

On Noise!

Philosophy – Art –  
Organization



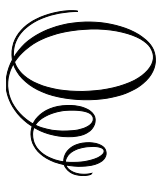
# On Noise!

## Philosophy – Art – Organization

By

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On Noise! Philosophy – Art – Organization

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By Luc Peters

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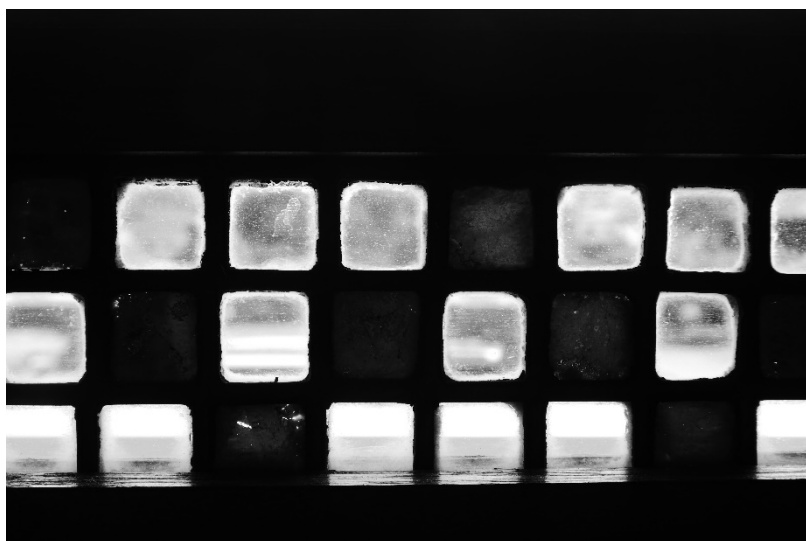
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While I can close my eyes, at my leisure, while I can cloak my colors, I can neither close nor permanently plug my ears. No one is deaf, in a strict sense; at least intropathetic noise is perceived nonstop, my body burns enough to give it off at all times. Hearing is an open receiver which does not go to sleep. It stays awake along with the tactile sense, the skin and the sense of smell. (Serres, 1995, 60)



## MEDITATION

With each passing day I've grown more used to the silence and how incredibly dark it is. (Murakami, 2005, 161)

I'm sitting in my room, listening. I have turned the music, Xenakis' *Metastasis*, off, and have, while being immobile on my sofa, closed my eyes and I am trying to concentrate. In the darkness, I search for silence to create a space for thinking. No disturbance, please! Nevertheless, I notice that the more I concentrate, the more I get distracted by all kinds of noises that suddenly become audible. I hear birds, I hear electricity humming, cars passing by, the next-door neighbors lawnmower, but not my cellphone which sound I have turned off. I try to ignore these noises, but the more I try, the more I realize that these are present nevertheless. Noise is all around me, in darkness or light, it makes no difference. Noise is there, always, everywhere.

I also realize that noise is not *just* restricted to what I hear, but to everything that moves me, thrills me, and disturbs me and my being, my thinking, my behavior, in whatever possible manner. And just when I consider this notion of disturbance, I simultaneously realize that I need this noise. I crave it and need to be disturbed now and then, or maybe more often than I realize or even like. I need it because I know that a world of total silence would be devastating. It would crush me and probably everything surrounding me. I also know that when I start to listen to it, closely, I might start to enjoy it, cherish it, and maybe even get addicted to it.

So silence and noise consume a troublesome and paradoxical relation. This raises the question of how I can understand this paradox? How can I grasp the way in which this relationship works? How can I let my thoughts roam freely in this zone of tension between silence and noise? How can I think about something that is absent, a nothing, the non-existent, the impossible? I need to think this through and hopefully find out along the way if it turns out to be

a fruitful adventure. But maybe it goes beyond thinking and is more like a primal excitement that moves my body, or gives me goosebumps, or cold sweat running down the back of my neck, or arouses me? The more I wonder about this, the more it thrills me.

Still in the dark, wondering about silence and noise, I think about the words of Cormac McCarthy, the American writer, who lets one of his characters, somewhere in his novel *The Crossing*, muse about how the world basically doesn't need light, and how it will move along in darkness, no matter what.<sup>1</sup> Does this imply that light is just some mere luxury product, which we nevertheless got used to, or maybe even got addicted to? Could it be that my body or my thoughts have gotten used to certain cultural sedatives that steer my senses and more or less program me? Have I become some sort of somnambulist who does not know anymore how to open his eyes to the world in front of him? Is the world too much, or too scary, or just too noisy to comprehend? Does this mean that I have lost any sensory connection with this world and that I have metamorphosed into some sort of alien, like Gregor Samsa in the Kafka novel who turned into a hideous vermin? Whenever I look in a mirror I do not see a vermin, but an image which I have come to know as me. Or might the mirror be deceiving me? Whatever the case, it still does not give me any clues on how noise is affecting me.

