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Visitors, or The Political Ontology of Noise

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I am ... the visitour and the seker out of the wykednes of the fathers in their
children.
George Joye (1545)

Who is this third person? He makes noise; he is, most assuredly, a
prosopopoeia of noise. Noise is a person – that is the lesson of Pentecost: it is
the third person.
Michel Serres (1980)

The whole theory of information and thus, correlatively, that of noise, makes
sense only in relation to an observer, who finds himself linked in being to them.
Michel Serres (1977)

A rat comes to stay

Michel Serres's *Le Parasite* opens with an account of a visit. The country rat comes to stay with his cousin the town rat. This is a puzzling paraphrase of La Fontaine's fable after Aesop, 'Le rat de ville et le rat de champs'. The country rat gorges himself on the splendours of his host's riches who, in turn, gorges himself on the riches of *his* 'host' the tax farmer who, in turn is implicated in a parasitic relationship with others, and the land. This chain of parasitic attachments, always asymmetrical, wandering ever upwards in a structure of exploitation, is striking not least because of that third meaning noted by Serres and hidden for English speakers in the French term *parasite*, that meaning best captured in English by the term 'static' or 'noise'.¹ The repast of the two rats is interrupted, as is well-known, by a noise, harbinger of the violence to come:

It was only a noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of information. Was the noise really a message? Wasn't it, rather, static, a parasite? A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who produces a different disorder. Let's go to the country where we eat only soup, but quietly without interruption.²

This enigmatic opening segment of Serres's 1980 monograph points to something we have become used to thinking about noise – its disturbing, upending, topsy-turvy-making quality. For Serres, in the 'message', that 'information producing panic', there is an Other, a mite that bites, a worm that

burrows, a life form that wants us for a host. Noise, we might say, lives to be heard, it feeds on our need for quiet.

The complexity of thinking noise and the parasite together (as the French term, and Serres's employment of it, would seem to want us to do) is a complexity that opens out and puts under pressure the political ontology of sound. As a system by which the conceptual territories noise/music/silence are mapped and managed, the political ontology of sound is also a political theory of relationships: there is no quiet without less quiet, no noisy without less noisy, no music without its forbidden others. Class, ideology, race and gender are all visitors to this process of naming, of holding apart, and holding in mutually exclusive relation the three territories. They all make their way, like a little tiny parasitic relation of their own, into the mechanisms by which the public sphere is managed, into the discourses by which noise-obsessed neighbours, anxious public license granters, social theorists and policy makers seek to discipline and silence the social. 2

What Serres opens up to us as well, it seems, is a refusal of the common sense notion of noise as always already undesirable. Noise in Serres stands not just for the outside or the disturbance that breaks the solemn repast, but also stands for precisely *that which it is deemed to interfere with*: 3

Rigorously speaking, there is never silence. The white noise is always there. If health is defined by silence, health does not exist. Health remains the couple message-noise. Systems work because they do not work. Nonfunctioning remains essential for functioning.³

In other words, echoing John Cage, what noise makes clear for Serres, and brings into our consciousness, is the very materiality of the signal medium itself. As he goes on to say, 'If the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum, and immediate; it disappears as a relation.' Noise is thus constitutive of messaging, of communicating, of signalling down the perfect channel. Even in this ideal communicative space, this dreamed of complete comprehension between two souls, a third figure is held at bay, the parasite in the signal. One way to think about noise, then, is as precisely this third position, the marginalised outsider that will not leave. Understood as a bearing witness to the mediatedness of all information, all signals, noise enables us to learn to live with the hubbub of communication. And in this bearing witness, noise makes us think differently about message, about communication, about silence and about how we might learn to listen for it.

