

## BACKGROUND NOISE\*

### BRUIT DE FOND

by Jean-Luc Guionnet, translated by Owen Martell

*This undifferentiated mass – lost as though on a bank of grey where the light permeates only intermittently, seeming to break through less and less day by day. What language could be sufficiently charged with desire to bring it into relief, to give it colour – unless by recourse to the artifices of a deceitful transfiguration?*

– Louis-René des Forêts, *Facing the unremembered*<sup>1</sup>

Sound, in practice, passes as soon as it is heard through an experience of background noise. Listening, in the proper sense, is a trapping of sounds: a reeling in, bringing them up to the surface, from the depths of that which reaches the ear<sup>2</sup>. The question of background noise, then, is first of all a question of that ground itself – its terrain, both aural and geographical. Is background noise the noise of the background or the totality of those sounds left behind or sent back to the background?

Straight away, we see that background noise functions in tandem with rumour<sup>3</sup>: if there really is background noise somewhere, it cannot be constituted in the sum of those noises known by their physical forms or causes. Background noise is neither a consequence nor a sound formed in specific circumstances – it is, in sonic terms, everything which is precisely *not* that.

Neither is background noise noise *from* or the noise *of* the background itself, a definition which would give it, in that case, a cause and would make it, for example, a *rumour* of the background.<sup>4</sup> Background noise is the *sonic* base of sound, its bedrock – a necessary distinction, since one could also conceive of a non-sonic base: an absence of sound – for example, a silence.

The question of hearing – or listening to – this sonic base is also problematic. If

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\* Certain modifications notwithstanding, this text, written between 1995 and 1998, is that of a radio programme (ACR, Atelier de Création Radiophonique, France Culture, 1998) produced by Jean-Luc Guionnet in collaboration with Éric La Casa.

<sup>1</sup> Translator's Note: All translations of cited texts are my own unless noted otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> TN: The French text refers to 'l'écoute' – the ear as an organ, a *machine* in the first place.

<sup>3</sup> J-LG's note: In this text, 'rumour' relates schematically to 'background noise': rumour is to the semiotic (in the broad, even prosaic, sense) what background noise is to the acoustic.

<sup>4</sup> J-LG: Here, in fact, the English form is "better" than the French. "Bruit de fond", needs the preposition *de* to connect the background to its noise, thus implying a causal relation. In that sense, "bruit (de) fond" might be more adequate.

background noise is audible, listening to it and thereby giving it attention, risks giving it also a form and thus a cause. A mode of listening is required, therefore, which brings into play these considerations of background noise; a listening which would hear, in the first place, neither forms nor causes.<sup>5</sup>

Like a pursuit of that which is sensed in thought, or perceived occasionally by the hearing, one seems to touch a threshold, where time<sup>6</sup>, independent of its cadence, might become precisely *that which happens*. Listening to background noise is necessarily to feel the passage of time as such – its permanent transit; prior to, after, even independent of, the hearing body. A permanence which, at the very moment of submersion in noise, infers the presence – at once abstract and forthright – of a paradoxical silence. Background noise infers materially, in the course of its reception, the permanence of a silence which is not an absence of sound but something akin to the temporal continuum of that which comes to us from the expanse<sup>7</sup>.

A moment in which a logical (or pseudo-logical) banality – time passes all the time –, becomes the object of a quest for perception (which is to say, thought).

Background noise exists under the ‘high surveillance’ of its own rumour – but at the heart of background noise also, and at the same time, is the ‘paradoxical silence’. As soon as one bears its imprint – has heard the silence through the encircling noise – one finds one’s mode of listening changed irremediably. Hence this text.

*[I]nstead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself– and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it. [...] It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be the ground.*

– Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*<sup>8</sup>

Listening to a resonance now defines a point between will and coercion – a point at which one finds oneself ‘sliding’ in noise. Even as resonance fades, so one’s hearing becomes ever more keen. It is a snowballing, in fact – bringing one’s attention to bear on that which previously was unheard – whether unconsciously or not. To be led in this manner is to assume the progressive elevation of silence to the permanent consistency of noise,

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<sup>5</sup> J-LG: One of this text’s important problematics: hearing is always in dialectical relation with causality in a way that seeing is not. “I hear the sound of the plane” vs. “I see the plane” (i.e. I *don’t* see the light that the plane reflects towards my eyes).

