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### Noise, neoliberalism and Iain Sinclair

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## Chapter 1: Noise story: from noise theory to theory's noise

Spam in an in-box, a cough in the Concertgebouw, Freudian slips, pregnant chads, “the centuries that lie between us and Shakespeare” (Lotman 25):<sup>5</sup> a basic definition of noise might identify it as that set of phenomena which, in one way or another, interfere with the transmission or reception of information. It is a basic definition, which, up until the mid-twentieth century, was more or less adequate to the concept, for, insofar as it was conceptualised at all, noise existed, until that time, primarily as an obstacle to communication. Theoretical engagement with noise was thus restricted to the calculation of the degree of redundancy necessary to incorporate into a particular message in order to overcome the interference of a given channel and medium. The transformation of noise from an engineering problem into an explanative concept can be dated to the publication in 1948 of Claude E. Shannon’s paper *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Assuming that the “fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point”, Shannon argued that the problem of noise related not to the content of the message, but the question of selection: “the semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem. The

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<sup>5</sup> Jurij Lotman: “According to the well-known law any communication channel (anything from a telephone wire to the centuries that lie between us and Shakespeare) contains noise which consumes information” (75).

significant aspect is that the actual message is the one *selected from a set* of possible messages” (379). A message, according to Shannon, informs not because it carries information as a ship carries its cargo, but because the message represents a series of choices between a range of possible alternatives at a variety of levels, and it is these unselected alternatives whose return constitutes noise.

“The Facebook suicide manifesto”, Sean Dockray’s advice on the most effective way to leave a social network provides a convenient example of the practical application of Shannon’s thesis. Because social networks understand individuals as the record of their selections and retain a record of those selections after an account has been “deleted”, Dockray suggests a more effective means of removing yourself from a social network is to subvert the value of selection itself. Because “[s]ocial networking captures, quantifies, and capitalizes on positive feedback” the only way to destroy your networked self is to corrupt the process of selection: “Suicide on a social network is a matter of introducing noise into the system”. The aspirant Facebook suicide should thus “like” everything, “add” everything and click on everything thereby “spreading viruses and misinformation . . . disrupt[ing] the finely calibrated advertising algorithms on which suggestions are made - for friends, groups, institutions, ideas, and so on” (Dockray).

While persuasive within the confines of a pure information economy such as a social network, Shannon’s conceptualisation of noise in terms of the return of the unselected would at first sight seem to have little in common with the more general understanding of noise as something external to a system which interrupts or disrupts the transmission of information within that system - the noise of an aircraft that drowns out the words of the TV reporter, for example. Here noise would seem to represent the intrusion of a random element from outside a signifying system rather than the principle of non-selection at work within the system itself. To relate this understanding of noise to the principle of selection, however, it is only necessary to recognise that the distinction between a system and the external world itself constitutes a (meta)selection. A principle formulated in the systems theory maxim that

what is experienced as noise or perturbation at one point within a system becomes information from another perspective within that system.<sup>6</sup>

Interdisciplinary Michel Serres provides an elegant illustration of this principle in his account of the operation of noise in Jean de la Fontaine's fable "The Town Rat and the Country Rat" (*Parasite* 3-15). The fable, he shows, is structured around a series of noisy interruptions which break one frame to reveal a higher order of complexity, each of which is based on the recognition of the parasitic relationship of the various protagonists - a relationship made resonant by the fact that the French word for interference or the noise of static is *parasite*: "In this somewhat fuzzy spot, a parasite is an abusive guest, an unavoidable animal, a break in a message" (*Parasite* 8). Firstly the country rat eats at the table of the town rat, but fails in his sacred duty as guest to pay for his supper with a tale. Instead, scared by the noise of the householder at the door, he eats and runs. The noise of the householder reminds us that the heroes of the tale are, from another perspective, parasites within human society: the rat's "feast" is in reality assembled from the crumbs left by the householder. However, in Fontaine's story the householder awoken by the noise of the rats is a tax farmer and, as such, himself a form of parasite who lives on the leftovers (surplus) of the farmer, the fable's "true" producer - just as, at a different scale, the city is a parasite upon, or guest at the table of, the country.

This at least is "the peasant's moral" (*Parasite* 6), but, according to Serres, the logic of the parasite extends beyond the city: the farmer who lives at the expense of his livestock, is also a parasite who constantly takes from nature but gives nothing back except death (5). In Serres' reading, consequently, everybody lives off somebody else: "abuse value" precedes "use value" (80). Or to put it another way, in every

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<sup>6</sup> William Paulson: "Self-organization from noise . . . provides a framework for understanding how organized variety, information, even meaning can arise from interaction with disorder. Suppose that in a system the totality of information contained in a subsystem A is to be sent to subsystem B. If the transmission takes place without noise, B gets a copy of A and now has the same information as A. But if there is noise in the channel, the information received at B is diminished by a function known as the ambiguity of the message, the quantity of information coming from the channel that is independent of the information that entered the channel that is independent of the information that entered the channel. From the viewpoint of B, defined as pure and simple receiver of the message from A, information has been lost. But consider the point of view of an observer of the combined systems A and B (and the channel). Such an observer . . . might also be a higher level within the system itself, a subsystem related to (A-B) as B was to A. What is the quantity of information emitted by (A-B)? It is the information received by B plus the ambiguity . . ." ("Literature, Complexity, Interdisciplinarity" 40).

simple system of exchange (communication), there occurs some noise, some interference, and when we shift our perspective and treat that noise as information, we see that the simple system forms part of a more complex chain. Serres formulates this insight thus:

Theorem: noise gives rise to a new system, an order that is more complex than the simple chain. The parasite interrupts at first glance, consolidates when you look again. The city rat gets used to it, is vaccinated, becomes immune. The town makes noise, but the noise makes the town. (*Parasite* 14)

If Serres here seems to elucidate the connection between noise as the negative trace of selection and noise as chaos or random disorder, elsewhere he insists on the foundational tension within Shannon's identification of noise as simultaneously an obstacle to, and precondition of, information. Noise as chaos in fact renders meaningless any distinction between a system and its outside, for, in Serres' more abstract formulations, noise is wholly paradoxical in that it is the only phenomena that is not a phenomena:

Background noise may well be the condition of our being. It may be that our being is not at rest, it may be that it is not in motion, it may be that our being is disturbed. The background noise never ceases; it is limitless, continuous, unending, unchanging. It has itself no background, no contradictory. How much noise must be made to silence noise? And what terrible fury puts fury in order? Noise cannot be a phenomenon; every phenomenon is separated from it, a silhouette on a backdrop, like a beacon against the fog, as every message, every cry, every call, every signal must be separated from the hubbub that occupies silence, in order to be perceived, to be known, to be exchanged. As soon as a phenomenon appears, it leaves the noise; as soon as a form looms up or pokes through, it reveals itself by veiling noise. So noise is not a matter of phenomenology, so it is a matter of being itself. (*Genesis* 13)

In this figuration noise becomes nothing less than the primordial chaos which is the source of all order and the condition to which every form of order returns. It is both generative and destructive and has its being in the contradiction implied in Shannon's

formulation of noise as both an obstacle to, and precondition of, communication. The importance of noise, in other words lies precisely in the seeming opposition between noise as a negative trace and noise as the manifestation of radical contingency or the random in an ordered system.

As Colin Grant observes, Shannon's thesis that a message is always articulated against a penumbra of uncertainty (1), and that it is that penumbra which determines its value as information, has a number of important corollaries that have resonances across disciplines ranging from economics to biology to poetics. A sample of recent economics papers, for example, shows the concept of noise to have been deployed in attempts to relate micro and macro analysis in asset management strategies, to model the aggregate effect of news and noise on the business cycle<sup>7</sup> and to explain why, if a market price represents the sum of all available information about an object, some investors will still pay for information.<sup>8</sup> In the life sciences biochemical noise such as slight variations in protein production has been identified as critical in helping cells transform from one state to another.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Yacine Ait-Sahalia and Jialin Yu: "A common view of the business cycle gives a central role to anticipations. Consumers and firms continuously receive information about the future, which sometimes is news, sometimes just noise. Based on this information, consumers and firms choose spending and, because of nominal rigidities, spending affects output in the short run. If ex post the information turns out to be news, the economy adjusts gradually to a new level of activity. If it turns out to be just noise, the economy returns to its initial state. Therefore the dynamics of news and noise generate both short-run and long-run changes in aggregate activity". <http://www.nber.org/papers/w13825.pdf> accessed 01.09.11.