Noise also brings with it a striking and rich litany of synonyms and proxies: *the outside*, the street, the open, the city, and those special places that Michel de Certeau called 'the right side of the street', the 'active side'.⁴ Here, on this sunny side, where humans shout and laugh in full public audibility, where voices ring out and cars toot their way through the throngs, noise breathes life, and marks the joyous openness of a culture to contagion, touch, glance, communion. This is the quotidian, the everyday, the space that, more than any other, privileges the vernacular. Here we listen to the tumult quite differently from the tense and anxious discipline of 'structural hearing' or 'reduced listening' in the manner of 4

Salzer, Schaeffer et al. Anahid Kassabian has noted how the forms of listening in which we all of us indulge most of the time are precisely those modes to which we pay little or no attention within the disciplinary study of music. As she puts it at the end of her influential piece on what she calls 'ubiquitous listening':

As we enter the second century of the disarticulation of performance and listening, new relations are developing that demand new models and approaches. It is easy to see that the industry is changing. It is perhaps harder to hear the changes in music, in listening and in subjectivity that all of this portends. Yet musics, technologies, science fiction, social relations and subjectivities have been fermenting these changes throughout the twentieth century. At least in the metropolis, listening to music is ubiquitous, and it forms the network backbone of a new, ubiquitous subjectivity.⁵

For many, this celebration of the end of the classical model of the subject is very unwelcome. The call of ubiquity is an exacting one, to be sure, and there is good reason to fear it: in the demise of political agency as we understand it, in the demise of the human as we know it, there is no guarantee that what follows will not ultimately be the end of us. But there is also good reason to welcome this new order, not least since, as Kassabian intimates, it has actually been with us for some time. It is only the critical ideoflects of the academy that have failed to take account of the new and fearful roar of the quotidian everywhere, this resolutely stubbornly overwhelmingly noisy ubiquity.

Noisy materialism and the silent study

Raising the question as to how to think the relation among material, materialism and noise is what is required here. How, for example, are we to query the ways in which we have sought to quarantine noise? We have, certainly, tended to detach noise from the social conditions in which it is made, encountered or interdicted and thereby installed a certain politics of sonic autonomy. What I mean by this is that we have tended to approach noise as an idea from a sentimentally materialist orientation in which the noise 'itself' forms the object of analysis as always already constituted, present, and yet somehow simultaneously (and magically) unavailable: noise can be felt, we say, it can be pointed to but when we come to the real moment at which we ask 'but what is this thing, noise?' we are always dumbfounded. Sentimental materialism, then, imputes to noise a certain enchanted auratic quality, a tendency rife in musicology, in a certain fascination for material as bounded and complex. The recent fascination for noise in sound studies also belongs to this sentimental trajectory. We have, one might say, installed a new kind of autonomy paradigm (noise for noise's sake) in which so-called 'musical autonomy' (the belief that 'musical materials' are somehow autonomous from the machinations of the social sphere) has been transferred to the sonic domain more broadly. We ought, rather, to question the terms on which this alignment of noise with what Foucault once termed 'formidable materiality' has been instated; under what flag does the operation of those 'materials' that appear to resist or exceed the analytical trajectories through which they are construed go about its business?

One way in which the sentimental materialism of noise has been played out is in the (often hidden) reliance on the juxtaposition of two opposed sonic zones, which we might characterise as privacy-silence and ubiquity-noise. Either noise is understood to enable an emancipation from the stuffy drawing rooms of polite bourgeois respectability or it occasions a martyrological discourse in which sensitive creatures are brutalised by the cruel neighbour or the heartless mob. This juxtaposition does not deal adequately with the political ontology of noise, nor does it help us to think about the relation among noise, material and labour. Certain kinds of labour present themselves as idealising, as if beholden to a set of logics wholly at odds with the outside or the street. The site of writing (the site of making, of creating, of producing) is one such site that must, at all costs, be kept isolated from the hubbub. From Woolf's room of one's own, to Kafka's sharp-edged desk that harms and hurts, writing has occasioned much anxiety about noise. Kafka, for example, made several references to Gustav Mahler's composing regimen and the famous composing huts in his correspondence, and was particularly engaged by the question of how to think the relation of noise and creative labour. He was clearly fascinated by the relationship between his own writing regimen and what he could garner from written accounts in newspapers and other published sources about Mahler's work regimen. In one such reference, complaining in July 1922 to Felix Weltsch about constant interruptions by the noise from a circular saw being used nearby, Kafka recalls a description he had read somewhere of Mahler's work regimen:

[...] I think about Mahler, whose summer routine ['Sommerleben'] was described somewhere as getting up at 5.30, he was very healthy then and slept very well, bathing in the open, running into the wood where he had his 'composing-hut' (breakfast would have already been prepared) and working there until 1, and the trees which make so much noise under the saw, stood around him in a crowd and blocked out the noise. (In the afternoon he then slept and only from 4 did he spend time with his family and only seldom was his wife lucky enough that he betrayed ['verriet'] any details of his morning's work.) But I wanted to tell you about the saw ['von der Säge erzählen']. I alone cannot escape it, my sister must come and, at unbelievable inconvenience to her, tidy the other room for me (which is also no composing hut, but I don't want to talk about that), and then I am free of the saw for a while. In this way, one has to move yourself [sic] into a quiet room.⁶

The German word for a saw, *Säge*, resonates here with the German word for a tale or saga, *Sage*. The saw is a transplantation (deterritorialisation) of the orality (from 'sagen', 'to say') of the *Sage* into the *noise* of the machine used in the production of paper, a reduction of the *Erzählen* of a *Sage* to the emptied out noises of material production. In the second reference, in a letter to Brod a few days later in the same month (July 1922), Kafka repeats his reference to Mahler's composing hut:

You ask me about the wood, the wood is beautiful, one can find peace there, but no "composing hut". A path through the (still very diverse) wood in the evening, when the noise of the birds is somewhat muted (in Mahler's place, the birds would perhaps have disturbed me) [...]⁷

The fascination with noise here enacts a deterritorialisation of the creative labour of writing (invariably idealised as a kind of holy exception): the writer is dissolved into a soundscape, acted upon by external forces in distinct contrast to (hegemonic, Cartesian, even 'romantic') notions of ideal creative labour which work as a proxy for the great universalising narrative of (male bourgeois) cultural production. Creative subjectivity is here reduced, shorthanded and curtailed by dint of its being worked upon by the hubbub of production: the hidden labour in creativity is made audible by noise, like an unwelcome visitor, its ordinariness as *labour* is laid bare.

Kafka's sensitivity to noise, famously shared by Mahler himself,⁸ is as much a sensitivity to ubiquity (the vernacular, the ordinary, the everyday) as it is to an anxiety about the porosity of the bubble of privacy that encases the site of writing. Here, the doors are closed to the street, the windows firmly and tightly locked and the subject withdraws, just as Descartes did into the cold dark oven, in order to perform the autonomy so cruelly denied him. The political ontology of noise is thus constituted around the acts of opening out and withdrawing, of listening for the everyday or isolating oneself from it. This territory, this space, we call *property*.

It has become almost impossible to think about what it means to be 'modern', what it means, that is, to live in a world without common ties or laws save those laid down in the abstractions of law makers, without thinking about autonomy, privacy, safety and property. And these terms have become so commonplace as to interfere significantly in other ways of thinking about social relations. Crime figures have been consistently falling across the Western hemisphere since the end of the Second World War, for example, and yet we are all more anxious than ever about personal safety, privacy, autonomy. The irrational fear of noise, not the fear of noise meant to harm or noise inflicted with malice, but of noise 'in and of itself', the fear, that is of noise as if it were *material*, is symptomatic of a discourse that Loïc Wacquant has described as *carceral*, which is to say, a way of thinking about the outside, about marginality, poverty, disenfranchisement as *criminal*. The poor have become punishable by what Wacquant in particular has termed the 'great incarceration of the fin de siècle':

It is not by happenstance that the stupendous expansion of the carceral sector of the American state [...] was started just when unemployment and casual (under)employment were spreading, public assistance was fast shrinking before being 'reformed' into a system of forced employment (called 'workfare'), and when the ghetto was imploding as the result of the combined pressure of black mobilization, deindustrialisation and the public policies of urban abandonment.⁹

The two kinds of withdrawal that we note here, then, are mirror images of each other: the bourgeois withdraws to his study as the poor are removed to the penitentiary. The carceral state and the silent study are profoundly and intimately connected not simply by their structural similarities (the act of cutting oneself off and of *being* cut off), but because they also both partake of a logic that construes the outside as a space of contagion. This epidemiological logic is

symptomatic of what Michael Bull has termed the 'aurally privatised listening experience' (of, for example, iPod users), one of those processes by which the alien spaces of the city and the potential for contagion can be mitigated by creating a 'seamless auditory experience' in which the bubble of property can be reinstated and made portable.¹⁰