<sup>6</sup> TN: Time and weather share the same word in French (‘temps’); this constitutes an important ambiguity/overlap in the French text – in the notion of ‘weather’ and ‘time’ constituting the ‘duration’ of the expanse.

<sup>7</sup> TN: ‘l’étendue’ – an expanse as a material concept as opposed to the abstract idea of space; ‘matter-in-motion’.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Trans. Paul Patton (1995) *Difference and Repetition* New York: CUP. p.28

becoming finally the time and space of sound: the time-space of sound is sonic; as if sound were its own milieu<sup>9</sup>.

Whatever the case, sound is accomplished in sound, not in nothing or in silence. When background noise is faint, even the faintest imaginable, the body takes over. Here, the body's sonic base – that is to say, the background noise of the body itself – rises to the surface, placing the body under its own surveillance. Resonance is also a slide to the inside...

Background noise is the sonic base of sound – and speaks also of a very particular kind of distance: distance not only in the concrete sense of a vast expanse (noises coming from afar) but, particularly, in the sense of a sonic time and space beyond the ear's ability to separate and distinguish sounds; approaching the sonic threshold but remaining audible nonetheless. This sonic base is a composite implied just as much by the physical attributes of the environment (from near to far) as by the listener's ability to distinguish and separate sounds.

Neither strong nor faint, it is constructed first of all in the mass of sound material which is of no interest to the ear; which is of no interest to the ear because the ear is unable to distinguish anything in it; and is unable to distinguish anything because there is nothing which, in turn, *wants* to be heard. Background noise is not interesting, for reasons that are as much subjectively complicated as purely physiological – distant, complex.

Background noise is a condition of listening – its sonic milieu, which is to say, its perceived milieu. And, as a condition, background noise is first of all a sonic flow passing under, between, through and around that which the ear is able to distinguish, that which the ear is able to place. Hearing is the reception of this flow and to be in the act of listening is to be on one's guard, as it were, against an evolution which background noise conditions everywhere around. "Background noise" names the fluid mass as soon as it is heard. It also names that which disappears from that mass *at the point of its reception*. Furthermore, it names the continuum<sup>10</sup> of sounds at the ear, just as much as it names the sonic continuum itself.

*There is no sonic landscape because landscape assumes a distance before that which is viewed. There is no such distance before the sonic.*

– Pascal Quignard, *Hatred of Music*

Background noise imparts on the ear independently of the ear's distinguishing

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<sup>9</sup> TN: 'milieu' – at once 'middle', 'world', 'environment' and 'background'.

<sup>10</sup> TN: 'continuum' - 'full', 'continuous' (in spatial and/or temporal terms), even 'substantial'.

capabilities; that is, without a specific ‘aim’ but based simply on the fact of an amplified alert. Background noise leads, in fact, to the point of a ‘general alert’, as though hierarchies were no more, each sound as important and as unimportant as the next – a sort of attention that, by excess, is made deaf. Without a specific target, reason becomes inversely proportional: the ‘alert’ causes the *diffusion* – rather than the concentration – of attention in sonic time-space as a whole.

Attention is always an intention, a decision implied by that which reaches the ear. Attention is linked to the possibility of distinction. Hearing background noise begins precisely here, at this blurred attention, tangled up in the present impossibility of distinction and the possibility of distinction in the future. However, when attention ceases to tend towards the possibility of such distinction, the ‘general alert’ leads to the point of *inattention*. That is, when one hears alerts all the time, one finds oneself not heeding any – or at the very least becoming inured to their urgency. In the same way that a constant flow of noise at the ear implies a default state of silence (the ‘paradoxical’ silence), so constant alert renders the ear incapable of distinction, one might even say deaf.