Maybe it is not just what noise is doing to me, but also what I am doing to noise. This implies that I am not just a consumer, but also a producer. So the noise surrounding me gets enhanced by my presence. It is almost like I am trying to make sense of the world, while the world is trying to make sense of me. So I am not just some innocent bystander but part of the movement of the world. This leaves me two options. One is to move with the world, and the other is to make the world move with me. This means that while I'm in the dark I can either surrender to the urge to turn on the light or remain in darkness. In both cases, I know that the world will remain noisy and thus full of unsolvable mysteries, and maybe it is only about letting the mystery be a mystery. Don't rock the boat, but let it move

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<sup>1</sup> See page 283, but the whole book might be considered as a meditation on the relevance of our senses and their ways to deal with noise.

along with the stream, slowly, while I am stretched out on the bottom, immobile, staring at the sky, and listening to the angels sing.

## **Crank**

It seems clear that noise is not just sound, but that it shapes some sort of assemblage, or apparatus, consisting of a wide variety of sensory thrills. These thrills can take different shapes. I can hear them or see them, taste them, touch, or smell them, or maybe any possible combination of these. When considering noise and me trying to make sense of this world, it also seems clear that it is especially sight and sound that direct me, although nasty smells, or smells of lust, or similar tastes or touches might drive me as well. Still when considering sight and sound it immediately evokes differences. This means that I can shut myself off from sight, but never from sound. In other words, I can always close my eyes, but I can never close my ears. Even if I would be able to close my ears, the noise or sound waves would move my body, so I would sense them nevertheless. Noise is always there to be heard.

So where light can be stopped by physical objects like walls, trees, or bodies, sound cannot so easily be stopped. It moves on, no matter what. It seeks its own way and will pop up at unusual and unexpected moments. We can close the shutters and darken the room, but sound will always worm its way in. So where light is more like a helpful companion, sound can be a nuisance, but also a joy or something to crave. For instance when I hear the moaning of a beautiful girl I am adoring, then this might move me. So noise might be a pleasant or a nasty disturbance, but one way or the other I also need these disturbances. Again noise paradoxically haunts me. This haunting is perpetual, as noise is always there, somewhere, lurking in the dark, always on the verge of moving me in any uncharted direction.

But it is not just about dichotomies. It is not just about arborescence. No, it is about the various and mostly indistinguishable shapes noise can take, which are never just black or white, light or dark, but always a chiaroscuro. Noise is the fuzzy in-between. It moves between and beyond the opposites and carries me along, willingly or unwillingly. It constantly moves, changes, and reinvents

itself, and is not limited to any box. It cannot be boxed-up but is moved by its viable essence. In other words, noise lives. It inhales and exhales in incomprehensible motions. Loud or soft, constantly changing, and moving and simultaneously moving me.

This doesn't always have to be a smooth moving on and beyond, but noise can come unexpected and disturb the peace. It is easy to imagine sitting in your garden, or on your balcony and suddenly an unexpected sound startles you. It kicks you out of your comfortable state of drowsing and suddenly you are wide awake and feel your heart pounding. It is like an alarm, the sudden announcement of danger. Dealing with noise is not always easy living, but can also be living on the verge of alarm, constantly. So, again, it is not so easy to grasp its meaning and the ways in which it moves us.

This also suggests that it can become too much sometimes. This too much is then what we want to silence. In other words, silence raises its head whenever noise becomes too much. It can be the noise of the city, in all its sounds, smells, or sights, but it can also be nature which can be incomprehensible and might scare us because of lurking dangers when shadows start to rise. Or, again, it might be that certain someone that ignites lust. So noise moves me in all of its unpredictable ways. It cranks me up and down.