<sup>8</sup> James Dow and Gary Gorton's paper on "Noise Traders" investigates the paradox that if the price on a market reflects the available information, there is no incentive for traders to collect costly information, as that information will then be expressed in the price and other traders will gain the information for free. For the system to work there has to be noise within the system. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w12256> accessed 01.09.11.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, J.R. Newman et al. "Single-cell proteomic analysis of *S. cerevisiae* reveals the architecture of biological noise" <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16699522>, accessed 01.09.11. This paper is summarised by Kate Melville in "Biochemical 'noise' critical for regulating biological processes":

Noise, like the static heard on AM radio, is generally thought to be a nuisance in most applications. But within living cells, biochemical 'noise' (for example, slight variations in protein production) turns out to be critical in helping them transform from one state to another. Describing their findings in *Science*, the UT Southwestern Medical Center researchers behind the discovery say it represents 'a new paradigm' in biology.

In an electrical circuit, random fluctuations in the electric current passing through the components create noise. Likewise, within each living cell there are many 'genetic circuits', each composed of a distinct set of biochemical reactions that contribute to some biological process. Randomness in those reactions contributes to biological noise. (Melville,

Within the field of literary studies, the concept of noise has made its presence felt chiefly in formalist attempts to distinguish the literary from purely instrumental language use. Literature as “organized violence committed on ordinary speech” (Jakobson, qtd. Erlich 219), or the conscious deployment of ambiguity and equivocation in order to privilege connotative over denotative meaning has been examined by, amongst others, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Schlovsky and Jurij Lotman and informs such concepts of defamiliarization and the alienation effect or *ostranenie*, while its importance within the Anglo-American tradition of New Criticism is suggested by the place of William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) within the New Critical canon. Jurij Lotman gives the concept one of its most ambitious formulations when he writes that art is Art because, like life, it “is capable of transforming noise into information”, because, uniquely “[i]t complicates its own structure owing to its correlation with its environment (in all other systems the clash with the environment can only lead to the fade-out of information)” (75). Where the information content of instrumental language is exhausted in the telling, the artful language of literature retains its informational content, its power of affect, by resisting its instrumentalisation.

The meta-linguistic thesis sketched in Lotman’s definition of Art as noise is further elaborated into a defence of literature against functionalist critics within the academy by William Paulson who argues for the importance of literature as “the noise of culture” (1988). For Paulson literature as a “noisy channel” is a marginal activity in a communicative economy dominated by instrumental forms of language use, and, as such, “creates meaning by putting meaning in jeopardy . . . By perturbing existing systems of meaning [noise] enables the creation of new ideas and ultimately new domains of knowledge” (Hayles, *Chaos and Order* 269).

For other scholars, such as Katherine N. Hayles (*Chaos Bound, Chaos and Order*), noise forms a useful bridge between a formalist concern with the text and the science of non-linear systems known variously as complexity- or chaos-theory. Jo Alyson

Parker, for example, has recently attempted “to demonstrate how certain narrative structures resemble chaotic nonlinear dynamical systems” (21) while Emily Zants (1996) applies the idea of “emergent phenomena” as developed in complexity theory to the evolution of the French novel as a genre.

Also drawing on Serres, Marjorie Perloff in a reading of Charles Bernstein’s L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poem, “The Lives of the Toll Takers” deploys the concept of noise to different ends. Taking Bernstein’s difficult and fragmentary text as illustrative of the nature of communication within a culture saturated by media she shows how its apparent incoherence becomes legible once we read the poem as being *about* interference and interruption:

Once we understand that Bernstein’s technique is to represent not only a “message” he is sending the passive reader but also the noise that is endemic to it, the poem makes perfectly good sense. Indeed, as a representation of the “Lives of the Toll Takers”, Bernstein’s text is remarkably “realistic” and coherent, its metonymic structure highly charged. (“Multiple Pleats” 196)

Elsewhere she argues that attention to noise as “unanticipated excess” is increasingly important: “given the complex electronic modes of communication that now exist, the possibility increases that what is received differs from what was sent” (*Radical Artifice* 16). Perloff effectively identifies the paradoxes of noise as an important element in the realistic representation of the globalised space of networked communications and electronic media and provides an exemplary reading of avant-garde practices in this light. In this respect Perloff’s interest in noise marks a significant departure from the work of most of the other scholars mentioned above. Where they are interested in the ways that the concept of noise can be used to identify a specifically literary form of language use, Perloff looks at the way that noise functions to relate literature with a wider communicative context, at the place of noise within a wider economy.

The function of noise within a wider information economy is taken up by Fred Botting who deploys the concept to illuminate the paradoxical relationship between



homogeneity and difference for the production of value within a globalised economic system:

Noise . . . becomes a reservoir of difference, a source of both uncertainty and innovation: in breaking up the circulation of (the same) information it opens gaps in transmission which, when filled, enable the production of new information. Sameness, or exact replication, with its diminution of value as information, requires the injection of difference. (231)

Where Perloff identifies noise as critical to an understanding of art in the age of electronic media, Botting indicates its importance to understanding the place of culture within the wider, globalised, economy. Botting in other words extricates noise from the formalist tradition to show how noise, as the “reservoir of difference”, is integral to the operation, and hence the understanding of what is variously termed “neoliberalism” (Harvey, *Brief History*) and “late capitalism” (Mandel; Jameson, *Postmodernism*).

Drawing on the formalist deployment of noise as a conceptual tool for the analysis of poetics, this thesis seeks to relate that understanding of the role of noise in the production of textual meaning and affect with the operations of the wider economy of noise that Botting associates with globalisation. Put another way, I am interested in the ways in which the concept of noise enables us to talk both about strategies for the production of textual meaning - the traditional concern of poetics - and to address the function of poetics within the social and economic space that has traditionally provided the field of cultural studies and cultural analysis (Bal, *Travelling Concepts*). As such noise is invoked not in order to negotiate the interdisciplinary boundaries that separate and connect (postmodernist) literature and (nonlinear systems) science, in the tradition of Hayles and Paulson, for example, but rather to explore the ways in which it can help us address the *location* of subjects which are simultaneously aesthetic and political, spatial and textual in spaces which are themselves processual rather than fixed. I am particularly interested in the ways in which the conceptualization of contemporary economies and cultures in terms of networks and flows reinvests the notion of noise with a critical potency. This potency I argue arises from the ways in which the contradictory logic of noise manifests itself within liberal thought which on

the one hand seeks to eliminate all that restricts or obstructs the circulation of information, and thus to remove noise from systems, but, at the same time recognizes that noise, in the form of delay, difference and inequalities of distribution, is necessary for the production of value. Historically this contradiction can be seen to organise the distinction between (embedded) liberalism and neoliberalism; between the belief, that is, that some form of extra-market mechanism, such as the welfare state, is necessary to ameliorate the worst excesses of the market and the neoliberal belief that any form of interference with natural market operations will be disastrous (Harvey, *Brief History*; Sinfield, *Literature, Politics, Culture*).

In the trajectory of his work from 1970s London to his more recent commentary on the Millennium Dome and the 2012 London Olympics, I argue, Iain Sinclair has provided a particularly rich commentary on this contradiction, and that his texts are particularly acute in their sensitivity to liberalism's contradictory investments in noise. To develop this argument, however, requires a refinement of the concept of noise as it has emerged from communication theory, and to this end I want first to elaborate some corollaries of Shannon's conceptualisation of noise as simultaneously an obstacle to and the precondition of communication in the form of four precepts which will serve as the basis for the practice of what I am going to call noisy reading.

#### **Four precepts for noisy reading**

The correlation of information with uncertainty and identification of information with the selections involved in producing a message rather than with any notional "content" has, as noted above, the immediate corollary of identifying noise as *the return of the unselected* and as such invites reflection on the different forms of selection and return involved in the production of meaning. The first precept of noisy reading thus involves attention to the negative trace of exclusion within the text or object, an attention, that is, to the ways in which the text registers that which cannot be said as the ground of its own status as message. Most typically this involves attention to the mechanics of return as a phenomenon which is both spatial and temporal.

