^{4.4} Affective semiosis of timbre: a theoretical formulation for an analysis of Brazilian indie rock sonorities

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× Abstract

Considering the central role that timbre exerts in indie rock and the social and economic disadvantages of Brazilian musicians, this paper aims to formulate a theoretical approach that will allow further analysis of how timbre affectively constitutes policies of singularization and of minor movements. It is proposed that timbre might be observed through an immanent communicational model. Following Deleuze's philosophy of difference, instead of a transmitter of emotions, timbre is presented both as an event (the result of a mixture of bodies) and as a transformed body (affect). The technical social machine that allows it to achieve its actual form, and the affective unfolding (semiosis) that expand timbre's virtuality must also be accounted for. As a result, this paper is expected to evidence semiotic machines that derive from timbre, in which precarity, cultural anthropophagy, *gambiarras* and other typical micropolitics of Brazilian indie rock are affectively expressed, engendering new sonic worlds.

Keywords: communication, affect, semiotics, timbre, indie rock.

This article presents the theoretical formulation of the research project *Timbre as affection in Brazilian² independent² rock: a semiotic approach*³, developed from observations carried out predominantly at concerts and festivals that took place in the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre between 2015 and 2018. Over these four years, we observed that the timbres produced by the artists depended not only on their technical and compositional skills as musicians, but also on a series of economic, aesthetic, social, political and language agents. Thus, we are interested in understanding how timbre is able to communicate policies of singularization and of minor movements, sociabilities and other types of affectivities and affection.

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^{2.} Indie rock has this name because it originally organized itself, without relations to major labels, emerging on British and American postpunk circuits. For an understanding of the genre, we suggest consulting, on British post-punk, Reynolds (2006); on British indie, Fonarow (2006); on North American *indie*, Azerrad (2002), Oakes (2009) and Shank (2014); on the centrality of timbre in indie rock, Blake (2012); on *indie* as a genre, Gumes (2011).

1. The context of Brazilian indie rock between 2015 and 2020

In her doctoral thesis, Caroline Govari Nunes (2020) starts from a consensus among popular music researchers to think about how musical genres are organized. In these works, usually backed by Cultural Studies perspectives, genres are based on sound, social, economic and affective aspects. Nunes adds musical scenes to this formula, in a proposal that understands genres not only by their consensus, but also by the symbolic disputes between their actors from a territory that is, at a time, geographical (the Seattle *grunge* scene; the London *punk*; the *rock gaucho* from Porto Alegre) and semiotic (the regime of signs that result from the disputes mentioned above).

Although our informal observations between 2015 and 2018 took place predominantly in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, we are not interested in any band that approaches the values of the rock gaúcho musical genre. On the contrary, many of the bands we want to study are opposed to this genre. We watched concerts by bands from other states that toured Rio Grande do Sul and noticed that their sound aspects differ a lot from each other, even though they share the same night, the same compilation, the same label, the same festival, the same *playlist*. So, it is possible to recognize some approximation between them because, together, they build a great national indie rock scene, being similar to each other when we observe the audience profile, age group, average income, artistic interests, ways of being in the world, political stance etc. There is a sharing of a scene, by social, economic, political and affective values, as proposed by Nunes (2020), but there seems to be more dissent when it comes to the sound aspects. It turns out that most of the bands we followed seem to privilege the construction of timbres, leaving harmonic, melodic and rhythmic structures - and even the lyrics that are sung - in the background. In this particular genre, artists strive to sound different from each other. In order to do this, they almost always have a series of effect pedals, plugged into guitars, bass, microphones and synthesizers, which modulate the instrument's original signal. In some cases, the modulation is so intense that the result dismantles the listener's horizon of expectation, who can no longer recognize that instrument's typical sound⁴.

Unlike the indie scene that emerged in the 1980s in the United States (Azerrad, 2002) and in the United Kingdom (Reynolds, 2006), Brazilian musicians, generally members of the middle class, have a much greater difficulty in putting together their set of audio equipment, since their purchasing power is lower than that of Anglo-Saxon countries' middle class. Giving oneself the luxury of collecting pedals, guitars and amplifiers in Brazil becomes a rare situation and, because of this, musicians need to go out of their way to create their unique sound signature.