The Madrid Commune

Even here, though, the clamour of the street is never fully silenced. I want to make a slight shift in my terminology here, which I hope will make clear the bases on which I have tried to argue against a naïve materialism of noise: what is never fully silenced is not just the street, the outside, the vernacular, but what we might want to call, after Antonio Negri, *the common*. In an interview with Raf Valvola Scelsi, Negri responds to the question 'Why do you maintain that the constitutional state is reactionary?' with 'Because it defends private property and doesn't recognise the common ... And delegates, that is, invents, a system of representation and a system of division of power guaranteeing that this system cannot be changed.'¹¹ In other words, it is with the cry of the *δημος* [*dēmos*], those withheld from the legislative structures of the Athenian state, that, as Žižek puts it (after Rancière), the political 'struggle proper' begins.¹² The constitution of the *dēmos* as such occurs precisely as it perceives itself to be excluded, as it coheres around a deficit of political power: 'we – the "nothing", not countered in the order – are the people, we are All against others who stand only for their particular privileged interests'.¹³

Negri's comments above about 'the common' were made in the context of thinking about what he has called the 'Madrid Commune'. At that moment when the political right in Spain sought to pin the terrorist bombings in Madrid's Attocha railway station of March 11th 2004 (two days before the Spanish general election) on the Basque separatists, suddenly, through a highly 'viral' process, a spontaneous political conglomeration (a coming together in shared hostility to the claims made by the outgoing governing Partido Popular) was suddenly and very powerfully enacted through the jingle-jangle of modern communication technology, especially mobile phones. This apparently spontaneous conglomeration (what Paolo Virno terms, somewhat dismissively, after Rousseau, a *volonté générale*)¹⁴ of the electorate in this manner represents a fascinating case study in the sonic agglutination of citizens to a particular kind of what Benedict Anderson terms 'unisonality', the sounding as one of a large number of citizens in the face of a certain mismatch between political ideal and political reality.¹⁵ Roberto Esposito has suggested, in his theorisation of *communitas* (the basis on which community can or cannot be thought), that the common is in some sense both 'impossible' and 'urgent', both obsolete and absolutely unequivocally of the present.¹⁶ What the sudden victory of the left in Spain showed for Negri is that the common will assert itself at moments of profound and extreme crisis as a general intellect, a sudden and devastating alignment.

These were noisy days in Madrid. I remember a friend telling me that she could not sleep because of conversations in the street, text messages ending with '¡Pásalo!', 'pass it on', beeping incessantly on a mobile phone she could not

bring herself to turn off and her own sense of radical communion with the processes by which the political right was being publicly exposed. A (more than usually) sleepless Madrid, standing suddenly for the predicament of a whole nation ('somos todos Madrilenos' [we are all Madrilians] declared Juan José Ibarretxe Markuartu, head of the Catalan government), and connected via the commons of mobile communications technology and the internet to every corner of the nation, was calling, literally calling, for the end of José Maria Aznar's government. Initially, millions took to the streets to protest the bombings, believing Basque separatists to be the perpetrators. But it very soon became clear that the *dēmos* was being lied to. As the editorial of the national newspaper *El País* put it:

Hasta que llegó José María Aznar lo único que se había oído en Cibeles había sido la lluvia contra los paraguas y el helicóptero de la policía rompiendo en silencio. Pero cuando llegó el presidente, acompañado del Príncipe de Asturias y de las infantas Elena y Cristina, fue recibido con una sonora pitada seguida de gritos que le preguntaban : "¿Quién ha sido ? ¿Quién ha sido ?". Luego la gente volvió a encerrarse en su silencio. Y a muchos, atrapados entre el dolor y la impotencia, no era lluvia lo que le corría por las mejillas.¹⁷

[Until the arrival of José María Aznar, the only thing one could hear in Cibeles Square was the rain hitting umbrellas and police helicopters breaking the silence. But when the president arrived, accompanied by the Prince of Asturias and the Princesses Elena and Cristina, he was met with high-pitched whistling followed by shouts of "Who was it? Who was it?". Then the crowd returned to its silence. And for many, caught between pain and impotence, it was not rain that flowed down their cheeks.]