*[There is a] distinction between attention brought to bear on objects – be they interior or exterior – and alertness which absorbs itself in the rustling of the inevitable being [...]. There is no longer outside or inside. Alertness is entirely devoid of objects.*

– Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*

Background noise is perceived as “arriving at the body”. It is perceived as reverberating towards the body, passing through a milieu – the imprint of which it bears when it arrives at the ear. Background noise is always that which remains of this propagation. Unable to determine its material causes, the ear receives background noise based on the surroundings from which it emanates: delays, detours and transformations which take effect in these surroundings, the thickness of the air, geography, transport, architecture, waterways – all these come into play...

It arrives continuously at the ear, is perceived as *coming at* the body as if to touch it, while being perceived as coming from elsewhere, arriving at the body from all around. This omnidirectional origin of background noise places the body at a point in space – even giving it precise coordinates; defining that space according to the distances travelled by the background noise. It is by these distances, those of background noise’s own expanse, that the sonic expanse is related to the physical space in which the body is situated. That is to say, the perceived background noise is directly related to the specific

position of the body in the expanse. The perception of background noise thus *signals* the position of the body in space. The spatial position implies its own sonic signature.

Based on this, a possible generalisation of the spatial signature: each point of the expanse, each possible listening point, is marked out by a *specific* background noise.

*[...] My heart and my imagination seemed to pierce the fog, the grey. Everything was so grey. I stood still, fascinated by the beauty in this non-beauty, bewitched by hope in the midst of despair. It seemed to me that, hereafter, to hope for anything would be impossible. Then, on the contrary, it seemed as though tender happiness – an inexpressible charm – were insinuating itself in the bereaved countryside. I thought I heard sounds, but everything was quiet. [...]*

– Robert Walser, *The Landscape*

One might say that a ‘stop’, any place within the expanse – which might also be an organ, a body, a machine or device –, fixes the expanse, letting time slope off (with sound in tow). In hearing background noise, the circularity of the body about itself, its coordination in sonic terms, triggers a location of sound’s time and space. As if the space (the body) were a filter letting only time pass through, blocking all the rest.

This might be somewhat counter-intuitive, however. Time doesn’t require the presence of a body in order to pass. But background noise does indeed qualify time by its continuous presence, encircling and imparting on the listening body. “Ordinary time” is neutral but because time and background noise are by a certain reckoning interchangeable (background noise too passes all the time) time, for the listening body, takes on different qualities. The continuum of time and the continuum of sound become confused in each other. Time-as-background-noise passes as though through a filter, retaining the peculiarities of its passage through a specific site, with the result that it defines the coordinates of the listening point, localising it in *sonic* space and time, thus *signing* the body definitively.

Sonically, the body is a resistance in the form of a loop; a loop therefore a resistance.

*space*

*butts up to time*

*in a scree*

*of memory*

Malcolm de Chazal, *Sens-magique*

To experience background noise is to experience the resistance of air to the dissemination of sound. At the same time, it is the proof of the body's resistance to the passage of air and that which the air carries.

In listening to background noise, the body, according to its form and position, gets wind of that which surrounds it: the ears, like the nostrils, tend towards the air and the breeze, because it is by atmospheric change that these surroundings are conveyed to the body and its sensory apparatus. The wind qualifies the space by caress – rubbing itself against the body. This is its form.

*It was always dear to me, this solitary hill,  
and this hedgerow here, that closes off my view,  
from so much of the ultimate horizon.  
But sitting here, and watching here,  
in thought, I create interminable spaces,  
greater than human silences, and deepest  
quiet, where the heart barely fails to terrify.  
When I hear the wind, blowing among these leaves,  
I go on to compare that infinite silence  
with this voice, and I remember the eternal  
and the dead seasons, and the living present,  
and its sound, so that in this immensity  
my thoughts are drowned, and shipwreck  
seems sweet to me in this sea.*

Leopardi, 'The Infinite'<sup>11</sup>

In hearing background noise, the body examines the physical matter of its milieu; it experiences as a resistance the imprint of the area crossed by background noise in order to arrive at that point. Thus, all that renders audible the milieu of this propagation; all that which, audible, makes the milieu non-transparent to the passage of sound – all non-transparence in fact – *also* participates in the signature of the listening point.

