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sa' e 'escuta de si' realizado em conjunto com a compositora brasileira Valéria Bonafé. Em ambos eu gostaria de enfatizar a conexão entre a ideia de comunidade como espaço para a formação de diferenças e a questão da escuta como exercício de alteridade. A escuta é aqui desdobrada em diversos significados para dar conta não apenas das relações entre o ouvinte e a música, mas também das conexões que emergem da prática musical em relação ao que está fora da própria música. Para isso parto de dois argumentos, um ligado ao processo de formação de uma coletividade (Basu, 2014; Bartleet & Higgins, 2018) e outro ligado ao entendimento da escuta como ato político (Souza-Lima, 2018; Gautier, 2014). O primeiro projeto diz respeito à Sonora, uma rede voltada para questões de gênero na música, em que diversas ações instauram espaços de fala e de escuta a partir de articulações coletivas. O senso de comunidade a partir da convivência regular e extensiva dos participantes nas diversas ações da rede, expandem a escuta do seu lugar estético, para um contexto ético. O segundo refere-se à exploração da ideia de conversa como método alternativo para a apresentação e reflexão sobre trabalhos artísticos. Durante um ano, eu e Valéria Bonafé conversamos regularmente a respeito de nossas práticas e de tudo que está no entorno delas. Consequentemente, passamos a conversar sobre a conversa, não como um objeto encerrado e cristalizado no passado, mas como um processo a ser refletido enquanto vivenciado. As duas ações, embora pareçam demasiadamente distintas para serem colocadas lado a lado, configuraram-se como tentativas de incorporar

a diferença a partir da alteridade e de usar a potência da ação coletiva para abrir espaço para as subjetividades. Percebi que, no tempo alongado de convívio e conversas, as mulheres se percebem, expressam, visualizam e compreendem não apenas em relação aos apagamentos a que estão sujeitas, mas às suas potências e às suas singularidades. Este texto descreve um exercício de escuta enquanto ação: trata-se de sistematizar os processos de escutar o outro, escutar a si e escutar os lugares. Em última instância, me refiro a uma tentativa de escutar minhas próprias escutas.

Comunicações #10

12 Abr – 11h30-13h

A SONOLOGIA DA RENASCENÇA

Cesar Marino Villavicencio Grossmann

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O florescimento da polifonia renascentista e o campo da Sonologia são comparados, expondo similaridades sócio-históricas que prepararam o terreno para o desenvolvimento de plataformas musicais criativas que abordam tanto a segunda metade do século XVI quanto a segunda metade do século XX na Europa ocidental como interlúdios na história que ofereceram condições especiais para a manifestação de uma arte rica e plural. Também, o uso de instrumentos da Renascença em composições antigas e contemporâneas é analisado, expondo a flexibilidade que eles têm em se adaptarem a novas estéticas.

“LO-FI” COMO LIMITE: HISTORICIZANDO A RELAÇÃO DISCURSO-AFETO NOS ANOS DE 1990

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“A gravação é lo-fi (quanto tempo vai precisar para que essa palavra seja soterrada?) como todo o inferno” (Joshua Brown, 1995, resenha do Elephantitus of the Night, de godheadSilo, para a Lolli-pop). Na passagem, um crítico de fanzine amador chamado Joshua Brown tenta capturar a indescritível força das gravações musicais de godheadSilo, uma banda pós-punk dos anos noventa. O fascínio de Brown pela singularidade do som de godheadSilo fica claro através de sua profanação (“all hell”). Ainda mais longe, a própria sintaxe de sua frase, interrompida por uma questão parentética, nos diz que este evento crítico ocupa um tipo de local-limite – não apenas o limite do aparato crítico pessoal de Brown, mas também um limite histórico mais geral: o limite da linguagem de capturar que palavras são, todavia, necessárias para aproximar. Esta apresentação reunirá semiótica e teoria dos afetos a fim de historicizar esse limite discursivo. A semiótica tem sido frequentemente concebida como aquilo que meramente captura afeto. Ao invés disso, vou considerar a força afetiva do próprio signo. Para esse fim, lerei uma seleção de escritos vernaculares sobre música através do conceito de “significante vazio” de Ernesto Laclau, como discutido no seu texto Emancipation(s) de 1996. Minha pesquisa de arquivo demonstra que, através dos anos de 1990, a palavra “lo-fi” apareceu, tornou-se moda na crítica de música popular e eventualmente saturou a cena musical. Em torno de 1995, a palavra penetrou a crítica musical