The streets, the internet, the digital commons of the connected crowds, all suddenly cohered around a singular instance, and the results in the general election turned out to be quite remarkable: José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's beleaguered left-of-centre Socialist Workers' Party, the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español), set, by all accounts, for a swingeing defeat, swept to power with a massive swing to the left (up 39 seats, a swing of over 30%).

In this sudden mobilisation we can observe something quite interesting about 'noise' or 'unwelcome' sound: first, in its precociousness, in its fundamental resistance to exclusion, it functions as a kind of 'poke' of agency, the call to listen, to commune, to become one among many; second, like the visitors in the farmer's kitchen, the noise in the signal will not be silenced, but rudely and incessantly calls us to a communion *without our leave*, in a parasitic relation with its 'host'; third, like other forms of insistent ubiquity, noise is only selectively audible, only available to our scrutiny precisely at those times at which it becomes unbearable, rapacious, incorrigible; fourth, noise comforts as it irritates in that silence marks the end of life, abandonment, the horror of what might be termed the 'empty pastoral', the desert. In this last observation, in particular, we note something that is often submerged or sidelined in most discourses about noise: the relation of noise to abandonment is *antimonial* in that noise speaks of

the social in its rawest state, of visitors, neighbours, lovers and saviours.

Noise and the pastoral

If noise speaks of the social 'an sich', as Hegel put it, of a raw, unmediated, 13
thetic social, then it speaks thereby also of a social without limits, without
closure, without ethical ground or arbitration. In the light of this monstrous social,
what Homer called *κακομιλία* or 'bad society', it comes as no surprise that the
pastoral, that idealised silent realm of blissful interiority, has become
sentimentally ubiquitous, embedded in political discourse about the social good,
in nostalgic attempts to reclaim the exotic, to reconstruct lost others and to
exceed the political economy of postmodern tourism, in a wide range of
strategies for retreat, for achieving quietude, autonomy, slowness. In all this, the
demand of the pastoral is to tarry at the borders of exile such that news of the
lost island of Lemnos, the site in the *Illiad* of the abandonment of the great
warrior king, can be carried back as a promise. For Susan A. Stewart, the
literary pastoral is the site of a profound disconnect between those represented
and the authorial machinery of the poet. In this sense, pastoral constitutes an
attempt to represent as ideal or beautiful the exile of bodies to deadly silence, a
mute Arcadian scene in which cries of suffering are permanently stifled. Indeed,
what Stewart terms the 'Philoctetes problem' stands for her as a structurally
illustrative account of the ideological work of the pastoral: Homer recounts in the
Illiad (and after him, Sophocles in his play *Φιλοκτήτης*, *Philoctetes*,¹⁸ thought to
have been completed in 409 BCE) how the hero Philoctetes is bitten by a water
viper and the wound festers; his kinsmen cannot stand the sound of his cries or
the smell of his wound and abandon him to the island of Lemnos, only to 'recall'
him again when they need him in battle:

How can the poet know – how can anyone know – what sounds, what
cries, were uttered, what agonies were expressed by Philoctetes in his
abandonment? It is only because of a consequent reception, one that
followed the "recalling" of Philoctetes by his men after his command had
been replaced by others, that such suffering can be given voice.
Philoctetes may call forever to the wind; it is only this recalling that can
bring back the repetition of his utterance – the repetition that enables the
poet to create the image of his suffering.¹⁹

This cruel abandonment is about *silencing* the suffering of the wounded hero,
enclosing him in the pastoral space that robs him of his agentive noise.
Stewart's account of the pastoral scene of abandonment is interesting for two
reasons: first, the scene is silent, or, rather, the scene is enclosed (on an island,
for example) such that it does not allow the *noise* of the social to speak; second,
the scene is founded on a communal cruelty that binds the kinsmen together –
like the horde in Freud's account of patricide as a kind of origin of the (homo-)
social in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, the scene of abandonment is precisely
that point at which the men constitute themselves as community, as collectively
agentive. The 'recalling' of the hero, then, happens on the terms that the
kinsmen set; they determine the manner and time of the return and, at that point
of return, the hero is instrumentalised as their warrior king (in the *Illiad*
Philoctetes is referred to as 'the Argive's ... great King'). In this sense, then, the

social emerges both as a disavowal and as an affirmation, as both abandonment and recall. But the act of recall can only be enacted at the moment the horde constitutes itself as community, and that community requires the abandonment of its 'king' as Homer determines him. This circularity – that abandonment is the precondition of recall – is constitutive of the pastoral.