Transposed into the language of systems theory, Shannon's uncertainty principle generates the familiar proposition that, in the words of Michel Serres, "*systems work because they do not work: functioning is a function of non-functioning*" (*Parasite* 79). Again the applications of this precept are legion. At the most abstract level it reminds us to pay attention to the interdependence of apparently opposed and antagonistic principles. Within a neoliberal context it is a maxim which speaks directly to much post-Marxist thought on the relationship of hegemony and counter-hegemony and the co-option of discourses of resistance for the production of value within a free market. As such this precept leads towards a consideration of the relationship between noise and resistance within a globalised culture and more, generally, the place of noise within the politics of an era which has been characterised as post-political.

The third precept shifts the focus from the system to the performative and the conditions of successful communication in the maxim, *a message can only arrive if it could have gone astray*. Giving Shannon's thesis this postal inflection serves as a reminder that successful communication involves the possibility of miscommunication, and thus highlights the necessary role of risk and uncertainty within communication. This emphasis on the constitutive role of chance in the production of meaning also involves a recognition, on the part of the subject, of its essential vulnerability: a recognition that, for a message to "get through" involves a surrender to the play of contingency. As such it is a precept which encourages us to pay attention to the ways in which communication exposes the vulnerability and non self-identity of the subject, and as such points to a possible ethics of noise.

The final corollary of Shannon's thesis addresses the ways in which noise serves to constitute or locate subjects within a relational space. The precept of *the locative function of noise* expresses the principle that *what we hear as signal and what we hear as noise positions us as subjects with respect to particular communication systems and their associated communities*. To literalise this precept we might point to the experience of the tourist who is constituted as a foreigner by her non-comprehension of her linguistic environment. Within her native linguistic environment the noise that marks the boundaries between comprehension and non-comprehension, will more likely constitute her as a subject according to the markers

of class, gender, race, sexuality, education, age, disability or even mood. Because the relationship between noise and signal is necessarily dynamic, however, it is important to recognise that the contours of the subject constructed by the perception of noise and signal is also fluid. Just as it is difficult to remain ignorant of a language, so languages may be motivated by the explicit intention of producing closed communities by remaining noisy to outsiders: music styles and youth culture generally, being obvious examples. The subject positions mapped, by the noise / signal contours are thus temporary and transitional. The precept of the *locative effect of noise*, consequently, suggests the ways in which the concept of noise invokes a particular order of spatiality which is relational - the subject is located inside or outside a particular community - but which is also in process insofar as the relationship between signal and noise is dynamic.

The corollaries then, are, in summary form:

1. The identification of noise with the return of the unselected.
2. The realisation that systems only work because they do not work.
3. The recognition that a message can only arrive if it could have gone astray.
4. The appreciation that noise has a locative effect: that what we recognise as signal and what we hear as noise locates us as subjects with respect to a particular communication system.

Having briefly introduced these precepts for noisy reading in summary form, I now want to examine them in more detail by considering the place of noise within the thought of a number of theorists whose work will return in subsequent chapters and to indicate, very briefly, some of their main points of expression in Sinclair's text.

### **The return of the unselected**

Shannon's demonstration that information can be treated as a measure of uncertainty, and that noise represents the return of elements whose non-selection is the ground of meaningfulness finds an immediate resonance in the founding insight of the science

of signs outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1915): namely that languages mean, or signify, by virtue of being differential, rather than referential, structures. As elements within an arbitrary system of negative difference, the meaning of a word is determined neither by its history nor its reference to “the world”, but through the system of differences constituted by its relationship to other words or units within the signifying system (*langue*) of which it is a part. Given Shannon’s conceptualisation of information in terms of selection it is important to note here that the system of signification is predicated on *negative* difference, which means that elements signify because they are sufficiently *unlike* any other element within the system not because of their own positive characteristics. Thus at the phonemic level, the English word “book” carries with it its difference from the words “look”, “cook”, “hook”, “buck”, “boot”, etc., etc., and it is this web of negative difference in which the word “book” is differentiated from all the other signifiers with which it could be confused that is the source of the background noise which can always return to disrupt the transmission of information.

Additionally, it should be noted that insofar as we tend to think of signification in terms of positive difference: the qualities that define “x” as “x”, and hence essentialize the nature of an entity (to see a cat as a cat, rather than seeing a cat as something that is sufficiently unlike something else to be itself) we tend to suppress noise as the unwelcome evidence of the basis of meaning in difference, of the system as the source of meaning. In our everyday mapping of the world we tend to operate with positive models of difference and hence are inclined to suppress evidence of the principle of negative difference. Significantly, because the systems through which we make the world meaningful do so by virtue of negative difference, the differences that count most are often minimal differences. As Rudi Visker points out (in a slightly peculiar example), in enumerating his possible responses to the news that another male had witnessed his wife undress,

I would remain indifferent if the cat is in the bathroom where my wife undresses, but I would not react likewise if it were not the cat but another male. Unless of course if I were the president of the V.O.C. (Dutch East India Company) and the other male was a local servant whose job it was to hand her the warm water she needed to wash herself. (117-118)

Identity, as that to which one cannot remain indifferent is sustained by precisely those minimal differences where the operations of noise are most effective. Minimal differences threaten our sense of self-identity, Visker suggests because they reveal that what was thought to be self-evident is in fact a cultural choice or selection - they represent the return of the unselected precisely where there seemed to be no selection. Thus Freud first mentions the importance of minimal differences in his discussion of the primitive taboo on virginity - that is the disgust manifest in many cultures at virgin brides. He notes that “the high value set [by our culture] upon her virginity by a man wooing a woman seems so deeply embedded and self-evident that we become almost perplexed and feel as if called upon to give some reasons for it” (Freud qtd. Visker 119). As Visker notes “[t]he primitive taboo on virginity does not make Freud’s contemporaries doubt the value that they themselves put on it. But it embarrasses them by demonstrating that this notion which appeared so self-evident, was only self-evident for them and not for others” (119).

Visker’s example also illustrates the ways in which the tendency towards positive identification presents itself as saturating the field, of structuring perception around a number of alternatives which are assumed to exhaust the available possibilities and as such underpins strategies of universalizing thought where two options are presented as the only possible alternatives, thus “a” or “-a”, constitute an ontological set, while “male” and “female” constitute the set of gender.

Although Shannon explicitly restricted his principle to the non-semantic aspects of communication, the principle of negative difference is extended within the structuralist tradition from the realms of orthography, grammar and syntax to the more evidently semantic domains of narratology and morphology. In his classic categorisation of the six functions of communication, Roman Jakobson provides a useful schematisation of the elements which can return as noise within the semantics of communication. According to Jakobson any message will display an orientation to at least one of the following functions:

1. Referential context

2. Emotive        addressor
3. Conative      addressee
4. Phatic         contact
5. Metalingual   code
6. Poetic         message

That is, a given communication can be a statement about the world (referential), about the attitude of the speaker (emotive) or person spoken to (addressee); it can function simply to check the condition of the channel (phatic) or be a statement about the language of the message (metalingual) or about the message itself (poetic). We can make statements about the world, communication theory suggests, only because we can, also make statements about the code: we can't say "the grass is green" unless we can also say what "green" means, and because we can also say what green means, a statement about the world can be mistaken for (or become) a statement about the code and vice versa. The instability of the border between poetic and referential functions is memorably exploited in William Carlos Williams' note/poem: "This is just to say" "I have eaten/ the plums/ that were in/ the ice box// and which/ you were/ probably saving/ for breakfast//forgive me/ they were delicious/ so sweet and so cold" (372). Reading Williams' text as a set towards the Poetic problematises the ethical questions that cluster around its Emotive and Conative functions: performative questions of sincerity and intent, forgiveness and absolution, and yet those questions are present in the Poetic. The poem is, in other words, an effect of the interference of different communicative functions: functions whose presence is felt even as one particular function is foregrounded. To recognise Williams' text as a poem it is necessary to set it against - recognise it as a selection within - a wider tradition which contains, for example, the Bible and *Paradise Lost* and a host of associations which relate the simple act of eating fruit with the themes of disobedience, punishment and mercy. It involves too a selection within a culture which has a particular understanding of poetic and plain language as oppositional.