amadora na imprensa dos Estados Unidos, saturando excessivamente os textos de crítica ao ponto de ela quase perder seu significado. E ainda assim, a palavra “lo-fi” reteve e retém ambas as forças discursiva e afetiva. Eu sugiro que a situação do “lo-fi” exemplifica a ideia de “relação hegemônica” de Laclau, na qual um significante vazio passa a referir a uma completa ausência – neste caso, ausência de fidelidade. Música carrega uma intensidade forte o suficiente para romper com a linguagem, assim como a linguagem, por sua vez, estrutura a experiência de escuta. Esta apresentação, ao enfatizar a dimensão afetiva do discursivo, oferecerá novas formas de pensar sobre experiências intersubjetivas e compartilhadas de música e som.

NOVOS RUÍDOS, NOVAS VOZES

Martina Raponi

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Como uma artista interessada em Ruído e uma criança de pais surdos (CODA), eu abordarei o problema do ruído e da contracultura a partir do ponto de entrada da surdez e das vozes in-cultas (un-cultured). Em sociedades capacitistas (ableist), a voz é um produto cultural, e algumas vozes, percebidas como “outras”, falhas, “ruidosas”, podem descerrar discursos relacionados aos espaços sônicos compartilhados, interrupções e inclusões. A paisagem sonora é aqui descrita como um ambiente social e político e os corpos nela imersos são considerados de acordo com todo o espectro de suas capacidades, para além da escuta, nos termos da ritmo-análise. O entendimento da paisagem sonora dentro dos limiares da au-

Lo-fi as Limit: Audio Quality and Empty Signifiers in the 1990s

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Abstract. This article examines the language used to describe audio recordings in the 1990s, with emphasis on popular music magazines in the United States, via Ernesto Laclau's theories of signification. Two levels of signification are examined: first, use of the word "lo-fi" to describe a disparate range of sounds, both as praise and critique; second, a broader practice of using the particular terms of audio quality (or fidelity) to describe social fullness and lack, in general. I conclude that "lo-fi," which was once used to signify resistance to "slickness," comes to signify slickness itself. Future work will examine the "raw" as a concept that escapes signification altogether.

Keywords: audio, fidelity, lo-fi, signification, music criticism, Ernesto Laclau

1. INTRODUCTION

"The recording is lo-fi (how long will it be until that word is beaten into the ground?) as all hell," wrote Joshua Brown in a fanzine called *Lollipop* (Brown, 1995). In this quotation, Brown uses the descriptor "lo-fi" to approximate the loud, rough character of the recordings of post-punk band godheadSi-lo, which he praises. He implies that this word is cliché or banal, even as he apparently finds it useful in approximating the band's sound. Perhaps most interesting is the syntax of his sentence—he interrupts his thought with a parenthetical aside, in which he asks when critics will finally stop using the word "lo-fi" to describe popular music.

During the years around 1995, the terms of audio fidelity were at a height of conflict. The word "lo-fi," or "low-fidelity," is one example of a term used to describe audio quality that appeared widely in this era, as I discuss further in my dissertation (Newton, forthcoming). As we can see, the word became so widespread that it was starting to seem overused, and critics were beginning to view it as meaningless.

In this article, I will apply ideas from Ernesto Laclau's 1996 text *Emancipation(s)* to the case of audio quality in this time, with the goal of contextualizing

then-contemporary understandings of that concept (Laclau, 1996). In particular, Laclau writes about the process of a sign, or a signifier, becoming emptied, which I suggest as a useful way of understanding the changing relationship between the word “lo-fi” and what it is thought to represent. Laclau focuses on the moment when something can no longer be represented by a sign at all—a point that he calls a “limit.” In his definition, a limit is something that, by definition, cannot be signified; a limit must show itself as an interruption or breakdown. He elsewhere calls this the “real,” the limit of signification, and here I will consider how “lo-fi” might mark such a limit.

2. RESISTING THE “SLICK”

In 1992, the record producer Rick Rubin said, in an interview with *Music Producers* magazine, “I hate technically slick records that have no sense of emotion” (quoted in Bennett, 2009). This was a widespread feeling in the 1990s. But what exactly *is* slickness? We might expect that the word has something to do with audio quality, the character of the recording that “mediates” the musical performance on record. Somewhat differently, though, Rubin defines slickness as something technical, and therefore counter to emotion. My forthcoming dissertation will argue that, in this era, slickness emerged as a structure that fetishizes signification—in other words, that fetishizes the representation *of* emotion, even at the expense of emotionality “itself.”