## **Bugs**

The sudden noise had made the insects stop their racket for a moment but they were soon at it again (Portis, 1979, 183)

The above quote indicates that also animals, in this case insects, have to deal with noise. This is also driven by unpredictability, but also something the insects are acquainted with. Apparently, noise is pretty standard for them. As producers, they make this humming noise, something which they get used to, and which we might get used to as well. It can become this background buzzing which we stop hearing after a certain point of saturation. It is there, but we have become unaware of it, probably just like the insects. It has gone beyond the senses, and beyond thinking, just like the humming of an air-conditioning system. But then the insects in the quote above, are



disturbed by some sudden *other* racket, which triggers them like some sort of alarm. The senses are awakened, again, and the insects fall silent. Could it be that silence is a defense system for them? A system they use in order to try and go unnoticed, or a system which gives them time to think what to do next? Whatever the answer might be, it seems obvious that silence plays its relevant part for the insects. Whenever it is clear that no real danger is present the buzzing noise continues as if nothing really happened. After the silence, it is buzzing, or business as usual. Obviously, in the case of these insects, there was no real silence, it was only their noise that stopped, while the other noises around continued their routine.

This buzzing brings us to French philosopher Michel Serres. His ideas on noise are central to his thoughts, and books, especially in: *The Parasite* and *Genesis*. These can be considered meditations on noise. In them, Serres stresses the idea that noise is about relations, which it constantly shapes and reshapes. This means that it is a constant disturbing which tries to become regular. But it not only disturbs but also creates, or in the words of Serres: “[t]he town makes noise, but the noise makes the town” (2007, 14). It is a constructor and destructor. It thus constantly disrupts the regular, while it needs this regular simultaneously, like a never-ending tape-loop, like ouroboros biting its tail.

Never-ending tape-loops, feedback loops, buzzing, nagging, crawling under the skin, but always there, somewhere, somehow. Moving in all kinds of directions, up and down, a paradox, never a one-way street, but always free-flowing and ungraspable. Invisible but present. If I would like to take noise in my hands, I would be confronted with an impossible exercise. I can locate it, but I can never define the exact space it inhabits. I might think it is there, but simultaneously it might be leaving or hiding within my world. The latter implies that it might be inaudible, which means that I cannot hear it, but still sense it, as some kind of trembling, something that disturbs my balance and shake my flesh and bones. It can be suffocating, asphyxiating, lethal. It can create stress, fear, anger, nightmares. Noise can cause trouble, serious trouble, but then it can also provide joy, happiness, euphoria, lust, climax. Again, it is never a one-way street.

If we start building a tower, or whatever structure it may be, stone after stone, we move up or sideways and try to create a solid structure, unmovable, motionless, static. But then static is also a disturbance, interference, unrest, annoying, noise. Static puts us in a paradoxical situation and informs us that whenever we would like to go down the one-way street and create the solid, this solid always generates noise, which crumbles the solid. It implies that whenever we built something, up from the ground, high in the air, it will disturb all that which it casts its shadows upon. The intruder intrudes, and creating is always creating noise. So static is a creator and a destructor, building and tearing down simultaneously. That is the essence of noise. It builds up and vanishes in never-ending feedback loops. Perpetual destruction.

Building, tearing down, creating and destroying. We need the buildings, the containers to live in unless we prefer to be cave dwellers. Building in order to be able to live, architecture, the art of shaping spaces and structures. An art that easily falls victim to calculation, commercialization, mass production, Bauwut. Therefore architecture needs philosophy, as: “the aim of philosophy is to make the world inhabitable” (Serres, 2007, 92). But philosophy also needs architects like Frank Lloyd Wright, Peter Zumthor, or Rem Koolhaas. Just like architects need music, or like Le Corbusier needed the musical framework of Xenakis, or Peter Zumthor creating architecture as a musical instrument, like his Thermal Bad in Vals (Switzerland). Architecture and music, or sound, are strongly intertwined. They are like Siamese twins. Doppelgänger.

## **Fuzz**

Somewhere in December 2016, I went to see (hear, feel, taste and touch) a show by Japanese noise wizards Boris. They were conducting a world tour dedicated to their 2005 album *Pink*. Before the show, I checked out their merchandise stand, which carried a limited *Pink* edition stompbox of the *Eau Clair Thunder*, by a small firm called Dwarfcraft Devices from Eau Claire (WI). I had checked their website to learn more about this ‘Boris Pink edition’ and to hear its sound, which was overwhelming, and informing me that, for some reason, I had to have that stompbox. Some irresistible urge was

planted in me, devouring me, and not letting loose, until I could hold it in my hand, claiming it to be mine, mine oh mine. So I bought the small cardboard box, containing the pink metal box, giving in to the obsession of playing with it at home. But first the concert by Boris.