And yet, as Paul Alpers has suggested, 'one of the projects of pastoral is to represent not only the isolated cry of pain, as lyric does, but also the auditor or auditors who make it fully intelligible.'²⁰ In other words, *audition* is precisely that act by which the evidence of the pastoral can be carried back or 'recalled' at all. But if this is true, if auditors 'make intelligible' the cry of suffering, then the paradox of the pastoral form is to be found precisely in the fact that the news can only be 'carried back', as it were, in an act of eaves-dropping on suffering *without intervening in it*. Hence, even if one accept Alpers's recuperative reading of pastoral, one is still left with that primary act of neglect or abandonment from which the pastoral flows. 14

Between the cheery promise of Madrid's noise-as-communion, and the unethical act of eavesdropping on another's suffering in the eerie scene of the pastoral there is a great political and ethical chasm. Madrid and Lemnos are a million miles apart, it seems, not least because these two articulations of the political ontology of noise point to (what seem like) radically different political imaginations of the auditor-*acousmêtre* complex we might in the past have referred to as the subject: on the one hand, we have the brightly contagious creature who spills onto the street in righteous anger looking for change, representation, inclusion; on the other, we have the nature reserve isolate who can be eavesdropped on but who cannot sound in communion, cannot join the raw and the roar of the *dēmos*. And yet, the two are not just mutually reliant on each other (noise requires the stillness it seeks to break, so to speak), but they are structurally implicated in each other as the other's ground: the cries of '¿Quién ha sido?' in the Madrid commune work precisely only in so far as they break the flat-line lo-fi stillness of the rain (silence, of course is never fully silent, but is constituted around notions of continuity, flatness, inanimate homogeneity). It is in the relation of the one to the other that both come into being. In this sense, noise, we might say, is a relation. 15

The cosy sentimental materialism of noise that attends much recent thinking about sound more broadly is symptomatic of a consistent and persistent desire to parcel up the political ontology of noise into its legislative constituent parts: acceptable/unacceptable, reasonable/unruly, bearable/unbearable. This binaristic structure misconstrues the mutual reliance of silence and noise as if that reliance represented the political structure *in toto*. To put this another way, what is missing here is some account of the complex, messy, demanding ubiquity of *affect*. In coming to an understanding of the Madrid-Lemnos divide we will have to raise questions about the affective domain of the political we have not raised before. How, for example, do we constitute ourselves acoustically? What are the processes by which we seek out and pleasure in unisonality? Will the ontological porosity of property, privacy and silence ever be overcome, and to what extent is that purported immunity to sonic contagion desirable at all? 16

The difficulties we face in coming to understand the sonic relation and *its* 17
relation, in turn, with the social relation more broadly are symptomatic, I
suggest, of a crisis in the imagination of the common. The key to thinking the
sonic/social relation is obscured precisely because it is interdicted by the forces
that seek to hold us in thrall to the charm of property.²¹ Without property, we
have come to believe, we will be excluded from political representation, destined
to dwell in the twilight of the amorphous proto-*dēmos*, without demand, without
voice, without future. To answer the first question I raised above, then (how, that
is, do we constitute ourselves sonically?), it is in the process of attaching
ourselves to an ideal scene of pastoral calm, the private imagined acoustically,
that we think ourselves to be whole. It is not that we are all dreaming of a rural
idyll, or seeking to live a life like Edward Carpenter's glorious peasant isolation,
but, rather, that we have come to identify with a certain sonic scene in which we
have full control over the boundary between the inside and the outside. In what
John Picker has termed the 'soundproof study', in a model, that is, of a certain
imagination of social autonomy, subjects have come to think themselves as
authors of their own soundscapes. Noise has become, quite simply, the name
we give to the failure of that authorial control.