Music critics used the idea of “slickness,” a word associated with the particular issue of audio quality, to attribute inauthenticity to music more broadly. Slickness and related terms such as “polish” became a way of describing art that seemed bad in many ways: whether corporate, overproduced, or uninspired; dishonest or phony speech or action; or anything expensive, excessive, or ostentatious.

Many critics in this era claimed to prefer whatever was *not* slick, and therefore more authentic. For example, in 1993, Scott Lewis praises the poor audio quality of the band Skinny Puppy, using the terms of slickness in relief, recasting the band’s seeming weaknesses as positive traits. Of their “rough” sound, he writes, “I consider both ‘faults’ to be assets, as I find Skinny Puppy’s later material to be slick, boring dance music masquerading as avant-rock. Here, the rough edges show” (Lewis, 1993: 124). By contrasting the “rough” with the boring, “slick” music, he praises them.

Samantha Bennett offers one specific example of “slickness” when describing the song “Never Gonna Give You Up” by Rick Astley, released in 1987.

She calls it “shiny,” noting the delays added to tails of alternate vocal lines, a technical choice that enhances the effect for the listener. She elaborates:

Delays have been added to the tails of alternate vocal lines and the backing vocals have been ‘flown in’ from a Publison—a high-end sampler that could record longer samples in stereo. The result is a highly distinctive, ‘shiny,’ uber-produced record; a number one hit was ultimately achieved (Bennett, 2009).

By contrast, when describing “Gigantic” by Pixies, released in 1988, Bennett notes the overall “coarse” sound of the recording, suggesting this to be the result of minimal effects being applied to the tracks (Bennett, 2009: paragraph 40). In each of these cases, slickness is situated against the rough and coarse. As a result of this interest in the “raw,” the ethos of “lo-fi,” by the time Joshua Brown used the word, became a crucial mode for resisting or critiquing qualities associated with slickness, and a way of celebrating supposedly “authentic” emotional expression.

Widespread valorization of raw, lo-fi sounds was the manifestation of broader cultural trends that resisted whatever seemed too “polished.” For example, in 1994, Bill Meyer would go so far as to characterize his entire era as “over-polished,” framing the album *Vampire on Titus/Propellor* by Guided by Voices as a rare exception: “In a day of bloated, boring, over-polished discs, it is a joy to find one that is too short at 67 minutes” (Meyer, 1994: 109).

This phenomenon emerged alongside growing skepticism about the emergent “information highway” during Silicon Valley’s boom in the United States, among writers who resisted “mainstream” prioritization of productivity and efficiency. In the 1995 essay “Info Fetishism,” Doug Henwood uses the terms of slickness (here, “gloss”) to express concern about cultural shifts in urban production: “If you strip away the high-tech gloss, this future looks in many ways like the nineteenth century or even the early days of the Industrial Revolution,” he writes, suspicious that growth in technology industries, although a cause for celebration to some, should instead be interpreted as “frightful and immiserating” for the majority of the world’s workers (Henwood, 1996: 170). He examines urban economic trends that discouraged manufacturing and encouraged the development of the “postindustrial information economy,” one which employed “symbolic analysts,” immaterial laborers whose currency was data (Henwood, 1996: 165). Other contemporary texts such as *Bad Attitude: The Processed World Anthology*, a compendium of comics and essays from the 1980s, expressed similar views, with a similar tone (Carlsson and Leger, 1990).

In my dissertation, I will regard this suspicion toward the data economy as indicative of a broader shift in critical thought in the 1990s: an emergent belief that the usefulness of the analytic framework of signification (of slickness) had been exhausted. Below, my example will be the work of Ernesto Laclau, especially his concept of the “empty signifier.”

3. EMPTY SIGNIFIERS AND THE CHAIN OF EQUIVALENCE

In his 1996 book *Emancipation(s)*, Laclau defines an “empty signifier” as a signifier without a signified, one that points, within the process of signification, to the “discursive presence of its own limits” (Laclau, 1996: 36–37). First, he establishes that any given unit of signification involves both a logic of equivalence, and a logic of difference; he then argues that, within a system of empty signifiers, the logic of difference must be subverted so that unlike things can be understood to resemble one another.

