Soundscape and Power

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Abstract

In *Balcony in the Forest*, Julien Gracq composes a soundscape as a series of spatial events and material affects. He snatches it from "the smoke and the suburbs of Charleville" and "the jerry-built cabins of raw brick and concrete" to better situate it in a technological lineage that passes through all the operations of metallurgy. If the soundscape is fundamentally connected to war, it is not only because the explosive lead and broken iron punctuate its lived or imagined duration, but also because the methods of describing the soundscape and the military means of its destruction have metallurgy in common.

In *Balcony in the Forest*, Julien Gracq composes a soundscape in four dimensions: he establishes an *undulating background* by involving spatial events; he forms *temporal figures* by involving material affects—spatial events and material affects extracted from (mythological, historical, memorializing) *depths* before being enveloped by a *resonant place* (or one of subjectification). Each of the four dimensions has a particular relationship to the sounds of power and the power of sound (from the patriotic songs broadcast on the radio to the impression made by the whine of planes nose-diving toward their targets), and it is up to the reader to decide whether the soundscape composed in and by the writing makes this double power even more deadly or whether it offers a means of countering it, turning death against itself.

At dawn on May 10, 1940, German fighters cleave the sky, tearing apart the soundscape, which is established through this tearing, through a series of interwoven spatial events, of mobile layers that alter the spatiality, layers tiled one over the other at various speeds: "a great whine slowly [rises] to its zenith," involving "the whole vault of the sky, which suddenly [becomes] a solid *firmament*" vibrating "like a sheet of tin"; at the horizon, a throbbing wave begins "to swell, rising slowly towards its calm culmination, flowing majestically across the sky"; then, the whine falls, "losing its powerful unison, its quality of seamless wave, leaving behind a trail of coughs, isolated, wandering murmurs" (Gracq 140-141). This soundscape is a modulation from one difference to the next, from one spatial event to the next, every threshold of intensity or density, mobility or velocity marking, at the rhythm of description and narrative, a constant modification of the sonic space and a tentative recovery of perception: a "peculiar insistent buzzing" becomes a draft "with a particular tonality, musical and vibrant," which becomes the electrified hum of cicadas, the shaking and rattling of a window pane, "a shrill note of panic urgency," a throbbing that flows from the sky, a fighter plane (139-140).

"Toward nine, they heard a tremendous series of backfires in the west which slowly turned into a low drone" (Gracq 144): the soundscape is not only a space in time (May 10, 1940), but also a spatial haecceity (toward nine in the morning, a horizon emerges or is drawn) and a rhythmic layout of spatial events (amplification, explosion, enlargement, deepening). As a result, silence is not the ultimate background disguised as emptiness, but is inscribed in this triple temporalization throughout the novel: "silence of the fairy-tale forest" (11), purr of "a contended cat" (16), "moist silence" (39), "the silence of keen eyes, which weighs less than that of straining ears—it was the silence of a workroom absorbed in delicate needlework" (194), "the petrified silence after the explosion of a slap" (197), "widowed silence" (209), until the final silence, the silence of dead earth, "the faint rustle of blood within the ear" (213).

Above "the ground base of massive corrosion," against a series of spatial events ("that collapsing cliff attacked by the waves"), sounds composed of material affects stand out: "a continual throbbing of motors" coupled with "a jolting dance of clashing metal" (the caterpillar tracks of the tanks) (Gracq 193), the whine of a sawmill, the "crack of trees falling" (68). Rather than standing out against the soundscape because it has been placed on it, the sound figure stands out through the motion of disengaging from the distant and rising toward the near (the cries of children rise from the background murmur of soldiery) (3-4) or it stands out in a flotsam of the soundscape that leaves parts of the distant on the shores of the near (the rustling forest emits "a few vague noises ... like the uninterpretable flotsam the sea washed up on a beach" [79]). Or the sound figure stands out through a rhythmic connection: the calm, continuous, and regular "murmur of water slipping over a submerged weir" becomes the distance that measures "the cries of the screech owls perched ... in the trees on the opposite bank'' (6).