Yet there have been, as we have seen, some striking moments at which the 18
desire for quiet and the private has been put aside for a desire for the
communion of political activism. When the *dēmos* spills out into the streets and
demands to be heard, and citizens leave their purportedly 'silent' bubbles and
are absorbed into the throng, then glimpses are briefly afforded of some of the
ways in which the demand for representation is made. In Madrid, that moment
was constituted around the notion that the 'we' of the *dēmos* had been excluded
from representation: the 'they' of a patrician elite not unlike the *nomenklatura* of
the Soviet Union had deliberately sought to foreclose the representational matrix
around a simple political equation (i.e. 'Basque separatists are the enemy' and
'we have not endangered Spain by joining the Iraq war') such that the 'we' of the
dēmos is held in a state of hysterical exclusion.

'Why won't they be silent?', Nicolae Ceaușescu once asked his assistant, as he 19
stood, on 21 December 1989, on the balcony of the headquarters of the
Rumanian Communist Party in the Piața Palatului in Bucharest, trying to
address the crowds that had gathered there in protest at the government's
actions in the Timișoara uprising. His failure to silence them, the puzzled and
frightened expression on his face, the roar of boos, hisses, jeers and jibes, all
this signalled the breaking of the channel and the forging of a new political
matrix in which the demand of the *dēmos* to be heard had become deafening. In
the light of the structural exclusion of both the Spanish and the Rumanian
majority, a certain *jouissance*, or enjoyment attaches to the solemn coming
together, at Cibeles, at the Piața Palatului, or at almost any place you care to
mention, in the shiver of communion, and participation. That coming together,
moreover, has a very particular sonic character, as an investment in unisonality,
the speaking of many as one.

So what, then, to reiterate my second question above, are the processes by 20
which we seek out and pleasure in this unisonality? Psychoanalysis has its own

kind of answer to this question: we seek out this unisonality, it says, for gratification, for the need of contact, for the will to cohere, share, be a part of a movement that nourishes. And it does seem right to me that we seek it out because we are hopeless romantics, wilful idealists. The social is always an act of faith, a giving of oneself to the dangers of misunderstanding, offence, contagion. We seek out unisonality precisely, I suggest, because it seems to offer a raw and automatic communion, an alignment without introduction, intercourse without seduction, and it places us in the comfortable place of the object that takes what is given, not having to steer, but being steered, not having to think but being thought. In becoming this object of political discourse, the thing in the mix, we still the inner cacophony of the soundproof study and listen to the roar of others. We seek out unisonality because it seeks us. It wants us for a host.

This becoming-object, this new sonic alignment, engages what Gustav le Bon 21 termed a *psychologie des foules*, a psychology of crowds. The crowd, for le Bon, is a site of madness, contagion, idiocy.²² Yet it is precisely these kinds of 'idiocy' or contagion that constitute the critical moment at which the *dēmos* is constituted. The roar of the crowd, the flatline lo-fi hum of communion, the to-and-fro of shouts, chants, demands – this is the noise that *demand*s; it is a noise excluded from the patrician signals of political work; it is the parasite that builds in the channel until that channel is saturated and breached. The sentimental materialism of noise cannot help us here: this is no simple material as such, no special sonic domain all of its own, no island of sounds written out of political discourse. Noise is here the sound of new signals being sent, new channels being opened, new demands of the political matrix being made. Noise is nothing more (and nothing less) than the call for a new relation.

As Žižek puts it, 'Politics proper [...] always involves a kind of short-circuit 22 between the Universal and the Particular',²³ or, to put it another way, the political is that space in which the demand enacts a kind of denaturalisation or estrangement of the status quo such that exclusion from that order becomes sufficiently audible as to demand that someone, or some group be granted entry. Knock knock knock. Let us in.

Notes

¹ The term in French means 'parasite', as in English, but also, and more commonly, 'static' as in the interference that one often experiences in analogue TV signal. In addition, it is often used to capture what we might term 'noise' (although French would normally render this 'bruits'), as in 'noise to signal ratio', where noise stands for an externally generated interference in the signal.

² Michel Serres, *Parasite* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 3.

³ *Ibid.* 78-9.

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living and Cooking* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 72.

⁵ Anahid Kassabian, 'Ubiquitous listening and networked subjectivity,' *ECHO: A Music-Centered Journal*, Volume 3 Issue 2 (Fall 2001), 30 pars: par 30.