I could feel the tension growing as the show was about to start. Not only the tension in me but also the tension radiating from the crowd and stage. I assumed a position in the first row, standing before their guitar player Wata. She kicked off the set at an extremely loud volume, reaching the range of the ludicrous. Her Orange stacks were cranking and I was in the frontline. At a certain point, I wondered when the rest of the band, bass and guitar player Takeshi and drummer Atsuo would kick in. So I looked over to where they would enter the stage when to my surprise I noticed that they were already blasting away. At least that was what it looked like because I couldn't hear them. My hearing was twisting my vision or vice versa.

Wata's guitar was so loud that the rest of the band became inaudible, something which can be considered an achievement in itself. It sounded amazing by the way. Still, I was eager to hear the rest and therefore decided to move towards the other side of the stage, something which isn't an easy track as the crowd was going berserk. Nevertheless, I continued and while making my way through the venue, moving through the excited crowd, I suddenly started hearing the rest of the band. Apparently, the battle of the loudest noise was driven by territory. This suggests that noise and silence indeed are in a constant struggle driven by territory and boxes.

This struggle was greedily fueled by the Eau Clair Thunder, the fuzzbox which out-fuzzes any fuzzbox. The fuzzbox of fuzzboxes, the king or queen of fuzzboxes. The enchanting fuzz that wipes out territories, or shapes them, while ripping apart boxes and simultaneously hiding in them. This was what Boris was delivering while crafting their *Pink* noise. Fuzz is thus badly needed in my investigation into noise. That might also be the reason why Serres states: "... my book is rigorously fuzzy." (2007, 57). He explains: "[b]etween yes and no, between zero and one, an infinite number of values appear, and thus an infinite number of answers" (ibid.). It is moving in between, blurry, cloudy, ungraspable, fuzzy. Boris stresses this to an extreme with their music and fuzzboxes. No black

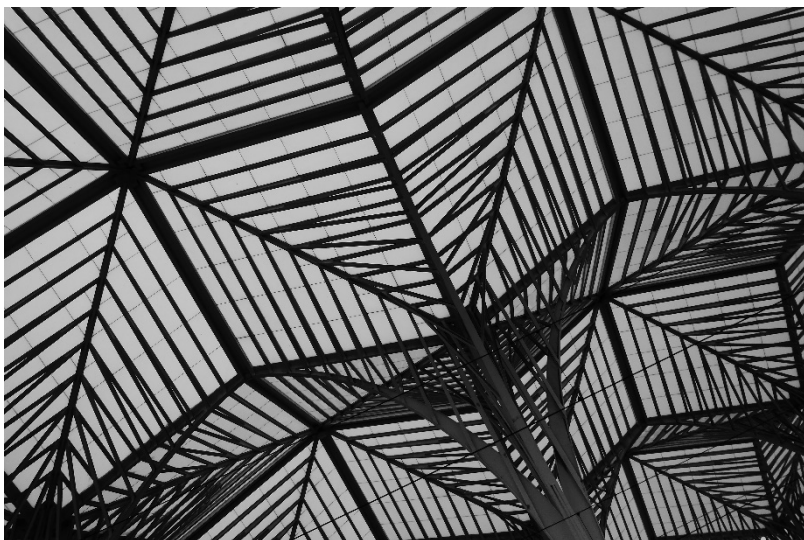
or white, strong or weak, beginning or end, winner or loser, darkness or light, destruction or construction. Not *or*, but *and*. The noise in between. The fuzz. The endless noise that drones on. A fuzzy drone.

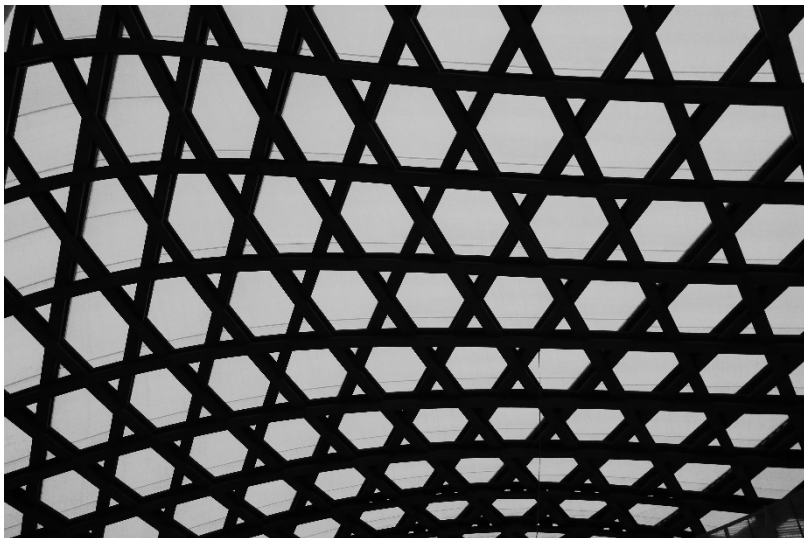
These preliminary and fuzzy thoughts slowly, but noisily move us into this book. In 6 chapters I explore what noise is doing and in what way it disturbs us, but also fuels us. Again, it is never a one-way street but always goes in various directions. As these directions are endless and unpredictable it seems clear that many things have escaped the attention. However, what has grasped my thoughts is boxed-up and laid down in these chapters.

