in, that’s absorbed you, that’s totally around you. (...) Somehow it goes inside of you and you make sense of it.”

Some are rather reluctant to define noise music as a music genre, others think of it as the most radical form of music nowadays.

“It pretty much loses the definition of music. It’s just, I think, music is intentional sound. (...) I think of it more in general as experimental music.”

“Noise is the most punk rock music ever. The current version. The most radical.”

“I think my work is almost exclusively fuelled by this interest of what happens if you play things in the wrong way.”

Noise music is a complex sign and requires some explanation before we can understand why it even exists. Nevertheless, it is not regarded in a very serious way by its creators.

“But when you really look at it, and take a good gaze at it, it's just so incredibly funny but it's not the kind of humor you can explain to someone, you know, it's the humor of the insane.”

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The ‘semiosphere of music’, when applied to Lotman’s theory (2005). The discussion of this semiotic model was left out, because it would address the concepts of ‘noise’ and ‘music’ which we have already discussed at length throughout this paper.
4. Bibliography


