

## The challenges of remote fieldwork in performing arts: avoid distorting Japanese culture through virtual and social media ethnography

The research at the issue of this paper aims to investigate how studying Japanese noise artists can provide us a clear understanding of a social engagement in response to social and political issues whose roots date back to the Edo *kabuki* and *matsuri*, studying how noise musicians and artists elaborated their artistic performances to create a specific message in which would reside a revolutionary or supportive intent according to the events and the different audiences' segments who are affected by specific social issues. Even if there is already existing literature that provides us historical insight into Japanese noise music, many studies are generally focused on researching such experimental music by starting from 1960s Japanese avant-garde with the climax of the anti-Japan-US security treaty movement<sup>1</sup>, with Group Ongaku's experimentations that laid the foundations for what became a real music genre in the late 1970s<sup>2</sup>. This could make us notice how references to traditional Japanese arts and festivals were not highlighted to explain spirituality and conscious awareness of noise that seeks to establish a link with the country's past through artistic reworking as can be seen in avant-garde artistic movements such as *Jikken Kōbō* and *angura* theatre<sup>3</sup>, thus covering a topic not extensively explored by the existing studies. By drawing closeness with other media and art forms to make neophytes understand the messages carried by noise performers and their relation with other subcultures, the research aims also to expand the timeline by focusing not only on already covered crisis periods like the 1990s post-bubble economy crisis and the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant disaster but also on the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, underlining the unusual relevance found by these alternative artists during a crisis and how noise performances can be reworked and adapted to different contexts and audiences to carry out a specific message.

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<sup>1</sup> In June 1960, the National Diet building in Tokyo was surrounded by hundreds of thousands of protestors on a daily basis in opposition to the revision of the 1952 Security Treaty, culminated with a battle between the radical left-wing student federation Zengakuren and the police on June 15<sup>th</sup>, in which a young female student was killed.

<sup>2</sup> It is by this period that emerged artists related to a music subgenre named Japanoise, a portmanteau of "Japanese and noise" (Novak, 2013), with a notably harsh performing style linked to punk subculture and industrial music, which will be followed in the 1990s by *onkyōkei*, translation for "reverberation of sound" (Cox and Warner, 2004), with a minimalistic style more related to free improvisation. However, it is important to notice how Japanese noise artists generally dislike being linked to a specific label, claiming that any artist has its own style that should not be enclosed into an etiquette.

<sup>3</sup> The artists of both art movements used to rework elements from foreign art movements like Dada and Surrealism with *kabuki* and *nō* to create a traditions' renewal or a reaction to a menace represented by the country's westernization.

As it currently stands, this thesis aims to provide answers to the following questions:

- How did noise aesthetics help to renew Japanese identity through art forms?
- How did transnational and transcultural reworking through noise create a sense of “Japaneseness”?
- How does Japanese noise fit and act in different political, cultural, and environmental contexts? And with which intent?
- Which relationship does Japanese noise have with underground movements and subcultures?
- Which role does Japanese noise play in times of crisis? And how relevant can its social implication be?

Given that only recently Japan reopened again its borders to students and researchers, it has been made sure that this research could be adapted to start the fieldwork remotely, relying on modern technologies to collect all the necessary qualitative and quantitative data. The data collection will be completed by secondary resources which mostly cover past periods like recordings and video performances, as well as scholarly sources like journals, book chapters, and monographs, to retrace the history of Japanese noise music and how has been employed in different case studies, seeking resources about other media and art forms like theatre, cinema, and literature to provide an accessible insight to an obscure counterculture by highlighting a social message through comparisons.

Considering the risks that may affect the research outcome by not being able to partially, if not totally, undertake in-person fieldwork in Japan, it shouldn't be disregarded the unfortunate event of providing a distorted or partial image of the researched topic without the usual physical presence required by ethnographic research. In this sense, modern technology can become a fundamental resource to break down the barriers created by the health emergency, helping the researchers to carry on their studies with tools that could be used for remote fieldwork. However, a lack of familiarity in the use of these resources can turn into a double-edged sword with which to reduce research on a foreign culture into a partial vision, nullifying the potential of technology in virtually crossing borders for academic purposes by misinterpreting the collected data or not collecting the required amount of data. Taking into account the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data that would rely on existing literature along with questionnaires, interviews, and data collected from internet resources, the expected challenges can be summarized as follows:

- How to overcome the challenges created by restrictions through remote fieldwork?
- Which tools and data can be used to undertake a functional virtual and social media ethnography for ethnomusicology research purposes?
- How modern technology can be helpful to keep in touch with a distant culture without affecting the understanding of it?