The 1st chapter is an exploration of what noise could be and how we can get a notion of noise. The 2nd deals with the idea of silence and in doing so messes with the Einstürzende Neubauten. The 3rd goes back to way back when to the days when Plato's cave dwellers were 'lounging' in their cave until they decided to move on. This quest for architecture deals with some specificities of our built environment. In chapter 4 this is extended by my participative observations while living with the monks at the Monastery of La Tourette, the Xenakis/Le Corbusier building near Lyon (F). The 5th chapter moves all the way to the town of *Twin Peaks* and muses about the concept of the Doppelgänger and how this specific concept can inform us on noise. The last and 6th chapter discusses some examples of organization and leadership and the way in which noise behaves like a parasite. Through the book, there are continuous fuzzy drones shaped by the thoughts of Michel Serres and some of his colleague philosophers, filmmakers, architects, writers, musicians, etc., and culminating in a final drone that goes on and on and on ...

Ok, and now it is time to open my eyes and put *Metastaseis* back on ...











We are surrounded by noise. And this noise is inextinguishable. It is outside - it is the world itself - and it is inside, produced by our living body. We are in the noises of the world, we cannot close our door to their reception, and we evolve, rolling in this uncalculable swell. We are hot, burning with life; and the hearts of this temporary ecstasy send out a truceless tumult from their innumerable functions. If these sounds are stilled, death is there in the form of flat waves. (Serres, 2007, 126).



# CHAPTER 1

## ORDER

Noise is all around me, in me, moving me, making me stutter, stumble, in all kinds of directions, affecting me in incomprehensible ways, never letting go, no time for a breather, and although that I know it is there, and even while trying to figure out of what it is, I know that I will never grasp it. Whenever I try to make sense of it, it escapes, and while trying to capture it, boxing it up, lassoing it with razor wire, it leads me into uncharted territories where place and time dissolve. Still, I want to get a feeling of what noise is. How does it excite my senses, pleases me, teases me, scares me, or unsettles me? All questions that fire me up, and down, and simultaneously confuse me while making me wonder. Noise is there, always, all-enveloping, but how can I possibly grasp it, describe it, turn it into words, or images?

Maybe I should move to the very beginning, to the so-called Big Bang. A horrendous, catastrophic noise. A noise that apparently came out of nowhere, blowing it all up, while creating life as we know it, and building it up in some sort of natural way. This implies that noise is the vernacular of life and that in the beginning there was noise! As noise is the foundation of our life and the basis of nature, noise can be boiled down to the formula: Noise = Nature.

However as noise is ungraspable, this would mean that nature is also ungraspable, and this suggests that this formula would only imply that the ungraspable equals the ungraspable. And although it is true that nature is ungraspable, something which I will return to later on, it also implies that it doesn't really help me in my questioning of noise? Could it be that it leaves me without answers and if this is the case, then is this questioning of noise even a good idea after all? To take it a step further, it is especially this labeling of good and bad that becomes troublesome with noise. This suggests

that noise, as it is ungraspable can only move in between these two labels and maybe even beyond it. In other words: noise is not to be labelled, it defies boxes and any decals should be licked off, to use the words of Captain Beefheart.<sup>2</sup> So any right answer is absent, as noise cannot be boxed-up. But what does that imply for the before mentioned formula? Does this mean that the formula is completely useless? In what way does this help me in my trying to make sense of noise?

Maybe the Big Bang, again, can help me out? When I try to image this Bang, I assume that at some point it reached a climax, after which it would normally become less and less intense, and near the end probably die out, and become silent. However, it is simultaneously clear that the world is never silent, which implies that maybe the Bang never stopped banging, or that maybe, for some reason someone, somewhere, at some point in time, might have become noisy for reasons beyond the original Bang. Or maybe it is an uncontrollable entanglement of the two, creating a third one. This would mean that us being surrounded by noise, is not just a natural thing, caused by a Bang and its echoes, but that there could be other ‘sources’ of noise that are banging on our door. This, again, makes the formula problematic.