In what Laclau calls a “chain of equivalence,” a series of signifieds come to be equivalent within the unit of signification, such that they can all be represented by the same signifier (Laclau, 1996: 57–58). In the case of audio quality in the 1990s, for example, disparate musical attributes (e.g., minimalist instrumentation, confessional songwriting, or low bandwidth audio storage) all come to be identifiable as “lo-fi.” As a result of this chain of equivalences, and of the emptying of the word/signifier “lo-fi” of its particularity, the word eventually comes to signify *not* any particular musical attribute, but rather authenticity more broadly. A critic can use the word “lo-fi” to describe music that they perceive, for whatever reason, as authentic.

Laclau argues that society generates a vocabulary of empty signifiers; a particular signifier’s content is drained of any particular meaning, so that it represents a totality. Something particular divests itself of particularity in order to represent an impossible object, an ideal. During this process of emptying, “temporary signifieds” emerge to fill the role of the emptied signifier, which Laclau suggests is the result of a political competition; politics is the process of a particular become universalized (Laclau, 1996: 40).

In the case of audio quality, I am interested not only in how “lo-fi” is emptied of its particularity in order to signify a range of disparate musical characteristics, but also in how the word “lo-fi” itself then comes to be taken as somehow representative of a social situation more broadly. For example, in 2009, Greg Milner would write, in his book *Perfecting Sound Forever*, “[O]urs is a lo-fi world” (Milner, 2009: 356), as though this “lo-fi” quality pervades

not only particular recordings but experience at large. Through what Laclau might call a “chain of equivalences,” the perceived authenticity of particular recordings is transferred to more general conditions of contemporary life.

4. THE HEGEMONIC RELATION

The next step in Laclau’s argument is the most important. After establishing the importance of empty signifiers, he argues that the presence of empty signifiers is a condition of a particular political phenomenon, hegemony. This situation produces instances of what he calls the *hegemonic relation*, “a relation by which a particular content becomes the signifier of the absent communitarian fullness” (Laclau, 1996: 43). This occurs, he argues, through a double movement. First, the communitarian and repressive forces in a system each become less differentiated and more general; secondly, this emptying of the particular makes it possible for the empty signifiers to emerge as signifiers of lack within the system (Laclau, 1996: 42).

At this step in the process, what once signified fullness in fact comes to signify the absence of fullness. Laclau uses the example of “order” in society. He writes, “The experience of a lack, of an absence of fullness in social relations, transforms ‘order’ into the signifier of an absent fullness” (Laclau, 1996: 60). He adds that other ideals (e.g., justice, freedom) can work in similar ways. I suggest that audio quality might be thought to also operate in a similar way.

For example, in an interview from 1997, the songwriter Elliott Smith was asked whether his music should be considered “lo-fi.” He responded:

Lo-fi’s just like anything else; it gets blown out. Lo-fi reminded people of certain things: You could do something that was cool without going into a ‘real’ studio. But then lo-fi got blown out just like every other box that people put themselves into, until it becomes, like, a fetish (Hunter, 1997).

Just a few years earlier, Joshua Brown had described godheadSilo’s sound as “lo-fi,” asking how much longer the term would retain its meaning. By 1997, apparently, Smith and probably other critics viewed the word as nothing but a “fetish.” Smith’s articulation here exemplifies Laclau’s idea of the hegemonic relation, whereby his experience of lack transforms the word “lo-fi” into a signifier *not* of authenticity, but of its opposite, inauthenticity.

Laclau argues that empty signifiers represent systematicity that is “constitutively unreachable”—a limit. By definition, the limit itself cannot be represented; it can only be shown as interruption (Laclau, 1996: 37). With this in mind, the quotation by Joshua Brown that opened this article takes on new resonance. His parenthetical aside appears explicitly as an interruption, marking the limit of not only the word “lo-fi,” but of contemporary critical tools for discussing music and sound more broadly. By 1997, Smith and others would see the word and identify it only with lack, with absence.

5. CONCLUSION

I have suggested that Ernesto Laclau’s ideas about signification, which are contemporary with the period of audio reproduction under discussion, offer one useful framework for theorizing the relationship between the particular and the universal in this time, in order to more deeply understand the changing relationship between language and the musical sounds that language captures.

In the history of recorded sound, “lo-fi” was once used to describe music recorded with less-than-optimal conditions or sound. In the early 1990s, this word rapidly became a signifier, instead, of *good* music—music that was understood as pure, genuine, or authentic. However, by the end of the decade, the word would again become a signifier of lack, of something less than a full potential. It then signified the very slickness that the word, just a few years earlier, was meant to dismiss.

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