Whether rising from the soundscape to sink back into it sometimes, whether rejected by the soundscape to return to it immediately, or whether being interwoven with it rhythmically, the sound figure makes the depth opening beneath the soundscape be heard, and it makes this depth be heard and understood as temporal. The sound figures are themselves temporalized, and this temporality often makes the representations to which the sound owes its power be heard: a siren is the anticipated sensation of the mortal wound in that it presses "a wet cloth between the shoulders"; it is the memory of a vacation when, at night, "the fire-engine's siren" blasted the type of fire threat that was afoot; it is the persistence of a colonial cliché—the "trumpeting" of the siren releases "a dreary herd of North Africans into the little square" (Gracq 3; translation modified). Therefore, these temporalized sound figures make the temporal depth of the soundscape be heard, a depth graded by representations that sustain the sound's power: the cries of children do not rise from the murmur of soldiery without it also making us hear that "a modern regiment makes more racket than all the armor of the Hundred Years' War" (4); similarly, an airplane puts "the infantry back in an earlier age, reviving the convoy of salt-smugglers, the gay *chouannerie* of the hedge-wars, the warpath of the Last of the Mohicans" (146); "this thin, piercing voice" that suddenly surges from the radio is already History ("the *Stuttgart Traitor*") that makes the myth ("the cry of screech owls") be heard against nature's indifferent durations—"the branches dripping around the blockhouse," "a long, sumptuous rustle that [seems] to dissolve into the breathing forest" (28).

In *Balcony in the Forest*, the soundscape is not sonic by being fleeting, by appearing and immediately fading, fading out into its permanence; it is not sonic by being complicated and omnidirectional, both folded in on itself and able to envelop everything it reaches, passing through the body and then spreading in space, occupying and mobilizing the body and then returning to itself to make its own elements vibrate (Nancy 2, 13, 15). The soundscape is sonic by making space-time be heard as a series of events, and by making the materiality be heard as a series of varied affects. For this reason, the soundscape is not only fluent and fluctuating, enveloping and mobilizing, but it transforms the fluency and fluctuation, the envelopment and mobilization into modes of sonic power on the body. The reason "we can think of a landscape as a temporal rather than a spatial sequence, the stacked layers of a landscape in a painting mutated into sequences, into vanishing minimal instants of time" (Cauquelin 4; our translation), is precisely because the temporal sequence is more profoundly a series of singular points, and the vanishing instants of time are a perpetual interweaving of affections—which is what a pictorial landscape can attain as well if we know how attend to it, how to *listen* (Nancy 3, 17n13). The soundscape can be said to have duration, attack, and decay at an intensive (or qualitative) and not extensive (or chronometric) level: the soundscape is serial; as a whole, it is a series of modifications that produce their own continuity through a combination of different speeds (slowly rising, uniformly vibrating), through an amplification or depletion of movements (swelling, rising, flowing; falling and losing its unison), through a play of echoes or reverberations (leaving something) behind). Similarly, the sound figure's punctuality is necessarily plural, and its plurality is a proliferation of affects: "and a few seconds later a little bell rang wildly behind the edge, and a gate creaked, and then doors slammed, rousing the clearing's echoes with the clamour of a stagecoach hold-up" (Gracq 48-49; our emphasis, translation modified). The spatial events and material affects shake and raise historical, cultural, artistic, and political strata: the slamming doors rouse the banging of a stagecoach hold-up in the clearing's soundscape; the "dry and sonorous night" secretly alerts the earth, suffusing it with portents of a time "when shields were hung in the branches of oaks" (81). These are some of the reasons why the sound composition must be regarded as a landscape and not an environment, atmosphere, or ambiance—the sounds also draw their power from the history of the representations whose space they make vibrate.