In parallel, in recent years in Brazil, indie rock has gone through a process of political reorganization. If it was a privileged space for white middle-class heterosexual boys before, now it is also a place for other causes, with a bigger, more active, and creative participation of women, people of color, indigenous people, LGBTQI+ people and other minorities. This diversity is clearly expressed in the presence of these bodies on stage; in the voices that sing and in the lyrics that explore the struggle for visibility, respect, equality, rights; in the visual performance of artists in music videos, on stage, in interviews and other media events; in their manifestations on social media; and so on. But then, the question remains: is this diversity also expressed sonically, in the complex weft that makes up the sound texture of the songs produced by Brazilian indie rock?

The economic and technical limitation aggravates with the progressive devaluation of the Brazilian currency against the Dollar since 2015. Added to this are the multiplication of micro music scenes provided by web 2.0 (Conter & Sartori, 2019), which imply a reorganization of regional music scenes; the verticalization of power on the internet generated by streaming services and the Brazilian phonographic industry crisis (De Marchi, 2016) that preserve symbolic power and the mainstream⁵/underground⁶ dichotomy; budget cuts in cultural government policies; and so on.

6. "Term attributed to the set of minor music scenes, generally autonomous, independent of major labels and of the rules of the music market." (Conter, 2016, p. 312).

^{4.} This process of an instrument's sound identity dissolution through effects is explored by Samantha Bennett (2016).

^{5. &}quot;The term is often used in a pejorative way to refer to the *status quo* generated by the imposition of the music industry's values on the market. Mainstream also, and specially, promotes the repetition, institutionalization and sedimentation of sound images at the core of the pop music system." (Conter, 2016, p. 312).

Our hypothesis is that timbre, which is the result of various sounds intertwining and being perceived by our body, is not limited to meaning in its current duration, but expands into a kind of 'semiosis of sensations' (Conter et *al.*, 2017) which we are interested in investigating, not only to understand how music expands its virtuality, but also as an epistemological exercise that helps us figure out the communication phenomenon through the recent affective turn in the humanities during the last decade. We also want to detach timbre and its unfoldings from the aesthetic experience and from the idea that it is a phenomenon that escapes meaning. Therefore, we also understand affect as a sign, as proposed by Gilles Deleuze (2011). Thus, we can view relationships between materialities as sign processes.

The relevance of this study lies in its proposal to understand timbre through an immanent communicational model. Rather than understanding it as a *transmitter* of emotions, here it will be presented both as an *event* (the result of mixing bodies) and as a *transformed body* (affect). Hence the need not to reduce this study to the actuality of timbre (the moment it manifests itself as sound): it is of particular interest to us to make it possible, from this strictly theoretical study, to write other analytical texts in which it is possible to describe and interpret the socio-technical machine by which timbre operations develop, produce semiotic regularities, and differ among themselves. In addition, we intend to recognize affective developments generated in the bodies (of listeners, musicians, instruments, music as a virtuality) after the timbres are actualized, also in future texts.

It seems to us that the economic precariousness related to the acquisition of musical instruments merges with the political condition of minorities⁷. We understand that the relation between these two characteristics is an important element for the arrangement of the genre's current stage sonorities. We will return to this in the final considerations, but we suggest the reader to keep this in mind throughout the article.

Therefore, we have a valuable object for Communication research, specifically in terms of communicational studies that rely on structuralism and semiotics, since timbre, like sign, is the difference resulting from clashing bodies.

In what follows, we cross-reference theories and knowledge from different fields of expertise: communication, acoustics, semiotics, philosophy, ethnomusicology and media studies, divided into two main axes. With the first, we intend to bring the discussion of timbre from the field of acoustics to that of media studies. With the second, we intend to speculate about the affective forces of sound.