⁶ '...ich denke an Mahler, dessen Sommerleben irgendwo beschrieben war, wie er täglich um halb sechs, er war damals sehr gesund und schlief ausgezeichnet, im Freien badete und dann in den Wald lief, wo er er eine "Komponier-Hütte" hatte (das Frühstück war dort schon vorbereitet) und bis ein Uhr mittag dort arbeitete und die Bäume, die später in der Säge so viel Lärm machen, in Mengen still und lärmbewehrend um ihn standen. (Nachmittags schlief er dann und erst von vier Uhr an lebte er mit seiner Familie und nur selten hatte seine Frau das Glück, daß er etwas von seiner Morgenarbeit verriet.) Aber ich wollte von der Säge erzählen. Ich allein komme von ihr nicht los, es muß die Schwester kommen und unter unglaublichen Bequemlichkeitsopfern ihrerseits das andere Zimmer mir einräumen (das allerdings auch keine Komponierhütte ist, aber davon will ich nicht sprechen), nun bin ich für eine Zeit die Säge los. So müßte man Dich auch einmal in ein stilles Zimmer hinüberführen.' Franz Kafka, *Briefe 1902–1924* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer Verlag, 1998), 389. My translation.

⁷ 'Du fragst nach dem Wald, der Wald ist schön, dort kann man Ruhe finden, aber keine "Komponierhütte". Ein Gang durch den (übrigens sehr mannigfaltigen) Wald am Abend, wenn der Lärm der Vögel sich dämpft (an Mahlers Stelle hätten mich vielleicht die Vögel gestört)...' *Briefe*, 394. My translation.

⁸ According to Bruno Walter, Mahler was indeed subjected to noisy external interference: 'He was suddenly frightened by an indefinable noise. All at once, "something terribly dark" came rushing through the window and, when he jumped in horror, he saw that he was in the presence of an eagle which filled the room with its violence. The fearsome meeting was quickly over and the eagle disappeared as stormily as it had come. When Mahler sat down, exhausted by his fright, a crow came fluttering from under the sofa and flew out. The peaceful abode of musical absorption had become a battle-ground upon which one of innumerable fights of "all against all" had taken place. Mahler's account of it still tingled with the horror of so striking a demonstration of the cruelty of nature which had ever been one of the reasons for his deep world-sorrow.' Bruno Walter, *Gustav Mahler* (Vienna, 1936), quoted in Stephen E. Hefling: *Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 35.

⁹ Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 277.

¹⁰ Michael Bull, 'No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening', *Leisure Studies*, 24: 4 (2004), 343-355: 344.

¹¹ Antonio Negri, *Goodbye Mr Socialism: Antonio Negri in Conversation with Raf Valvola Scelsi* (New York: Seven Stories, 2008), 145.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, 'The Lesson of Rancière', Afterword to Jacques Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 69-79: 69-70.

¹³ *Ibid.* 70.

¹⁴ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (LA and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 42.

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: 1983), 145.

¹⁶ Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

¹⁷ '¿Quién ha sido?', *El País* (13th March 2004).

¹⁸ It is known that Aeschylus and Euripides also wrote versions of the story but their versions have not survived.

¹⁹ Susan A. Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 102.

²⁰ Paul Alpers, "The Philoctetes Problem" and the Poetics of Pastoral', *Representations* No. 86, Special Issue: Music, Rhythm, Language (Spring, 2004), 4-19: 6.

²¹ It is no coincidence that the recent financial crisis began in the Anglophone property sector, with an overheating of unregulated speculation on subprime mortgages. It is as if property had come to constitute in itself the ground for a certain kind of citizenship, to which all others inspire, and against which all other forms of citizenship are found wanting. To be a member of what Margaret Thatcher called the 'property owning democracy' (a fundamental oxymoron, of course), had become not simply a way (as had been the case in earlier decades) of becoming a member of the middle classes (meant here in the British sense), but of becoming socially agentive. Property came to equal representation as such.

²² '[...] the individual forming part of a crowd acquires, solely from numerical considerations, a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint.' Gustav le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Félix Alcan [1895] 1907), 17.

²³ Žižek, 'Lesson', 70.