While Jakobson's schema provides a useful list of selections, and hence possible sources of interference or noise, it should be remembered that insofar as it is

meaningful, it too represents a selection between different possible semantic categories and is itself subject to the return of the unselected. Here we can note that it includes two communicative functions - the phatic and the poetic which themselves seem to be more intimately and immediately related to the concept of noise. Insofar as phatic communication, or communication intended simply to check the functioning of a channel, typically has little or no semantic content, it frequently approaches the condition of pure noise. Similarly, poetic communication, insofar as it is defined in opposition to the referential function, or statements about the world, also has a pronounced inclination towards noise.<sup>10</sup>

If the notion of noise as the return of the unselected resonates strongly with the founding principles of the structural tradition in linguistic analysis, it is also evident that it encompasses the more general fascination with “return” as a theoretical object within twentieth-century thought associated most particularly with the legacy of Freud. In the notion of “the repressed” Freud institutionalises the dynamics of return as one of the principal motions of critical exegesis. Indeed Shannon’s thesis allows us to nominate *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) as one of the founding texts within the literature of noise insofar as its subject is precisely the errors, glitches, mistakes and accidents which, while appearing to represent a loss of information, actually constitute the trace of what could not otherwise be articulated. Or, as Freud puts it, “[c]ertain shortcomings in our physical functioning . . . and certain seemingly unintentional performances prove, if psychoanalytical methods of investigation are applied to them, to have valid motives and to be determined by motives unknown to consciousness” (239). In hypothesizing the insistent presence of the unselected in a variety of forms ranging from the hysterical symptom to dream logic, to parapraxis

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<sup>10</sup> However, as William Paulson notes, the concept of noise also works to undo the opposition between the organic and the instrumental. The Romantic opposition is rooted in a vitalist distinction between the organic and the inorganic. One of the most important contributions of information theory has been to help rethink life as information:

To speak of the organism as a self-organizing system is to speak of it as a machine, but a kind of machine no longer conceptually opposed to the living being. The nineteenth century saw in the machine the antithesis of the organism, because the machine had been constructed according to a plane or organization external to itself. It had no autonomy. The autonomous self-programming machine is a problematic but not impossible metaphor, for the concept of machine has now changed to include informational machine, cybernetic regulators that make use, via feedback, of their own output as one of their inputs. (*Noise of Culture* 70)



and the uncanny, psychoanalysis teaches us to read discourse as spoken and unspoken, as the marker of a boundary separating the sayable and the unsayable.

Indeed Freud's career can itself be characterised as one long attempt to determine the nature of return, of what, from where. In abandoning the topographic model of the unconscious for one based upon drives in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he shifts from a content-based notion of return - the return of something from somewhere - to a notion of return which, in the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, notes the generative role of returning in producing its own "content".

I will argue below that this notion of return is of critical importance in Sinclair's notion of the relationship between present and past, which is structured around the notion of the future anterior, the "preposterous" tense (Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio* 6)<sup>11</sup> that allows us to say what we will do as if it was over and done with. The operation of this *nachträglich* temporality becomes clearer in Jacques Derrida's elaboration of the concept in "Freud and the Scene of Writing" (1966). In Derrida's account, Freud's perception that the primal scene only ever acquires its originary significance in retrospect, and that cognition is, as such, always re-cognition, entails that our understanding of the present and of presence is the creation of this process of delay and deferral. In a "theme formidable for metaphysics", Derrida suggests, Freud allows us to see that "the present in general is not primal but, rather, reconstituted, that it is not the absolute, wholly living form which constitutes experience, that there is no purity of the living present" (*Writing and Difference* 210). In addition to forcing Freud to abandon his "topographic" model of the psyche for a dynamic model based on flows and drives, Derrida notes that the perception that the present is never present has dramatic implications for Freud's model of interpretation and reading. Specifically it forces Freud to discount the idea that dreams are the distorted expression of an original text "hidden" in the locked box of the unconscious which can be decoded through the use of a formal schema, code or key.<sup>12</sup> Instead, in

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<sup>11</sup> "This reversal which puts what came chronologically first ('pre') as an after-effect behind ('post') its later recycling, is what I would like to call a *preposterous* history" (Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio* 6-7).

<sup>12</sup> As Derrida notes, "[t]he conscious text is thus not a transcription, because there is no text present elsewhere as an unconscious one to be transposed or transported" (*Writing and Difference* 211).

pursuing this theme he comes to recognise that in dream logic the sign exists as a trace, that it is not the content, but the context and relation that is critical. As such, dream logic operates with the materiality or noise of the sign - the sound of a word, or, the shape of a letter, the place of the signifiers within a network of associations which are entirely singular, and which cannot, consequently, be translated or transcoded:

The materiality of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes. To relinquish materiality: such is the driving force of translation. And when that materiality is reinstated, translation becomes poetry. In this sense, since the materiality of the signifier constitutes the idiom of the dream scene, dreams are untranslatable. (*Writing and Difference* 210)

The concept of *Nachträglichkeit* thus marks the recognition that every dream exhibits its own noisy logic, smuggling a private meaning through a web of particular associations on the back of its public message or “manifest content”. In this respect the dream effectively discovers the noisy element in every sign, and reveals that this lies in the materiality which is defined as “precisely that which translation relinquishes”.

In *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987), Sinclair effectively deploys this insight as the basis of a critique of empiricist historiography. Taking the unresolved question “who was Jack the Ripper?” as emblematic of the historian’s desire to recover an original identity or event, his novel suggests that there can be no single answer to the question of who committed what came to be known as the Whitechapel murders, for, like the unconscious, the locked box of the past is always either empty, or overfull. The women murdered in Whitechapel in 1888 were, in one sense, sacrifices to the compulsion to discover the identity of their murderer. The idea of the detective produces the idea of the crime, and hence, the aim of their investigations, the narrator tells his accomplice, Joblard, must be to overcome their own obsessions, “otherwise they will be doomed not to relive the past but to die into it” (*White Chappell* 198). According to the logic of *Nachträglichkeit*, the crime is always constructed after the

event which becomes thereby its impossible origin. At this level, the real perpetrator of the Whitechapel murders was Sherlock Holmes, for as Wilhelm Emilsson observes “[a]n enigma of this magnitude in the period when Holmes, the greatest detective in the world, reigned supreme can be seen as Iain Sinclair’s challenge to the ultrarational world view symbolised by Doyle’s hero” (276). As the product of the impulses repressed by the Victorian valorisation of rationality and science, Whitechapel’s “scarlet tracings” figure the past as the present’s other and as such invite a deconstructive hermeneutic. As Emilsson notes, Sinclair’s novel “may be viewed as a noir version of Derrida’s deconstruction of phallogocentrism” (278), his detectives “deconstruct the present in order to get to the past” (282) but this is of course impossible “for the events of Whitechapel are ‘under erasure’ . . . one sign leads to another along the infinite twisted strings of signification” (282).

If the legacy of Freud marks the most obvious instance of theoretical fascination with the dynamics of return in nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought, that legacy finds one of its most interesting expressions within the Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions. The nature of the return invoked in the famous and much-analysed opening sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*, “There is a spectre haunting Europe”, points to the more general principle of return as revenance (Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*) at work within classical Marxist Historicism. In identifying History with a world Historical struggle of particular classes - the Aristocracy and the Bourgeoisie, the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat - classes which are themselves formed in the process of that struggle, Marxist historiography exists in a complex relationship with the idea of the return of the unselected. At the same time as it denies any world Historical role to the majority of the world’s population it presents History as a struggle of the unselected to assert their right to recognition. The assertion that the ideological ascendancy of neoliberalism entails the end of History thus produces the paradoxical situation described by Alain Badiou when he writes that globalisation means that we now live in a world where there is no world (121).<sup>13</sup> To further explore the nature of the Marxian return, however, it is helpful to invoke the second precept of noisy reading.