Acoustics, medial awareness and formal characteristics of timbre

A commonplace used when we talk about timbre is to think of it as the 'color' of sound; or, in a slightly more technical reading, of the equalization parameters (amount of bass, mids, trebles); or even the formation of sound waves (sine, square, triangular waves...). A very common conception, which is over a hundred years old, is that timbre is what differentiates two sounds that have the same melodic pitch and volume. If we hear a note there vibrating at 440 hertz coming from the strings of a piano and then being blown out of a trumpet in the same frequency range, it is the timbre of each instrument that allows us to differentiate one from the other. The parameters that define the timbre quality of each of these instruments are well known by professional musicians and physicists, but not always by the lay public:

*As Helmholtz first revealed, there are spectral features of timbre – its 'vertical' dimension – determined by the contribution of harmonic and inharmonic overtones; there are time-variant, or temporal elements, such as amplitude fluctuation (beating); and there are spectrotemporal features, which meld the two, including attack time, decay, steady-state timbre, and release, the phases of a sound often referred to as the ADSR envelope. Finally, tone perception is influenced by the unique attack transients characteristic of a sound generator – for example, the sharp attack of a rigid plectrum striking the uneven surface of a wound steel guitar string. (Fink et al., 2018, p. 11, our emphasis).

7. While heterosexual, middle- and upper-middle-class white men persist in the Brazilian indie rock scene, many openly support and defend minority participation. In addition, between 2016 and 2018, campaigns to report emotional and sexual abuse on social media perpetrated by people that fit that profile were instrumental in the political rearrangement of the group of people involved in music production, a practice that generated a series of controversies, as it can be seen in the article from 'Catraca Livre' available at https:// catracalivre.com.br/cidadania/por-que-uma-lista-de-denuncias-contra-bandas-gerou-debate-na-web/.

In the preface to *A acústica musical em palavras e sons* [Musical acoustics in words and sounds], Menezes (2003) clarifies that, although acoustics is normally reserved for the field of physics, he believes that understanding acoustic phenomena is important in the education of contemporary musicians. It turns out that, with the advent of electroacoustic music, the possibilities of timbres increased dramatically compared to the music performed with acoustic instruments. With electronic instruments, such as a synthesizer keyboard for example, it is possible to generate any type of sound wave pattern, from a simple sine wave to white noise, a sound in which all humanly audible frequencies are reproduced simultaneously. Adding this to the feeling of exhaustion of the tonal system at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, timbre progressively becomes one of the most important elements for the creation of new musical genres (Wisnik, 1999; Guigue, 2011).

To produce a greater diversity of timbres, it was necessary to understand in advance which waveforms generated which types of sound texture. Notions of electricity, electronics and acoustics become central to music production. In the early days of electroacoustics, gigantic computers connected to oscillometers generated waves that could be shaped through controls. It became possible, for example, to generate a wave with a triangular shape, regulate its inclination degree (the more angular, the more strident), its amplitude (volume) and even add it to other waves (sine, square...). Before electroacoustics, a change in timbre necessarily implied some change in the playing of an instrument or in its body.

From gigantic and heavy tubes to tiny transistors, electroacoustics migrated from universities to home users and everyday musicians, defining the sound of 1980s pop music. At this stage, we are already relying on electric keyboards that simulate different timbres and that are reproduced through speakers. In addition, and especially for this research, in the mid-1960s, portable effects pedals became popular. The pedal is a compact device in which you can connect a guitar, bass, keyboard, microphone, any device that generates sounds converted into electrical pulses, and whose purpose is to model these sounds, generating, in the output, a different sound form in the most different ways: interfering with the equalization (changing the volume of bass, medium, treble); distorting it (*fuzz, overdrive, distortion*); changing its melodic pitch (*pitch shifter*); cutting it off and letting it sound interspersed (*tremolo*); and so on.

With the advent of pop music in the first half of the last century, timbre took on a greater role in composition. If before the term was sometimes confused with which instruments a composer chooses to perform his sonata, in pop the electrification of guitar, bass, piano and other instruments will dramatically increase their sonic possibilities with circuitry, speakers, valves, modulation pedals, among other things. Timbre, in this context, communicates. It is necessary to observe this phenomenon through a medial awareness, as proposed by Fabrício Silveira (2013, p. 65):

^{*}According to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (1994, 1998, 2010), the medialities – hence 'medial consciousness' – concern the material conditions that allow the emergence of meaning. In other words: it is important to pay attention to the instruments, technical resources and support that we make use of in communicational contacts and records of all kinds; it also matters how such apparatus will be operated.