In composing the soundscape as a series of spatial events and material affects, Gracq snatches it from "the smoke and the suburbs of Charleville," the "mud-colored little stations," the "dust from the gypsum quarries," and "the jerry-built cabins of raw brick and concrete" (1-3) to better situate it in a technological lineage that passes through the molding of clay, the smelting of steel, and even more profoundly through all the operations of metallurgy. On the one hand, metallurgy brings out a corporeality or materiality inseparable from changes of state, from processes of formation and deformation operating in a space-time and acting in the manner of events (ablation, adjunction, fusion, decarbonization, etc.). On the other hand, metallurgy brings out a corporeality or materiality inseparable from "intensive qualities, which can be higher or lower in degree, and are produced in the manner of variable affects (resistance, hardness, weight, colour...)." Metallurgy is essentially "an ambulant coupling, events-affects" (Deleuze and Guattari, Thousand Plateaus 407-408). That Gracq's descriptive style combines an entire collection of the singularities, operations, and traits of expression of metallurgy is not accidental, according to Deleuze and Guattari's main thesis: the technological lineage or "machinic *phylum*" that passes through sound and ultimately gives it its power (we will come back to this later) is that of metallurgy. In other words, the same tendency traverses metallurgy and music (or the composition of a soundscape): "a continuous development of form" (a whine of motors bursts into a tremendous backfire, then evens out and slowly turns into a low drone), "a continuous variation of matter" (the electrified hum of cicadas becomes the shaking and rattling of a window pane, which becomes the high pitch note of urgent panic), "the option of

melting down and reusing a matter" (moist silence, final silence, petrified silence, keen silence) (410-411).

The emergence of materials of expression (not tanks, but a continual throbbing of motors) and the fleshing out of these materials (welding the throbbing to a metallic jolting) situates the soundscape in a unique machinic phylum of metal and metallurgy. In *Balcony in the Forest*, the soundscape is fundamentally connected to war not only because the explosive lead and broken iron, the twisted sheet metal and thundering steel largely punctuate its lived or imagined duration, but also and above all because the methods of describing the landscape, the modes of its sonic composition, and the military means of its destruction have metallurgy in common. Once caught in this phylum, the material described is no longer homogeneous but a bearer of singularities: whine, hum, throb, buzz, drone. Inscribed in this phylum, the expression of the landscape is no longer formal but inseparable from relevant traits: a great whine; a throbbing that *flows*, *swells*, *rises*; a buzzing and drone that *lingers* and *lurks*. It is a question of placing the variables in a state of variation: the operations of describing the landscape "seize or determine singularities in the matter" and space (Deleuze and Guattari, Thousand Plateaus 369). They effect individuations through events or affects, not through an object composed of matter and form (369): not a fighter plane that throbs, but a throbbing that flows from the sky and variably becomes a fighter plane. And so it is hylomorphism that metal and metallurgy elude in literature: the operations constantly encircle thresholds—for example, quenching follows forging after the form has been fixed—"so that an energetic materiality overspills the prepared matter, and a qualitative deformation or transformation overspills the form" (410)—for example, the individual acoustic energy of an echoing slam carries gate, door, and clearing through the repetitive operations of the syntax ("and," "and," "and then").

Metallurgy therefore has an essential relationship with writing music or composing sounds: like metallurgy, music (at least since Romanticism) and soundscape composition (at least for Gracq) tend to replace the succession of forms by the form of a continuous development; they tend to replace the variability of matter by the matter of a continuous variation; they tend to replace the depletion of matter in a form by the possibility of melting down and reusing both (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 411). Yet by continually developing the form, varying the material variables, and melting down matter and form, do we simply surrender the soundscape to the power of sound and the sounds of power, or do we actually erect a soundscape against the war? The soundscape in itself is problematic: it is defined by events that happen in space and by material affects that characterize a state of things (Deleuze 52-54). Yet through this, the soundscape also problematizes: Does the events-affects coupling function as a means to recreate a familiar little corner ("the sound of tinware promised hot coffee" [Gracq 16]), to bombard existing people with molecular populations of sound ("this thundering, rattling way of setting the scene" [157]), or on the contrary, to create a new world for a future people, to mobilize us "in a dream army" (135), making the past subsisting at the heart of the soundscape be heard as an insistence on the future ("we're all dreaming, but of what?" [135]), the past and future separating the soundscape from the technical progression and social whole and inscribing in the gap the dream as politics? (Deleuze 33-34, 49).