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<sup>13</sup> “Yes, today there is no world, there is nothing but a group of singular disconnected situations. There is no world simply because the majority of the planet’s inhabitants today do not receive even the gift of a name, of a simple name. When there was class society, proletarian parties (or those presumed to be such), the USSR, the national wars of liberation, etc., no matter which peasant in no matter in what region - just as no matter which worker in no matter what town - could receive a political name. That is

### “Systems work because they do not work”: the politics of noise

In one respect this formulation of Shannon’s insight simply states the obvious truth that communication presupposes difference: “Given two stations and a channel. They exchange messages. If the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum and immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means it failed” (Serres, *Parasite* 79). Or, in other words, the perception of difference - of spatial or temporal delay - is what makes communication communication. In the realm of physical systems the maxim simply states that insofar as work involves overcoming resistance, if there is no resistance, there is no work and thus friction, the loss of energy, or noise is part of what makes a system work. Insofar as the operation of power within the sphere of the political is conceptualised according to a mechanistic model, the precept alerts us to the interdependence of force and opposition, hegemony and counter-hegemony which has been a feature of much post-Foucauldian thought on the dynamics of power. It implies that resistance to the exercise of power paradoxically serves to facilitate the smooth operation of power.

As such Serres’ maxim<sup>14</sup> seems to speak directly to the political situation which Ross Chambers, describes in terms of the “lessons of 68”, lessons which “demonstrated both the fragility of the structures of authority in Western societies and their

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not to say that their material situation was better, certainly not, nor that that world was excellent. But symbolic positions existed, and that world was a world. Today, outside of the grand and petty bourgeoisie of the imperial cities, who proclaim themselves to be ‘civilization’, you have nothing apart from the anonymous and excluded. ‘Excluded’ is the sole name for those who have no name, just as ‘market’ is the name of a world which is not a world. In terms of the real, outside of the unremitting undertakings of those who keep thought alive, including political thinking, within a few singular situations, you have nothing apart from the American Army” (Badiou 121).

<sup>14</sup> “Systems work because they do not work. Nonfunctioning remains essential for functioning. And that can be formalized. Given two stations and a channel. They exchange messages. If the relation succeeds, if it is the perfect, optimum and immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed. It is only mediation. Relation is non-relation. And that is what the parasite is. The channel carries the flow, but it cannot disappear as a channel, and it brakes (breaks) the flow, more or less. But perfect, successful, optimum communication no longer includes any mediation. And the canal disappears into immediacy. There would be no spaces of transformation anywhere. There are channels, and thus there must be noise. No canal without noise. The real is not rational. The best relation would be no relation. By definition it does not exist; if it exists, it exists it is not observable” (*Parasite* 79).

extraordinary resilience and powers of recuperation” (*Room for Maneuver* xi). According to Chambers, the events of May 68 in France and elsewhere provide a set of “propositions” which when “taken jointly, [show] that there are no hegemonies so absolute, no systems of control so strict, that they are not vulnerable to disturbance, and that conversely, the disturbance in such systems cannot be so radical as to break with them” (xi). Politics post-68, suggests Chambers, can no longer be aimed at the revolutionary overthrow of a power structure, (the substitution of a false universal for a true universal), rather it involves thinking about the means by which minoritized groups within society can persuade the rest of society to adopt their values and universalise their interests in the knowledge that seemingly oppositional practices in fact serve to shore up the hegemonic group’s control of power. In this context, suggests Chambers, following Michel de Certeau (1984), it is necessary for the weak to develop an oppositional politics which will make hegemonic structures more bearable - and hence indirectly, strengthen their control.<sup>15</sup>

The loss of faith in revolutionary politics described by Chambers writing in the aftermath of *les evenements* seems to be reinforced by the “lessons of 89” and, the apparent disappearance, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, of any challenge to capitalism at the geo-political level. Thus Mark Fisher suggests that the lessons posed by the end of the Cold War included one that was critical to the development of capitalism itself, namely, how capitalism would persist in the absence of any external resistance: “having all too successfully incorporated externality, how can it function without an outside it can colonize and appropriate?” (*Capitalist Realism* 8). Serres’ maxim once again supplies the logic of his answer. In the absence of any external challenge, Fisher argues, capitalism has shown itself adept at generating and assimilating internal resistance - “nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV” (*Capitalist Realism* 9). To the extent that “[c]apitalism seamlessly occupies the horizon of the thinkable . . . the old struggle between *detournement* and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, seems to have been played out”. We now have to deal with the “*precorporation*” of subversive materials with the

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Sinfield illustrates this logic in his argument that while many analysts see a fundamental opposition between the development of the welfare state in post-war Britain and the operation of the free market, the welfare state in fact strengthened capitalism by ameliorating its worst effects and thus ensuring that it did not destroy itself (1997).

result that terms such as “alternative” and “independent” no longer “designate something outside mainstream culture; rather they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream” (8-9). The unquestioned belief that capitalism represents the horizon of the thinkable, the condition that Fisher terms “capitalist realism”, is such that it is, in either Fredric Jameson’s or Slavoj Žižek’s adage, now easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.<sup>16</sup>

Žižek addresses the same logic through the concept of the “fetishistic disavowal” which he argues is central to the operation of ideology in a post-political context. He illustrates the concept through an analysis of the Hays Production Code. Introduced in Hollywood in the 1930s to formalise what American movie-makers considered acceptable viewing for an American cinema audience, the Hays Code, Žižek argues, did not function simply as negative censorship, it was also

a positive . . . codification and regulation that generated the very excess whose direct depiction it forbade. The prohibition, in order to function properly, had to rely on a clear awareness of what really did happen at the level of the outlawed narrative line. The Production Code did not simply prohibit some contents, rather it codified their enciphered articulation. (*Looking Awry* 84)

In Žižek’s Lacanian terminology, the Hays Code acts like a superego that encourages us to engage in an act of “fetishistic disavowal” where we know what we are doing is prohibited but believe that our knowledge of that prohibition changes our relation to our actions. The Hays Code because it is directed wholly to keeping up appearances, actually encourages us to enjoy the “dirty fantasies” it disavows: by removing something from our sight it encourages us to imagine that which has been removed. In this, Žižek argues, it illustrates the more general working of ideology in a post-

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<sup>16</sup> Each attributes it to the other: “When work on this issue began, tracking down the author of a quote turned out to be more difficult than we thought. You may have heard it too: ‘today it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’. Everyone knew it, but had seen it attributed to someone else. Someone even thought they’d been around the time it was first uttered, by somebody at a meeting a few years ago. Further research proved inconclusive: like the story about the man who woke up in a bathtub full of ice without his kidney, it was everywhere, but came from nowhere in particular. Yet, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, this omnipresence seemed to count as its own confirmation. Everyone’s saying it, so it must be true . . .” *Turbulence* [David Harvie, Keir Milburn, Tazio Mueller, Rodrigo Nunes, Michal Osterweil, Kay Summer and Ben Trott]. <http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-4/present-tense-future-conditional/>. Accessed 29.08.11.

historical context. Where Marx believed that people were persuaded to act against their own interests by an ideological mechanism which prevented them recognising the true nature of their actions - “they do not know it, but they are doing it” (Marx, qtd. Žižek, *Sublime Object* 29) - Žižek, following Peter Sloterdijk (1987) argues that capitalism operates by producing cynical subjects who know all too well the way things really are but act as if they do not. As such the formula of ideology should be “they know it and still they do it”. Ideology, in other words, functions not at the level of belief, but at the level of action. Capitalism reproduces itself not through the agency of willing subjects but through the action of subjects who believe that they truly understand the nature of the system of which they are an unwilling part.

Serres’ maxim that systems work because they do not work thus registers the critical dynamic of much post- and neo-Marxist thought about the ways in which capitalism reproduces itself as an economic and political system and as a set of beliefs.

Chambers points to the ways in which resistance serves to shore up systems, Fisher notes how in the absence of an external challenge, capitalism has manufactured its own outside in products which proclaim their anti-capitalism such as alternative culture, while Žižek identifies the same Serresian logic at work within the mechanism through which capitalism reproduces docile bodies, subjects who enact its logic because they believe that they have immunised themselves against its ontology.