I have already argued that there is no ‘noise-box, meaning that noise cannot be contained, although we will witness some serious attempts later on. Not being contained means that it constantly escapes and moves in all kinds of unpredictable directions and ways, and as mentioned beyond good and bad. It is easy to point out the echoes of the Big Bang that are still haunting us, like earthquakes, tsunamis, erupting volcanoes, landslides, rolling thunders, crashing lightning, pouring rains, howling winds, hail storms, and all kinds of other natural noises. But how can we understand these natural bangs? As human beings have this uncontrollable urge to ‘understand’ things, grasp their language and ‘know’ what is going on and how to behave, it seems obvious that attempts at catching noise, and boxing it up were craved. This should lead to options for dealing with noise, and ‘handling’ it. This also implies that silence became a thing to be desired.

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to his album *Lick My Decals Off, Baby* (1970).

This suggests that it is not just noise that shapes us, but also all attempts to silence this noise. Thus noise and silence become entangled opposites that seriously attempt to shape one another. This implies that there is a zone of tension between noise and silence that goes beyond opposites. This paradoxical relationship suggests that they can't live with or without one another. In other words: noise tries to shape silence, while silence tries to swallow noise. This Siamese entanglement means that they are bonded in a fuzzy way, shaped by our desire to silence our world.

As noise cannot be contained, we can only hope that we can grasp silence in some sort of way. However knowing that silence and noise behave like Siamese twins, the odds are against us. Nevertheless, we can wonder how human beings try to shape this silence. This brings us to the notion of order and subsequently organization, or should it be 'orderization'?<sup>3</sup> It means that trying to find our way in ungraspable nature and its haunting noise, can be described as an attempt at civilization, driven by a quest for order. However, this quest becomes extremely problematic as it creates its own noise. This suggests that in order to silence noise, or dealing with noise, we create new kinds of noises. Noise breeds noise.

Therefore I will claim that any quest for order, or civilization, or organization, shapes its own noise. This is a different kind of noise than the before mentioned noise of nature. This 'new' noise is something which can be referred to as the 'noise of civilization'. It is noise that arises out of a desire for silence. So noise can never be completely silenced. This means that we are now confronted with a situation in which we have to deal with the noise of nature and a new and artificial noise shaped by civilization. This then leads to a new formula, namely:

$$\text{Noise} = \text{Nature} + \text{Civilization} = \text{Order}.$$

The order suggested in the formula is thus a very noisy order. However, it is exactly this noisy order that is fascinating and which needs further investigation. One of the reasons for this is that

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<sup>3</sup> Maybe later one I will discover the role of the organ, and whether it is something visceral or artificial.

civilization seems obsessed with order and that this obsession only leads to a widespread variety of different noises. This means that noise itself changes as well, although it remains a mystery in what way and in which direction. Creating a new order thus implies creating new noise, that always changes and differs, under the influence of serendipity. Therefore it seems pretty necessary to get insight into this unpredictable disturbance called noise.

It also seems obvious that whatever the investigation may be, any clear and definite answers will not be at hand. Any exploration of noise leads to a noisy output, generated in a noisy way, and running the risk that I could lose my way during these investigations, in which any Hansel und Gretel oriented tracking devices probably turn out to be insufficient. On the other hand, losing track, getting lost and indulging in drifting might be the only way to deal with noise. In other words: behaving in a noisy way and thus conducting a noisy investigation.

## Filth

In ‘order’ to do this, I will go back to the original condition, in other words, the era where the formula Noise = Nature finds its origin. This is the period before civilization and order raised its ugly head. In this exploration, I will be joined by the French philosopher and anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009). In his seminal work *Tristes Tropiques*, he describes his anthropological research of vernacular societies in ‘order’ to get insights into those natural conditions, which are not yet under the influence of order. He is thus interested in the zone of tension between the noise of nature and the effects of order. Let us roam freely, or fuzzy, through his experiences.

As a victim of sickening or dusty boredom, he describes the devastating impact order has on our natural environment, stating that: “[o]ur great Western civilization, which has created the marvels we now enjoy, has only succeeded in producing them at the cost of corresponding ills. The order and harmony of the Western world, its most famous achievements, and a laboratory in which structures of a complexity as yet unknown are being fashioned, demand the elimination of a prodigious mass of noxious by-products which now contaminate the globe. The first thing we see as we travel round the