It turns out that the ways in which pop music's sounds are configured depend on a whole complex sociotechnical machine. Most musical instruments are electric and/or electronic, and even those that seem more rudimentary in this sense, such as an electric guitar, for example, have their sound signal modulated by various effect pedals, amplifier modules, microphones, plugins and computer software. Even the voice, apparently the most 'carnal' element in pop music, has its timbre intensely modulated by such devices.

Timbre in indie rock implies a stance against normative currents and it is also a political act, not just a technical one. In *Timbre as Differentiation in Indie Music*, David Blake (2012) argues that timbre is used to differentiate the genre in question from mainstream music and that it is more powerful in this regard than any other parameter (like harmony, melody and rhythm) we could highlight: "(...) each artist offers a heterogeneous timbral palette connected with an increased sense of recording and songwriting craft which produces unusual sounds. This finding may lead one to theorize that, if anything, indie music is unified by a sense of timbral heterogeneity." (Blake, 2012, p. 11).

Blake also demonstrates how timbres used can communicate, beyond aesthetic experiences, social experiences, when, for example, a musician produces a highly distorted timbre to generate abrasive affections, or a 'hotter' timbre, with more bass and simulating greater proximity to the listener, to generate an idea of involvement and social sharing (Blake, 2012, p. 11).

But how is timbre formed? Let us imagine the act of listening to a song as the making of a rug woven by our memory. Outside our consciousness, there is no song (if we understand it as a social convention), there are sound waves moving through time and space, like unwoven threads of a potential web. A multitude of sound waves reach our ear canal and pass through the eardrum as if they were one. How can our brain tell them apart?

If timbre is a sound property that allows the distinction between one sound and another when both have the same pitch and intensity, then we can define it as the agent of difference between two instruments being played in unison. Consequently, it is because timbre exists that there is a difference in music; it is an agency of several sound attributes. It needs time and space to exist. The formation of this territory occurs through the agency of several elements: at the very least, a body that produces sounds and another body that is affected by them.

3. From 'timbre as affect' to the 'affective semiosis of timbre'

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As the title of our research project proposes, at the beginning we were interested in thinking about timbre in music from the perspective of affect theories, but along the way we improved this idea until we reached another proposal, which is to observe the affective semiosis of timbre. Such a theoretical movement was fundamental for an adequate construction of our observation point. Next, we will present the theoretical path that led us to this decision, as well as explain what we mean by affective semiosis of timbre.

We listen to music with our whole body, not just the ear canal. In front of a rock band that goes beyond healthy hearing levels, we can have shivers, goose bumps, the bass sounds go through our body, vibrating bones, organs, teeth, viscera. It is impossible not to be affected by the different sound frequencies that tackle our body. After the inescapable impact of air vibrations (since we cannot close our ears the way we plug our nostrils or close our eyes), our body is transformed: racing heartbeat, ringing in the ears, ecstasy, a desire to scream, dance. We also think about the meanings that result from this encounter, turning over the sound images that formed in our memory after the listening experience. When we do, we are also affecting the music we listen to, in its incorporeal condition. Judging a song, criticizing it, recommending it, is also affecting it. So, between the musician and the music they produce, between the music and the audience, between the audience and the music, and so on, all these agents are in a constant affective relationship.

With that said, however tempting, we declare that we don't want to confuse affect with emotions. In a broader sense, derived from a long lineage that starts with the Stoics, passes through Spinosa (2017), Deleuze (2011, 2007) and through the affective turn in the humanities, our starting concept is that affect is a force, an intensity or a sensation that is the result of the action of one body against another (this action, in turn, we call affection). Affect cannot be confused with emotion because, as Mazzarela (2009, p. 292) argues, "An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal". Or as Hemmings (2005, p. 551) argues, "Affect broadly refers to states of being, rather than their manifestation or interpretation of emotions". This departure from emotions has an importance for our research, which is to avoid falling into a reading that places music as an agent that transmits emotions, as if music's core potential laid in its ability to move listeners. In this research, affects are forces, intensities, sensations that can only be potencies (virtual) or the action of one body on another (actual). To develop this notion, Deleuze relies on the philosophy of the Stoics, who established two distinct kinds of things, the bodies and the effects: "[the] bodies, with their tensions, their physical qualities, their relationships, their actions and passions and the corresponding 'states of affairs'. These states of affairs, actions and passions, are determined by the mixtures between bodies" (Deleuze, 2007, p. 5). The effects happen in these mixtures of bodies: "(...) they are not bodies, but properly speaking, 'incorporeal'. These are not physical qualities and properties, but logical or dialectical attributes. They are not things or states of affairs, but events" (Deleuze, 2007, p. 5). An effect is both an affection - the trace that one body leaves in another - and an affect - the change that has taken place in that body.