Serres’ maxim also describes in broad terms the political position that Brian Baker attributes to Sinclair who, in his view, “exemplifies the utopian aspirations of the late-1960s counterculture, disillusionment with its failure, and the subsequent realignment of critique of contemporary conditions of life from explicitly Marxian politics to an oppositional stance concerned with the configurations of urban space” (2-3). In Baker’s account, Sinclair attempts to achieve a re-enchantment of urban space by means of a modernist/avant-garde practice which “ironically, echoes similar re-workings of the Marxist critical tradition in the 1970s and 1980s in adopting topographical or geographical approaches to late capitalism” (3). Where Baker argues for an (unconscious) alignment between Sinclair’s concerns and those of neo-Marxian critique, I would emphasise Sinclair’s acute and distinctive awareness of the logic of the parasite: his commitment to an oppositional stance in the consciousness that opposition is always suspect. In practice this manifests itself in an impatience with

oppositional politics that denies its own complicity in upholding the system it seeks to overthrow, without, as we have seen, relinquishing the practical critique of neoliberal policy on the production of urban space. In his willingness to inhabit this contradictory position, I argue that Sinclair is the exponent of a parasitic poetics, which increasingly comes to reveal a contradiction within liberalism itself which centres on the desire, on the one hand, for ever greater immediacy, and on the other, a recognition of the necessity of waste and inefficiency.

### **A message can only arrive if it could have gone astray: the ethics of noise**

The vital role of chance in communication implied in Shannon's identification of information with uncertainty is more fully articulated by his fellow information theorist Donald MacKay in the argument that the information content of a message is directly related to its unpredictability, or its ability to surprise the recipient (*Information, Mechanism and Meaning* 57, 157). MacKay's thesis that the more unpredictable a message the more information it contains is given an existential reformulation in Milan Kundera's apothegm: "Chance and chance alone has a message for us. Everything that occurs out of necessity, everything expected, repeated day in and day out, is mute. Only chance can speak to us" (48). Kundera's reformulation has the merit of making explicit two further corollaries within Shannon's uncertainty principle. Firstly in suggesting that we are most fully alive when surrendering to the contingent, he suggests that communication involves an acceptance of the vulnerability of the subject and hence that vulnerability is an integral part of subjectivity. To speak at all is to accept the possibility of being misunderstood, is to surrender authority over one's utterance to the noise of the medium. As such, and more radically, it also problematises the notion of a speaker whose identity precedes the act of communication, and in effect it entails contemplating the ways in which a subject is constituted by the very possibility of its misrecognition. Secondly Kundera's insistence that only chance can speak transforms contingency into a communicational resource, and having commodified that which resists determination, paradoxically threatens to routinize the contingent.



In its implicit identification of communication with vulnerability, with miscommunication, Shannon's figuration of noise leads towards an awareness of intersubjectivity and the domain of ethics. The necessity of the possibility of loss as a precondition of successful communication is not simply theoretical, loss and the experience of loss involves a recognition that we are constituted as subjects by virtue of our vulnerability. One of the most direct cultural expressions of this precept is to be found in Romantic theories of poetry which, as Andrew Bennett notes,

produce an absolute and non-negotiable opposition between writing which is original, new, revolutionary, writing which breaks with the past and appeals to the future, and writing which is conventional derivative, a copy or simulation of earlier work, writing which has an immediate appeal and an in-built redundancy. (3)

The Romantic valorisation of the notion of "originality" effectively identifies true communication as an utterance which invents the rules for its own understanding and which is consequently condemned to be misunderstood by its contemporary audience. Coleridge's "absolute genius" (128) creates the taste by which it will be appreciated and hence "[t]he original poem is both new and before its time precisely *because* it is new" (Bennett 3). To truly speak, rather than simply repeat what has already been spoken, thus entails being misunderstood, while being understood is to simply have repeated what is already known. As such within the Romantic paradigm, speaking truly entails accepting not only the vulnerability of the subject - the necessity of being misunderstood, but even its mortality - a speech which will be understood once the present has been dissolved.

To give the concept of noise-as-loss its full affective ethical weight is thus to arrive at something like Judith Butler's configuration of the relationship of vulnerability, grief and the grievable worked out in her essay "Precarious Life, Grievable Life". In mourning the loss of another, one is confronted with the loss of one's self, for to mourn is to embark on a process whose consequences for the self are unknown:

one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly, for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to

undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.  
(*Precarious Life* 21)

Or, as she says elsewhere: we are “undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something” (*Undoing Gender* 23). The vulnerability involved in successful communication, Butler helps us recognise, is radical and relational. It involves a sudden perception of the intersubjective dimensions of the subject, that the communicating subject inhabits a space which is not proper to it, but relational.

It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and then simply loses a “you” over there, especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who “am” I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do . . . (*Undoing Gender* 22)

As such, the precept that a message can only arrive if it could have gone astray works to problematise the articulation of communication theory around its classical coordinates. Rather than considering sender, receiver, and channel as discrete and self-contained elements, Shannon’s uncertainty principle in this iteration encourages us to see the subject as constituted *through* communication. Where the precept of the return of the unselected resonates strongly with the principles of structuralism, consequently, the precept that a message can only arrive if it could have gone astray suggests a more post-structural dimension to the dynamics of noisy reading.

In Sinclair’s text the precept of the necessary indeterminacy of the message is expressed in what seems to be a fundamental contradiction in his view of artistic production between, on the one hand a sharp-eyed appreciation of the production and circulation of what Pierre Bourdieu terms “cultural capital” (*Distinction; The Field of Cultural Production*) - the way, that is, in which the artist functions as an outrider of the estate agent - and a belief in the artistic production as in some way involuntary and of the artist as the victim of this compulsion. For Sinclair, in other words the creative act is creative insofar as it threatens to disrupt standard communication, and as such

the artist always exists in a position of vulnerability with respect to those communities defined by standard communication. In Sinclair's work, I argue below, that position of vulnerability is dramatised in his mythography of the long poem *Lud Heat* (1975) which in its refusal to respect the economy of metaphoricity threatens to dissolve the community of outsiders constituted by the idea of poetry itself. After the long "poems" *Lud Heat* and *Suicide Bridge* (1979) the issue of the vulnerability of the artist becomes manifest most obviously in his concern with the recovery of "lost" texts and figures. These include the peasant poet John Clare, in *Edge of the Orison* but perhaps most memorably and poignantly the forgotten neo-modernist poet Harry Fainlight "gone; re-remembered, re-forgotten . . . Dum de dum de dumb ash: the final words in his *Selected Poems*" (*Landor's Tower* 334). This concern with "cancelled creatives, [and] drift-culture marginals" (*London City Of Disappearances* 4) extends further to forgotten London novelists such as Gerald Kersh and Alexander Baron whose novel *The Lowlife* (1963) features a protagonist, Harryboy Boas, who is addicted to both gambling and literature, hiding out from creditors by staying in bed "working his way through yards of Zola" (*Lights Out for the Territory* 24).

Robert Bond describing this contradiction takes over Bourdieu's concept of art as a field of "restricted production", as a field, that is, which functions as an "anti-economic economy" (Bourdieu qtd. Bond 32) in that "[t]he fundamental law of this specific universe, that of disinterestedness . . . is the inverse of the law of economic exchange" (Bourdieu qtd. Bond 33). Within the field of restricted production, commercial success is an indication of artistic failure, or, in Bond's words, "economic disinterest is twinned with transcendental gain" (Bond 33). According to Bond, "Sinclair's writing at once unconsciously subscribes to an ideology of disinterestedness, and recognizes the artist's self interest. Sinclair's books therefore point towards the mutual implication of interest and disinterest" (Bond 33). That is, Sinclair's text is highly sensitized to the commercial value of the principle of artistic disinterestedness - he recognizes that artists can perform the acts of enchantment which are subsequently capitalised by investors, and that artists themselves frequently operate as traders on and in this margin.

Sinclair provides one of his most memorable images of the collusive dynamic between culture and capital in his portrait of the visual artist Jock McFadyen.