For Gracq, the war, "even in its most somnolent moments, [rouses] the ear so much more intimately than the eye" (56), not because it sharpens one's listening for signs, the listening of a soldier on watch, attentive to the slightest signal triggering an action or reaction, nor because it offers contemplative listening a new poetics of nature or machine (as it did for Marinetti or Russolo), but rather because it reveals the fundamental reason for composing a soundscape: to make the power that the few have over the many and the entire world be heard. War opens the soundscape to the earth's mythological, historical, memorializing depth, to "the troublesome darkness," "this murmur from the wild" (28), the "giant harrow's clatter passing over the broken earth," to nature engineered for the "fierce and arrogant cavalcades," to "the enigmatic signs of time's reversion-an age of great hunts, of proud cavalcades" (56-57). One senses that "obscure messages, heavy with significance" intersect "deep in the bowels of the troubled earth"; one listens "to the troubled murmurs of the distance with that new ear [one has] discovered deep within" oneself (149). To be more precise, by opening the soundscape to a mythological, historical, memorializing depth, war endows listening with the faculty to hear human suffering in this earthly upheaval. This is also why the sound matter and form should be described as material affects and spatial events: a rent in the air, "a long, shrill clatter, as if a celestial express train were rushing along its tracks, rattling at top speed around curves," the "powerful whine of motors" that "thunder through the forest on all sides at once" and make it vibrate "like a street shaken by the uproar of a pneumatic drill" (167-168) are all sonic attacks of a state apparatus erasing the presence of people on earth. The politics of the writing, therefore, comes down to this gesture: to attempt to counteract the sounds of power by interweaving the spatial events and material affects into one another in order to create a resonant place.

Lieutenant Grange is the main character of the novel only to the extent that he is this resonant place:

Pressed against her hip, he heard only her long breathing, and through the open door the great tidal murmur of the pines at Les Fraitures fading away in the distance. It seemed as if his life were no longer divided, partitioned, as if everything were of a piece because of one door that banged and blurred the hours of sleep with those of daylight and cast him upon Mona from the heart of war's watchful night. He closed his eyes a second and listened in the darkness to their mingled breathing, rising and falling against the long, low rustle of the forest: it was like the sound of ripples deep in a cave, the backwash against the clamour of the breakers.... (Gracq 83; translation slightly modified)

The relationship between the sound matter and the form is one between the expanding or distancing of myriad interwoven sonic particles ("the great tidal murmur of the pines") and the mingling or grazing of two light and fragile breaths, a relationship between two intensifying magnitudes that each have their own spatial system of repetition: a distant clamor and a near ripple. The relationship between the sound matter and the form is also a rhythmic relationship (two breaths "rising and falling against the long, low rustle of the forest") and a tactile relationship ("their mingled breathing rising and falling *against* the long, low rustle of the forest"). Yet this relationship exists only under the condition of an open envelope, a hollow cavity: a small breathing chamber that echoes the rustle of the forest with the rhythmic banging of its door; a cave that composes the breathing of the ripples with the clamor of the breakers; rather than the ear's pinna, a listening palpating a wall's resonances like a mollusk ("Grange felt he was welded to that cool dark cavern underneath, which his ear unconsciously questioned—a snail en promenade outside its shell" [18]). The sound matter and the form compose a viable and livable soundscape (cast upon Mona "from the heart of war's watchful night") only on the condition that they introduce this resonant place, which is coextensive to listening itself, to the place of listening: a place where form contributes to matter and vice versa (all things being of a piece through the rhythmic banging of the opening and the resonances in the cavity); a place where listening identifies with this bang and resonance (an unpartitioned life).

The spatial events and material affects fail to establish this resonant place when they are only the "commotion" dominating over people and earth: "a heavy, terebrating commotion of armor plate, chains, canteens, caterpillar treads, and the shuddering metal that snatched at the nape of the neck and did not let go again" (Gracq 144-145). When spatial events and material affects fail to establish this resonant place, death looms in the abolished soundscape: "'Don't let her die,' he murmured superstitiously, and the word wakened a vague echo in the shuttered room: the world had made its appeal and lost: as if, during its sleep, a listening ear had turned away" (70). A world without recourse is one without a soundscape; it is deprived of echoes and resonances, of the listening ear, which help to make it viable and livable or to appeal the death sentence hanging over people.