If it is kept in mind that the research at issue is focused on the performing arts, whose artists and performances have been greatly affected by the anti-COVID-19 restrictions, it is natural to think how the difficulties just mentioned end up intensifying with a topic whose physical presence is generally considered of fundamental importance. Thankfully, technology has reached such an advanced level that academic research continues to operate despite the closure of borders and the need to reduce travel to prevent health risks, providing vital to tackle the aforementioned issues.

As it is well-known, the internet provided the possibility to connect people all around the world, an aspect that has been strengthened even more over the years up to the establishment of real virtual communities. Nowadays, it is easy to find people gathering online thanks to the proliferation of social networks like Facebook and Reddit, allowing them to aggregate based on certain common interests to even create specific niche communities along the lines of the already existing webzines and web forums. These circumstances will provide the occasion to put into practice methods from social media ethnography (Postill and Pink, 2012) that will play a strong role to accomplish the research, providing the possibility to virtually keep in touch with fans and communities located in a different country, looking closely to their reaction towards specific news and releases and measuring them through questionnaires and interviews. These can be accomplished not only by using specific programs like Google Forms and SurveyMonkey, but also Q&A websites like Quora and Yahoo! Answers, which is still a trend among the Japanese users despite the service discontinued in the other countries, by writing questions related to my research study.

Speaking of interviews, it is easy to get it would be better doing a face-to-face interview to not lose all the hints served by body language that cannot be collected through a simple exchange of emails to fully understand the interviewee's mood. Even though this aspect risks not being fully understood without the physical contact and closeness, videoconferencing software like Zoom and Microsoft Teams provide not only

the possibility to see the physical reaction of the interviewee but also the option to record them through the interviewee's consent, making possible to rewatch and relisten the interview to properly collect both the body language and the spoken words. These programs can be also helpful in case the interviewer would prefer to be accompanied by an interpreter or a transcription to significantly reduce the time required to collect all the data that can be extrapolated from an interview.

About the artists' works and performances, while their music continued to be released with the proliferation of music streaming services like Spotify, whose streaming can be considered along with music sales rankings and the website Google Trends to analyze the shifting popularity in different time periods, it is undeniable that their performances suffered the impossibility to organize physical live events due to restrictions. Luckily, now the internet provides the possibility to create virtual events in which the audience can be gathered online to follow live concerts. In this sense, it can be undertaken a virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) by taking part in these events without being physically present, analyzing the gigs and the social intent carried by the performers, and reserving the opportunity to study the audience reaction in case such concerts would allow to users the option to write a comment as in video-sharing platforms like YouTube, Twitch, and Nico Nico Douga.

In conclusion, the challenging events created by the pandemic can be seen not only as an unfortunate event that prevented researchers and scholars from physically undertaking their research fieldwork but also an opportunity to restructure the academic research through modern technologies, relying on advanced tools and software to carry on studies and tackle the difficulties created by the lack of in-person fieldwork. The advanced level of the internet provides now to researchers the possibility to shape their ethnographic research by staying closer to virtual events and social media communities, intertwining both the observation of audiences' reaction to specific performers and the investigation activity made of interviews and questionnaires. While the physical presence will continue to play an important role for any research fieldwork, especially for underdeveloped countries that are still not completely networked through the internet, the technology allows now to complete remote fieldwork about a foreign country by minimizing the risk of collecting insufficient data and carrying on incomplete research even for topics that generally required in-person fieldwork like measuring the public engagement in live events. Thus, the researcher should continue to be informed about the proliferation of modern research tools and trained to properly use them, taking advantage of the possibility of crossing borders through technology.

## References

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