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<sup>11</sup> *L'infinito*, G. Leopardi, Trans. A.S. Kline 2003. <http://www.tonykline.co.uk/PITBR/Italian/Leopardi.htm>

*Time is the full, that is, the unalterable form filled by change.*

– Gilles Deleuze, *The Time-image*<sup>12</sup>

With background noise, sound is brought back to that which is resistant in itself when, outwardly at least, nothing happens except time itself. The ear, then, seems to function as though to define a minimum qualification for sound: sound passes with time and, subsequently, background noise qualifies this time. But this qualification is precise: by dint of background noise, sound qualifies time in such a way as to define the very limit between its existence as an abstract notion and its function as a receptacle – i.e. that in which things *take place*.

When listening to background noise, one learns of the surrounding expanse – because it is precisely this which enables background noise to reach the ear; the atmosphere, the movements of the air, weather conditions and so on. And we learn of the expanse in other terms as well as those which relate to the air and its sonic properties: the surface of the earth, the foreground, the geography of its forms and surrounding areas. All this comes, with background noise, to touch the body through the airways. The body receives news of the expanse.

However, background noise is merely the conduit of this information. Properly speaking, such information is *a rumour* of the expanse around the listening point, reaching all the way to the furthest horizon from which background noise emanates. It is a response to the listening being, the attuned body.

*Since the first pulsing of the world I turned about myself Thinking as a circumference Internally I found the racket intolerable always Monotony was my room-mate Sounds came to me without my being able to classify them My fear of space was a big blue I wouldn't speak of the difficulties of my journey nor of the antipathy of suns encountered at full speed Therefore only the movement of water of seaweed of grass of trees of sand of liquid of ingredients announced that a body might be born of all that [...].*

– Henri Pichette, *The Epiphanies*

Each signature is already rumour, already full of sense, of information. Background noise cannot be the signature of anything at all, in fact: noise heard, being the proof of that through which it passes, is already rumour.

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<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze (1989) *Cinema 2: the time-image* London: Athlone. p.17

The area's rumour, then, is not background noise but information that background noise carries with it. Better still, the rumour is *not even sonic* but rather the result of the body's contact with the sonic immensity that reaches it – a sonic immensity which designates a spatial immensity. Properly, one would need to speak of this immensity passing through the body; rumour permits a *little bit* of the expanse to do so.

Background noise is always open to the infinite. Without a horizon, and in its complexification of distance – near and far intertwining in each other as though free of their definitions –, background noise qualifies the furthest reaches of the sky. Sound itself has neither width nor depth nor height, no *elsewhere*, until its contact with the body.

This tension, in hearing ears, in threads to be followed and explored, lends a cosmic breath to the smallest current of air.

*I will have lived in the sun. I have known in this world an infinite happiness.  
Some evenings, the sound of the rain provided me with an unspeakable joy  
because it was the song that my life sang in order to resonate in the depths of  
time which gave me everything.*

– Joë Bousquet, *Translated from silence*

Atmosphere conveys background noise which, in turn, conveys a rumour of the expanse which itself brings news of the very atmosphere. Message and messenger become confused because the flows of air and sound entwine themselves in listening. In background noise, there are loops everywhere but everything is not a loop. By the same token, background noise is shot through with rumour but everything within it is not rumour. (Much like the logic of Leibniz's monadology: "There is life everywhere but not everything is alive.")

All happens as though background noise demanded, by virtue of the rumour it carries, that the expanse had a milieu of its own, a milieu for its own propagation even, so that it too might be time-as-background-noise. As if time were the milieu of space; as if time disseminated space through itself.