Radio is a communication device inextricably linked to World War II not only because it is the medium of the sounds of power ("after a long sputtering, all the war's unreality melted through the static into this thin, piercing voice, which lingered over its words, hissing like the villain of a melodrama" [Gracq 28]), but also because it is itself a resonant place: "he could just hear a radio in the office playing La Brabançonne. Suddenly, mysteriously, the planet's spasm was exploding here: the sound of the sea when you hold a shell to your ear" (159). The soundscape exists only to fold the spatial events and material affects into one another, to interweave them through repetition, repercussion, reverberation, echo. Yet this system of resonances alone does not guarantee the establishment of a living environment: the resonant place also hollows into a "mausoleum" (64). War makes the ear more alert and, in response to its commotion, challenges the ear to compose a soundscape despite everything. In so doing, war exposes listening to its own dangers, to the risks listening runs when it takes an "ontological tonality," "when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority," and "when we listen to a voice, an instrument, or a sound just for itself" (Nancy 4-5). Grange is the novel's main character to the extent that he makes us hear the tension underpinning the subjectivity of a resonant place: we cannot counteract the sounds of power without running the risk of being swept up by them. Grange's listening posture is inextricably linked to the Phoney War not only because, since it starts "so quietly," it leaves the soldier on a desert island "in the solitude of high stubble and the encircling firs," in the drowsiness of a vegetative life anticipating nothing at all, as though "the war were already over" and all that remains is to compose a soundscape with the distant echoes of the battlefield, but also because the Phoney War leaves him with "the sensation of falling free" and being able to transform this vague sensation into a desire to lead a life "free of ties, isolated from past and future alike," in a soundscape where the unburdened self's last command is "to *drop everything*" (Gracq 5, 15, 17, 22, 76, 90, 178-179).

Sound studies has been known to claim that sound (or music) possesses a deterritorializing force and deadly power due to phenomenological or material reasons: sound's physical properties would explain its immediate and powerful detachment, refinement, autonomy (Deleuze and

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Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 347-348); the conditions of musical emission and reception would give sound the power of seduction and eradication (302-303). Deleuze and Guattari offer a different reason: metallurgy. It is a technological lineage or, in Deleuzoguattarian terms, a *machinic phylum* that operates in sound and gives it a deterritorializing force and deadly power.

As Gracq has just illustrated, the sonic components have the greatest power of deterritorialization, and according to Deleuze and Guattari, it is precisely this power that gives music adverse political power in certain circumstances. And this is why, of all the arts, music has a much stronger deterritorializing force, which "explains the collective fascination exerted by music, and even the potentiality of the 'fascist' danger": "music (drums, trumpets) draws people and armies into a race that can go all the way to the abyss" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 302). In short, as sonic components are the most deterritorialized, they adapt much better to forms of continuous development, to a variation of matter, and to change in general, but this aesthetic and poetic power of deterritorialization is at the same time a deadly power: an open movement turns into an act of territorial extinction; a transporting movement turns into a death wish (299).

Here we are coming up against a crucial problem of the politics of sound: the continuous development of form, the continuous variation of matter, and the possibility to recast and reuse matter and form constitute a "potential fascism." It is precisely through the continuous development of form, the continuous variation of matter, and the possibility to recast and reuse matter and form that "sound invades us, impels us, drags us, transpierces us," drops us into a black hole or makes us want to die—and not through its physical properties. It is precisely through the continuous development of form, the continuous variation of matter, and the possibility to recast and reuse matter and form that sound "effects the most massive of reterritorializations, the most numbing, the most redundant" (Deleuze and Guattari, Thousand Plateaus 348)—and not through the conditions of musical emission and reception. The problem is all the more serious because the continuous development of form, the continuous variation of matter, and the possibility to recast and reuse matter and form are the operations that largely define the music of Romanticism and Modernism and the composition of Gracq's soundscape, and many of these practices hope to oppose the potential or actual fascism precisely through this relationship to matter and form. In short, the operations that define the machinic phylum, the operations of the "widened chromaticism [that] sustains both music and metallurgy" (411) have both a fascist potential and a potential to resist fascism.