Caricatured as Jimmy Seed in *Dining on Stones*, Sinclair presents McFadyen as an artist who exploits this margin with a sophisticated yet pragmatic efficiency. He describes his modus operandi thus: “Sell a painting, buy a share in a slum. Sell the renovated flat and option a burnt out pub. Photograph the pub, copy the photo. Sell the painting to a hustler who risks a wine bar on the same site. Sell heritage as something to hang on the Gents” (10). Working his way out of the spray shop and into the gallery and down from Glasgow and up to London, Seed/McFadyen has internalised the principles of cultural capital within a strictly functionalist aesthetic:

Young Seed saw art as a way of accessing women who had expectations of property. His third wife (second launderette conversion) carried him as far West as Roman Road. Social life tracked the flight of the sun (Clerkenwell, Soho, Bond Street), while his art travelled in the opposite direction; greater savagery, blanker canvases. (10)

As an artist, Seed/McFadyen paints the world that will subsequently appear in the developer’s property portfolio, he performs the preliminary imaginative investment necessary to prepare, or territorialise, the world for investment capital:

I imagined when McFadyen began to blaze away with his camera, that he was gathering material for a future painting. Nothing of the sort. The artist was sussing a property. These days the huge canvas is of secondary interest. Paintings are no more than blow-ups of estate agents’ window displays. They’re done, the best of them, with a lust for possession. Speculations that got away. (48)

Both as artist and developer McFadyen is an “auditioner of unlikely prospects” who recognises that in art, as in finance, the real returns are to be made in the area of maximum risk, the domain, in other words, of the future anterior.

However, where Bourdieu seeks to rationalise the field of restricted production according to the operation of general economic laws, Sinclair, as Bond points out, insists on the irrational, compulsive character of artistic production. Art remains disinterested because it is pursued “without regard to the exigency of self-

preservation” (Bond 33). And it is in precisely this noisy, stochastic region that creative and capitalist value mirror each other: the compulsion of avant-garde artists to jeopardise their links with community mirrors capital’s relentless drive to colonize new territories, and specifically they mirror each other in the need to constantly rediscover the contingent. Consequently, if the precept that a message can only arrive if it could have gone astray points to a dynamic which simultaneously makes and unmakes the subject, a similar transformation operates within the concept of contingency. For once it is asserted that chance *alone* can speak to us, and contingency has been identified as the exclusive source of new information, the idea of contingency is quickly confronted with the possibility of its own exhaustion: nothing is less spontaneous than enforced spontaneity. So too, in economic terms, as Botting observes, the principle of freedom of choice has the practical result of increasing homogeneity, which gives rise to the paradoxical situation where the production of contingency itself becomes the motor that drives the free market - both in the sense that high-risk investments yield the highest returns and in the sense outlined above, that resistance produces development and growth.<sup>17</sup>

It is the space peculiar to this stochastic margin shared by capitalist and cultural production that is addressed in the final principle of noisy reading: that what is heard as noise and what is heard as signal locates a subject with respect to a particular communication system or community.

### **The locative effect of noise: the space of noise**

Serres (*Parasite* 66) imagines a scene where a guest leaves a banquet in order to answer a telephone in an adjacent room. At the table the sound of the telephone ringing was noise, on the telephone the animated conversation from the feast becomes

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<sup>17</sup> In this respect it is instructive to note the extent to which the continued re-invention of contingency, of staging “a gap between intention and outcome” (Iverson 12), has informed the practice of the avant-garde since at least Marcel Duchamp’s *3 stoppages etalon* (1913). The role of chance in contemporary artistic practice has been extensively theorised by among others André Breton, Georges Bataille, George Brecht, John Cage, Robert Morris, Gilles Deleuze, Francis Alys, Brion Gysin and William Burroughs. A list of the practices devised in order to formalise the operation of chance would include the notion of the found object, cut-ups, automatic writing, algorithmic psychogeography etc. etc.

noise. The seemingly trivial example of the now familiar lesson that what counts as noise and what counts as message is relative to the position of the observer also speaks directly to the problematic of subject formation within in a world structured by tensions between the local and the global. The guest breaking away from a conversation to answer a telephone is moving between a number of different kinds of communication and their associated spaces: territorialised and deterritorialised, local and global, physical and virtual, analogue (wave) and digital (binary), mediate and immediate.

Serres then goes on to posit a hypothetical space “somewhere between the feast and the telephone . . . a spot where, give or take one vibration, moving a hair’s breadth in either direction causes the noises to become messages and the messages, noises” (67). This position, although hypothetical, is also strangely familiar to the subject of global space, a subject which is constituted precisely as a site where different communication systems coincide and shift between message and noise - local and global, territorial and deterritorialised. Serres describes this space of subject formation thus:

Of course this crest is jagged, random, stochastic. Whoever watched me in my comings and goings would think that he was watching a fly . . . I am on the saw’s teeth of the mountain, at the edges of noise. Not an echo, not at the center of everything like a sonorous echo, but on the edges of messages, at the birth of noises. This erratic path follows the paths of invention exactly. (67)

The stochastic region traversed by Serres’ human fly which is simultaneously the globalised space that demands individuals constantly negotiate a path between multiple codes and languages is defined by its unsustainable nature, for the interdependency of noise and message is based in the fact that the one is constantly becoming the other. The notional interface between message and noise is dynamic and constantly shifting, for Shannon’s conceptualisation of noise as an index of the relationship of information and uncertainty also implies that signal is constantly becoming noise and noise, by the same process, is constantly becoming a source of new information. The principle that what is noise at one point in a system can be information elsewhere in the same system thus ushers us into a space which is

relational and processual, the space of becoming rather than being, a space which is constantly dissolving and emerging.

In order to conceptualise the dynamics of this relational space some theorists have, as we have noted above, turned to complexity theory and the science of non-linear systems which in concepts such as the “emergent” and the “strange attractor” provides a useful technical vocabulary for talking about non-Newtonian, non-linear configurations of spatio-temporality. The explanative ambit of new science for social analysis has been spectacularly demonstrated by Manuel DeLanda in, for example, his *New Theory of Society* (2006) and *A 1000 years of non-linear history* (1997). There are however a number of dangers in this turn to the conceptual lexicon of complexity theory. The first is that the explanative function of the terminology is frequently negated by its own technical nature. The second is the suspicion that science, albeit a division of science which addresses the construction of “science”, is being invoked in order to explain literature rather than set up any more dialogic exchange. In Parker’s account of complexity and narrative for example the claim that the plot of *Tristram Shandy* “both thematizes and enacts deterministic chaos” (44) and identification of Death as a “strange attractor” (33) can seem like a simple transposition of one order of discourse into another which will serve as a form of epistemological alibi.

The further perils of this border crossing are, as Parker herself observes, abundantly illustrated by “the Sokal affair”. Alan Sokal’s triumphant denunciation of postmodern theory after he had persuaded the editors of *Social Text* magazine to publish a spoof article on “postmodern science” speaks to a certain asymmetry in the languages of “theory” and “science” which is evident in the debate which followed on from Sokal’s hoax. Where a theoretical text appears obscure it can be blamed on wilful obscurantism or “bad writing” whereas the difficulty of the “scientific” text is typically taken as an effect of the specialist knowledge required for its comprehension. This accusation is given a particularly tendentious expression by Paul Gross and Norman Levitt when they write: “Thus we encounter . . . essays that make knowing reference to chaos theory, from writers who could not recognize, much less solve, a first-order linear differential equation” (5-6). For the non-specialist to invoke the language of complexity as an explanative strategy is thus to invite accusations of obscurantism. However, it is also to obscure precisely what we are claiming is

productive about noisy reading: specifically the way the perception of noise and signal work to locate or construct a subject. As such it is more useful to locate noise not in the formulae of complexity theory and non-linear dynamics than in the supposed inadequacy of the humanist reader when confronted with the scientific text - in precisely the experience of inadequacy and incompetence rhetorically invoked by Gross and Levitt. This experience of inadequacy is not of course restricted to the alpha contemplating the hieroglyphics of the beta, rather it is a common experience of what Mireille Rosello has recently conceptualised as “rudimentariness”. The experience that is of inadequacy, or incompetence which insofar as it locates us as subjects, with respect to a particular language we shall relate to the locative effect of noise.