It is challenging to think of timbre from this logic, since it is the music element that our perception most immediately recognizes. And yet, its nature is quite difficult to establish. Where is timbre? Is it potentially contained in musical instruments? Is it in the air that vibrates? Is it in the perception of those who absorb it? Is it shared collectively? Well, if timbre is not in any of these places, but, at the same time, its action can be recognized in all of them, then it is not a body, but the result of an affection, of clashes between bodies. An incorporeal, therefore, like the notion of affect in Steve Goodman's *Sonic Warfare*, which means

^{*}(...) the potential of an entity or event to affect or be affected by another entity or event. From vibes to vibrations, this is a definition that traverses mind and body, subject and object, living and non-living. One way or another, it is vibration, after all, that connects every separate entity in the cosmos, organic or nonorganic. (Goodman, 2012, p. xiv)

Now that it is possible to observe timbre as an affect, we could move further and think of it as endowed with a semiotic potency. This proposal is based on our hypothesis that timbre produces meanings, even though non-logocentric signs, for example. At this stage, philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2011, 2007) is our main interlocutor, especially when he brings the theory of affects, as proposed by the Stoics and Spinoza (2017), closer to the notion of sign.

^{*}This proposal, we believe, is different from what has been said about affect, sometimes as something that would escape meaning, whether pre-sign or non-sign, sometimes as a passionate element. (...) every affect is a sign, and every affection, which occurs between two or more bodies, modifies the signs involved in the communicative act. (Conter et al., 2017, p. 37)

It is thus possible to recognize the triangulation that we want to produce here between timbre, affect, and sign. These are all incorporeal elements. We approach affect theories in order to observe timbre through an immanent perspective, as we understand that it is its relations with other bodies that define it and not the other way around (cf. Conter et *al.*, 2017). Thus, we emphasize, it is necessary to overcome the idea that affect is an event that escapes meaning. This approach is very different from the common sense one, where affect is confused with emotion, passion and feeling, even being understood as a phenomenon that alters the state of a body, external to language, inexplicable. Affect's affection capacity does not end at goose bumps, the urge to vomit, the sensation of dizziness. The trace left by one body on another is just the beginning. There is a processuality of affect that needs to be considered: from an affect, there are escape routes: minor affections, potencies, affective chains... unfoldings that are similar to the semiosis process that we can recognize in language.

If affect is like a sign, it must have a signifier series and a signified series (Deleuze, 2007). As a signified series, affect exists in and of itself. It does not produce meaning and will only do so if its signified series comes into contact with a signifier series. Let's imagine a set of sound waves vibrating a listener's eardrum. In this context, before suffering the affection of the waves, the listener was an empty signifier house, waiting for the beginning of a song. When they hear the waves and recognize in them the typical sound of an indie rock band, for example, they are giving the affection that tackles them a signifier series. But the timbres of the sound waves produced by the band are not part of the band, nor of the waves (Menezes, 2003); they are not even part of the listener, who translated them into memory form. In fact, this identification of a sonority with a specific genre is just the beginning of semiosis.

Another obstacle to the observation of the semiosis of timbre is the fact that common sense terminology is too precarious to describe it. We generally employ terms used to describe other senses (sight, smell, touch, taste), such as calling a timbre 'abrasive', 'stodgy', 'hot', 'heavy', 'crunchy', qualities that are not necessarily sonic. Even musical genres named after timbre characteristics come from other sensorialities: heavy metal, grunge, ambient, rock, funk, trance. All these terms, although useful in terms of classification, halt the semiosis of timbre. Therefore, we are interested in the ability of timbre to unfold, to produce lines of flight. Thus, it will not only affect subjects (emotionally moving a listener, for example), but it will also affect itself, its own variation, modifying its state and developing autonomous behavior. This is our main theoretical challenge. We understand that it is necessary to detach timbre from an identity idea, as if it were the shaping agent of certain musical genres through the sound of certain musical instruments, while it is also necessary to move away from the idea that it is capable of provoking emotions on a particular audience member. Although it can be used for both things, it has an autonomous form before that, and it is endowed with a virtuality of its own.