Yet how do we differentiate? This is the most serious practical and political question. "The problem is a truly musical one, technically musical" and also literary, "and all the more political for that" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 341). To this problem and question, Deleuze and Guattari offer simple answers that are almost vulnerable in their simplicity—this is why all the technicians-operators of theory reterritorialized to the hard lines of Modernism are quick to understand in this simplicity not the dissonances of idiocy, but the harmonies of conservatism. Yet for these stereophonic thinkers, the continuous development of form, the continuous variation of matter, and the possibility to recast and reuse matter and form realize their fascist potential when the synthesis of disparate elements opens to all events at the same time (343-344): ablation, addition, projection, distortion, transformation, fusion, and so on. Sometimes we overdo it, adding more and more; microperceptions dispel one another; we work with a jumble of sounds, reproducing a scrambling of disparate or heterogeneous elements; the variation of matter and form takes listeners into the undifferentiated (228-229, 285). This release from hylomorphism then transforms into a passion for abolition: everything must explode, we have to start over, once forms, substances, perceiving subjects have exploded. Between a form of expression that is music (or soundscape) and a form of content that is fascism, we ensure an isomorphism: both bombard existing people with molecular populations that take up all the frequencies through redundancy, that pass through the same techniques, mass media, monitoring procedures, computers, etc. (345-346). In contrast to this, Deleuze and Guattari offer a pragmatics that is often mistaken for a secret conservatism: refrain from opening oneself to all events and instead simplify, make something more sober; refrain from pushing synthesis until only a common matter remains and instead ensure the distinction of affects; do not start over by blowing up all the strata, all the forms and figures, but instead retain a minimum of sonic forms and harmonic and melodic functions from which to extract events and affects (270). This is the wisdom (with its long philosophical past) that should save us from the fascist potential of sound and music: retain the minimum sonic and musical forms and figures needed to get out; retain the minimum to get the maximum out—the new politics of sound.

Music is never tragic, music is joy. But there are times it necessarily gives us a taste for death; not so much happiness as dying happily, being extinguished. Not as a function of a death instinct it allegedly awakens in us, but of a dimension proper to its sound assemblage, to its sound machine, the moment that must be confronted, the moment the traversal turns into a line of abolition. (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus* 299)

It bears repeating one last time: the soundscape exists only to fold the spatial events and material affects into one another, to interweave them through repetition, repercussion, reverberation, echo, and in so doing, compose a resonant place, a place that always remains open on one side, an opening through which the soundscape recharges itself not only with new events and affects, but also with "faults" and "unknown veins" into which it slips to the other side (Gracq 178), into the social field, thus escaping the deadly dangers of an exacerbation of processes pushed to infinity, processes that take themselves for the end (Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus 278-283), the sound composition thus relating to the state of things without merging with it, releasing from the social field a problematic plane using spatial events and material affects (Deleuze 54). Yet, in *Balcony in the Forest*, the nature of this other side is something else altogether: neither a state of things, nor a social field, but rather the conversion of a resonant place into an anechoic chamber. Not the exacerbation of repetitions, repercussions, reverberations, echoes that have become autonomous, but rather their total interruption: remembering that "all wounded men drag themselves toward a house," Lieutenant Grange heads to "a hiding place" as though moving toward an obsessive idea (Gracq 207), the path beneath his feet awakening in the darkness "the deep muffled echo of an empty room" (209). Arriving at the house of his lover, Mona, he closes the door that once stood banging and locks it firmly: "silence [closes] over him like a pool of water," he hears nothing, "the earth around him [is] as dead as a plain of snow," life falls back into a silence full of "the faint rustle of blood within the ear. like the sound of the unattainable sea in a shell" (210). Listening to the buzzing of a blue fly that butts "heavily against the walls and the windows" (213), Lieutenant Grange pulls the blanket over his head and goes to sleep.

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