### **Rudimentariness and the locative effect of noise**

Although addressed to the conceptualization and practice of comparative literature, Rosello’s exploration of the concept of dwelling in rudimentariness speaks directly to the practice of noisy reading. Connoting “ignorance, illiteracy, incompetence or incomprehension” (312) the term rudimentariness, Rosello notes, is generally regarded as undesirable, whether as the experience of a subject confronted by her or his lack of mastery or fluency in a given language, or as an attribute of an object which is seen as an inferior or underdeveloped version of a more sophisticated model: creole as a rudimentary version of a hegemonic language, for example.

Given its negative connotations there is a natural desire to get rid of, or escape from, rudimentariness as quickly as possible. Strategies for achieving this vary. Confronted with our own rudimentariness, we may seek to attain fluency in the language that positions us as rudimentary - learn to recognise and solve first-order linear differential equations, for example. Alternatively we may declare the illegitimacy or rudimentariness of the language which causes us discomfort by returning the rudimentariness ball in Rosello’s phrase (321). We might argue, for example, that Gross and Levitt’s cultural critique is negated by their simplistic identification of the postmodern and the Left. Similarly, when presented with an apparently rudimentary



object - creole or a pop song, for example - we might seek to demonstrate that although it appears rudimentary it possesses its own sophisticated poetics and as such is actually fluent in “our” language, or, alternatively, we might dismiss it as unworthy of “serious” consideration. All of these strategies are characterised by a desire to negate the experience of rudimentariness.

What happens, asks Rosello, if instead of trying to escape rudimentariness, we recognize its operations and embrace it as a critical tool; if instead of trying to achieve mastery as quickly as possible we choose to dwell in rudimentariness? Specifically, what would it mean “to encounter and then accept certain forms of ignorance as productive forms of relationality” (312)? Might not the discomfort with the rudimentary then serve a valuable critical function in revealing the process of comparison? For a comparatist, she argues, this approach has a number of advantages chief among which is that, in its revelation of a relational space, it opens up onto “a type of thinking or practice that does not start from the objects that an ‘I’ wants to compare but instead lets the ‘I’ and what the ‘I’ understands as comparable objects [to] gradually emerge” (312). As an expression of relationality, rudimentariness can, following Eduard Glissant, be characterized as “a way of remembering that comparing involves a theory of the self and the other, and a theory of the comparable. Relationality suggests that we can neither treat categories as a given nor ignore them” (313). As such, taking rudimentariness seriously “would mean not trying to compare what we already know, or even not wishing to compare something that pre-exists the comparison”. In that it involves examining “our assumptions about more or less naturalized canons and territories” (313) taking rudimentariness seriously entails rethinking, rather than simply crossing, borders.

Insofar as it describes an encounter with opacity that is not restricted to the intercultural but is embedded in the dynamics of subjectification through an encounter with noise-as-the-language-of-another, it is evident that although addressed to comparatists, Rosello’s account of opacity has a wider theoretical application. In encouraging us to allow objects, subjects and concepts to emerge through attention to opacity, Rosello outlines a methodology which allows us to conceive the emergent in terms not of complexity but of the rudimentary. As such she provides a key

element for the practice of a noisy reading which discovers its objects through attention to noise as the return of the excluded.

In Sinclair's text, for example, thinking of the locative effect of noise in terms of the rudimentary encourages us to consider the importance of walking in his work not as a development of a distinguished literary tradition but rather as a form of becoming pedestrian; that is as a way of being rudimentary in a world of flows, and as such a way of being that is parasitic upon the world in which it dwells. What is important about walking in other words, is less its relationship to the tradition of the *flâneur*, for example, than the fact that to choose the pedestrian in a world where fluency is understood as the rapid and noiseless transmission of information is to be wilfully out of step with one's environment and hence, not only to dwell in rudimentariness, but to reveal the rudimentariness within dwelling, in staying slightly longer than is permitted. In the "Freedom Rides" section of *Ghost Milk* (2011), for example, becoming pedestrian means trying to cross the country from Liverpool to Hull using the local bus services on which he can travel free with his Hackney pensioner's "Freedom" bus pass. The bus is rudimentary because "[a] bus is not a coach . . . Coaches don't stop. They have tinted windows to ameliorate the blight: to prevent the curious from looking in. Nobody looks out" (*Ghost Milk* 271).

To become pedestrian is not only to open up the kinds of space encountered in Sinclair's texts - "the bus is a room, a waiting room in transit" (*Ghost Milk* 271), the motorway's "acoustic footprint" (*London Orbital* 16) - it is also to reveal the intimate connection between location and identity. Becoming pedestrian, insofar as it represents a loss of the personal mobility associated with independence, would tend to be experienced as a threat to selfhood within a liberal regime that associates personal freedom with personal mobility. It is this association which is invoked in Margaret Thatcher's notorious dictum that "a man who, beyond the age of twenty six, finds himself on a bus can count himself a failure"<sup>18</sup> - those who have failed to even make it

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200203/cmhansrd/vo030702/debtext/30702-10.htm>. From a materialist perspective the dictum illustrates that it is by doing such things as sitting on a bus that we "find" ourselves, or are constituted as the subjects of an ideological address, in this case as "failures". In other words, we do not hail the bus, rather we are hailed by it.

onto the bus and walk by the side of the road do not even register on Thatcher's scale of failure.

Insofar as the relationship between signal and noise is stochastic however, to choose rudimentariness is to transform the rudimentary. By dwelling on the rudimentary, Sinclair transforms rudimentary space into a space of dwelling. Just as walking, precisely because of its resistance to the economy of immediacy, can itself become a luxury commodity within that economy, insofar as one must first earn the time to "waste", so Sinclair transforms the pedestrian into the principle of his thematic and stylistic identity as a writer and film-maker. The walk as a form of becoming pedestrian provides him with his own distinctive territory, the world suspended between departure and arrival, and with his own theory of writing in which the "ped" is opposed to the "pod": "Sit at your PC as you sit in the car: pod person. Lose yourself in the rhythms of the walk: pedestrian . . . It went back through literature" (*Dining on Stones* 130).

The influence of the pedestrian also informs his work at the stylistic level. His prose exhibits the same disregard for the economy of flows insofar as it proceeds by digression, by forging associations and making connections, rather than by any more conventional dynamic of narrative development. Peter Barry describes this style as "paratactic" noting that Sinclair's "disjunctive, serial hits on successive targets, rather than constituting a flow, as if the lines are really end-stopped poetic images" (176) while Brian Baker speaks of the "semantic drag, a retardation of the narrative impulse" which constantly forces "the attention of the reader to the level of the sentence, the brilliant phrase-making and away from the narrative as a whole" (177).

But this becoming pedestrian also sets in train a spatial logic which is situated precisely at the stochastic interface of the local and the global. Insofar as the walk is the mode of movement associated with local space, to walk is to extend the perception of the local beyond its proper ambit: to confuse the registers of the local and the global. In Sinclair's text this confusion manifests itself in a number of ways. It is particularly evident in terms of diegesis or reference. In the long poem *Lud Heat* for example it is possible to identify at least three different types of reference in terms of diegesis. There are quotations from identified sources ranging from Thomas Browne,

to Origen to Charles Olson, there are un-credited quotations - snatches of dialogue from John Ford's western *The Searchers*, for example - and topical references such as "The Divine Light" in "East Dulwich" (92) - whose specificity and ephemerality could be expected, in a world without Google, to render them wholly opaque or undecodable to anybody outside the immediate time and place of the poem's composition. In more recent prose works the physical progress of a journey-as-thesis tends to be skeined with memory work which typically involves raids on Sinclair's own personal archive of recollections (particularly his home movies), those of his companions and acquaintances and, or, a more generalised cultural memory, particularly of film-lore. The result of this double movement - forward in space, backwards in time - produces a similar "retardation of the narrative impulse" so that the labour of reading Sinclair can seem equally pedestrian in terms of energy expended.

For Sinclair, consequently the notion of the rudimentary as the pedestrian informs both his themes and technique, and in aligning noise with the rudimentary then I want to identify noise as the basis of a practice of reading which is attentive to the emergent and to the processual nature of space as intersection - to locate the dynamic relationship between noise and message explored under the earlier precepts to the production of space which, while it cannot be dwelt within, can be dwelt upon. It is to the role of noise in the production of the city through the practice of the pedestrian that I turn in the next chapter.