Using the theories of the authors mentioned in this item, we can say that timbre has, in addition to an actual side (when it is signified), a virtual side (the power to affect, be affected and affect itself).

^{*}The virtual, as such, is inaccessible to the senses. This does not, however, preclude figuring it, in the sense of constructing images of it. To the contrary, it requires multiplication of images. The virtual that cannot be felt also cannot but be felt, in its effects. When expressions of its effects are multiplied, the virtual fleetingly appears. Its fleeting is in the cracks between and the surfaces around the images. (Massumi, 2002, p. 133) We are therefore proposing a different understanding of how timbre communicates: as we tried to say at the beginning of this item, going beyond the idea of a *transmission* of emotion, timbre will also be understood as *event* (the result of mixing bodies) and as a *transformed body* (affect). Both dimensions are fundamental for understanding timbre's signifying processes.

4. Referrals for an analysis of Brazilian indie rock sounds

Recognizing the communicational dimension of affect from a post-structuralist model, which understands communication as the production of difference, the next challenge of this research will be to develop a methodology capable of analyzing the semiosis of affections that arise from the actualization of the research object, since "Perhaps one of the surest things that can be said of both affect and its theory is that they will exceed, always exceeds the context of their emergence, as the excess of ongoing process" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 5). With this, there are three stages to be covered in future analyses, which justify the research being carried out in the field of Communication.

The first is about mapping the socio-technical machine behind the timbres of the songs that will be analyzed, in order to understand the economic, political, mediatic and technological conditions that configure it as such, following in the wake of recent studies focused on the Materialities of media and of Communication.

The second looks at timbre in its current material condition, manifesting itself as a sound wave complex that reverberates in an environment and affects the bodies around it. Here we need knowledge of Musical Acoustics and Affect Theory.

Finally, the last step is the most challenging: observing timbre as a communicational phenomenon that develops affective semiosis. In Brazilian indie rock, due to its minor nature, engaged with the underground, with amateurism, with a certain distance from the mainstream, our prognosis is that the affective semiosis of timbre in this genre creates a minor communication, in which precariousness, feminism, anthropophagy, *gambiarra*, jerry-rigging, body politics and other micropolitics typical of this music express themselves affectively and, even in a non-logocentric way, are capable of engendering new possible sonic worlds:

^{*}The goal of characterizing a minor communication is perhaps to shift the focus, to abandon notions already heavily stratified like Media, Culture, Politics, Institutions, which are typical of communication studies, and pay attention to its inventive character, to the unconscious and almost imperceptible devices that underlie all these big molar aggregates. (Araujo, 2020, p. 167)

To handle the first two stages, we can rely on more traditional methodologies, such as mappings, cartographies, clipping of news articles, field observations, interviews with the artists. But the last stage depends on a more speculative process, one that, it seems to us, can be done if we rummage through the collected material in a rhizomatic, anti-genealogical way, as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (2011), focusing on the observation of timbre's inventive character, as proposed above by Araujo (2020).

As we said at the beginning, Brazilian indie rock produced between 2015 and 2020 seems to us to be marked by the unusual encounter between an economic precariousness that limits the acquisition of equipment and a minor political condition. The set of equipment that the musician uses in the studio or in live performances presents itself as a socio-technical machine that crosses technical, social, economic and even political limitations. It implies, therefore, in the observation of different bodies acting against each other. The same happens with this minor political condition, which will develop a collective semiotic machine, where a regime of signs in favor of diverse and plural ways of being in the world will reorganize this universe. Thus, it is possible to propose, albeit hypothetically, the reason why indie rock has presented a great semiotic opening to incorporate minority politics: the composition of timbres in indie rock is not just what constitutes the genre. More than that, it is what produces difference *within* the genre, which creates singularities even between songs from the same band.

Going through these different strata, territories of meaning and agency generated by timbres that constitute our corpus, with the theoretical framework that we have tied together here, will be fundamental to understand how the affective semiosis of timbre happens in Brazilian indie rock.

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