The resistance of the milieu of propagation (the fact that the matter of the milieu can be propagated; take form in time; evolve) impels the listener to create in time that which allows specific places to exist in the wider expanse: a point from which and towards which feeling and that which is felt advance; a point from which one could observe the

*temps* – time as time and time as weather.

*Such, therefore, will 'bland' sound be: diminished, withdrawn, left to die as long as possible. One hears it still but barely; being less and less audible, it renders that – the beyond – in which it will expire all the more perceptible; and it is its own extinction, its return to the undifferentiated depths, which makes us listen.*

– François Jullien, *In praise of blandness*

Beyond breathing and the beating of the heart, which bear the ordered (and rhythmic) particularities of their sources, internal background noise, when it arrives, arrives once again as a deaf undifferentiated mass – unnumbered and continuous. Internal background noise is the presence at the ear of an internal sonic immensity. It comes at the ear, through background noise, *in conjunction with* the external sonic immensity.

*He ceased to ask himself anything, ceasing at the same time to see, even though he forced himself to keep his eyes open and to hold himself as straight as possible in the saddle, while the silt in which he seemed to be moving got ever thicker; and it was completely dark now and all he could perceive was the noise, the monotonous multiple hammering of hooves on the road, echoing, multiplying (hundreds of thousands of hooves now) to the point (like the spattering of the rain) of erasure, of self-destruction, implying by its continuance, its uniformity, like a sort of second-degree silence, something majestic, monumental: the course of time itself, invisible, immaterial, without beginning or end or point in between, and in which he seemed to feel himself, frozen stiff on his horse, and his horse too, invisible in the dark...*

– Claude Simon, *The Flanders Road*

This 'second-degree silence' speaks of a plane to which background noise itself is incapable of leading us. Background noise allows for a conception of this plane but its implication is *outside* – a non-sonic background distinct from the reality of background noise as sound's time and space. Whatever the intensity or quality of the background noise, this second silence is indicated during the act of listening. Outside of the sonic continuum, a continuous silence is achieved *with, but outside of*, background noise.

Background noise infers, in the course of its reception, the permanence of a paradoxical silence. This silence is not the absence of sound but, rather, time experienced by the body

almost as if it were solid.

*Opening is an essential feature of univocity. The nomadic distributions or crowned anarchies in the univocal stand opposed to the sedentary distributions of analogy. Only there does the cry resound: 'Everything is equal!' and 'Everything returns!'. However, this 'Everything is equal!' and this 'Everything returns!' can be said only at the point at which the extremity of difference is reached. A single and same voice for the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same Ocean for all the drops, a single clamour of Being for all beings: on condition that each being, each drop, and each voice has reached the state of excess – in other words, the difference which displaces and disguises them and, in turning upon its mobile, causes them to return.*

- Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (trad. Paul Patton)

Background noise reaches the ear as a whole, a sound unity, and it is this unity which a switch in the mind, a mental flick, transforms into silence – a silence which is also whole. Perhaps any “unity” as such is a form of silence. The sonic unity is background noise, but the unity of that sound is a silence – a paradoxical silence. To *feel* the sonic unity as a whole is to perceive background noise; to retain the idea of this unity – its *oneness* – is to perceive of its silence. As if one were to speak of silence in a world of noise in order to say what one thinks.<sup>13</sup> Precisely, it is the oneness of sound (a one that is both whole and unique) which is thought and, hypothetically therefore also, the oneness of *anything* that might be called silence. Silence first of all by indiscernibility, by non-differentiation from the whole of background noise, then by the fact that the one itself cannot be separated. Silence sustained by the unique signature of the listening point – from which is derived an idea of the continuum that takes in the body entirely, inducing in it a *thinking* silence. As though thought itself were the material from which silence is fashioned.

‘If only I could no longer hear it, I would surely find comfort.’

‘Hear what, my dear?’

‘Don’t you hear anything? Don’t you hear that terrible voice crying out at the horizon, and which we usually call silence? [...]’

– Georg Büchner, *Lenz*

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<sup>13</sup> J-LG: From which point, a somehow classical equivalence: silence – perception – time – thought.