
THE STRATEGY OF NOISE CANCELLATION IN THE ORGANIZATION OF THE WORLD

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Abstract: Michel Serres is rather unknown French philosopher who, despite having published almost 40 major works, is still an enigma for the wider critical community. His large opus is mainly dealing with the effect of the concepts of noise and the parasite to different areas of investigation. This article deals with the informational, scientific, anthropological, economic and political dimension of his theory. Although noise is our body, the nature in us, over the centuries the science has been developing sets of protocols of noise cancellation designed to stabilize the order against the perturbations of the environment. This Hobbesian fear of the adverse effects of human nature gave rise to various protective systems: from parliamentary monarchy to cybernetic feedback protocols and commercial noise cancellation headphones, the noise has been widely prevented from infecting the closed system of the governance, economic activity and the bodily behavior. The digital era has been especially effective in mobilizing the autophagic noise diets set to isolate the social body from the harm noise, if left untreated, may produce. Every example of the noisy behavior, be it hacking, political unrest, immigration and terrorism, even the noise from the vehicles on the street and the human conversation has been canceled by installing the surplus noise that as a negative feedback stabilizes the system to its original state. The question the article poses is what kind of society are we heading towards once the threat of noise is successfully deterred.

Keywords: noise, Michel Serres, the third man, digital control

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the eternal strife between nature and culture in the light of the insistent technological tendency to permanently cancel the noise from the informational grid of modern societies. In its core, the problem is informational as the noise interference and the attempt to separate itself from the noise of the environment is inherent to the humanity since the early days. Humans were always interested in detecting the messages from the environment (the nature, the universe or the gods). For that purpose they invented various religious and mystical systems that were supposed to translate the messages sent from the universe. In a story from *Upanishads*, Prajapati, the creator of all, sends the message *Da* in a form of a thunder. His creations (the gods, human beings, the demons) understood the message differently. The gods interpreted it as *damyata*, humans as *datta* and the demons as *dayadhvam*. The meaning of the story is that although the message was noisy (thunderous) and equivocal (Prajapati spoke in different languages) it was correctly received and understood by all the creatures. Similarly, one of the basic purpose of myths was to decipher the codes of the divine. The mythical stories became the clearest and the most direct interpretation of the sacred world, or the messages sent from the Gods. The topological configuration was given a central role. The hero was urged to go down to the underground to receive the God's wisdom, or power; woods and seas represented symbolic crossroads where the hero was prevented from understanding the message, either by God Pan that created panic to the visitors, or by sea nymphs that paralysed the traveller with the unbearable noise. In that respect, the hero had to be sacrificed (scapegoated) in order to act as the mediator between the Gods and the humans. In other words, the sacrificed victim kept the communication operable. Michel Serres calls this unfortunate mythical figure - the relational entity that allows for the dialogue between the sacred and the profane to exist – *the third man*.

2. WORLD WITHOUT THE SACRED: THE SCIENCE

The modern scientific organization of the world has removed, or is trying to completely remove, *the third man* from the triad. In fact, instead of the triad (subject-the third man-object, or, man-the third man-Gods), that creates a complex informational loops of various paths, lines and organizations, the science has resorted to the dual system of Subject versus the Object or the Man versus the World, that involves simple linear organization where the cause should produce a certain effect in a straightforward fashion, or in communicational terms: the signal should be send to the receiver with minimum loss of information. Science, for Serres, was the last attempt to disperse all the superstition and the scapegoating from the human society. In its wake, the pure desire for knowledge without any

personal stakes or other quasi objects promised that the science would restrain the animalistic nature of humans (the noise) and would open the perspective for the creation of a better society that could finally be called human. “Knowledge is, at first” Serres proclaims, “without greatness, without power, without adoration, without conquest, without value.” Science was meant to possess the “place without a place”; in other words, science was supposed to operate away from the place of power and to search for the origin of knowledge in the abstract regions, for the “perfect utopia outside the world”- full with objects that are inconceivable for us and yet, these objects and this place organize our world. The original scientist was very similar to the ancient philosopher that perceived the Ideal (the non-place) as responsible for all the knowledge of the world. This absent space (or absent petit object *a* with Lacan) is the vortex that gives birth to the knowledge of this world and all the objects inside.

However, the subsequent developments in the area of quantum and fluid mechanics have completely shaken the basis of the scientific ordering of the world: more and more scientists reveal truths about the world by using the instructions from the myth and the poetry. According to these theories, while you may trace the signal from the sender (the cause) to the receiver (the effect), the same signal cannot take the same route backwards. Serres explains the phenomenon by using the analogy with the stream. If the river is the unitary effect of the multiple causes (various different sources of water leading to the same path), the same river cannot go back and find its frontier, its bordering banks by going back to the source of the water. In other words, the movement downstream is not the same as movement upstream. The multiplicities, the noise upstream, that is the foundation of the visible path of the river, cannot be visualized but can be heard, or felt. The result for the science will be, instead of seeing, to start listening to the world.

3. THE NOISE IN THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Information system is for Serres first and utmost a system, and as such, it is taken for granted in his investigations. The rule seems to be very simple: the sender sends the signal (the message) to the receiver, taking care that the lowest amount of noise interferes in the process. All the technical manuals are instructing us that the so called SNR (Signal to Noise Ratio) should always be kept to minimum, if not to zero. Still, as we are all aware, more and more messages we receive through our mobile phones, computers or Hi-Fi equipment are subject to various noisy interferences that may muddy, block or even completely distort the message. That is especially frustrating for the sender that is unable to send the complete content of the message. The receiver, on the other hand, gets an overload of information, meaning that apart from the original message he gets extra information related to the environment surrounding the sender. So, he may find that the sender is in a tunnel, in the open field, on the busy street, in the car, at the meeting and so on. The excess of information makes the message richer and more revelatory: the receiver suddenly realizes the material fact about the message, its noisy environment. What’s more, he understands that apart from the relation that he has with the sender there is a parallel relation with *the third man* as well. For instance, *the third man* might be the secret services listening to your conversation. This recent phenomenon is very apparent in some countries like North Macedonia where huge scandals about phone tapping was shaking the credibility of the Government for more than a year. When on the phone, Macedonian citizens have even invented a special vocabulary that openly acknowledges the presence of *the third man*: the rule is never to pronounce the names of certain people but refer them as *the man*; certain affairs or transactions were referred as *the thing spoken earlier*; etc.

To return to the concept of the info systems: Serres claims that in order for the system to function there must be some noise, or in other words, for the system to function, it must not function properly. Some earlier investigations of the information systems, to which Serres refers to, have proven the same thing: the information is impossible if there is zero interference between the sender and the receiver. In this case, the complete unity requires no communication. Claude Shannon’s pioneering work from 1948 defined the background noise as equivocation or entropy. Unknowingly, Shannon conflated the concept taken from the exact sciences (entropy) with the mythical concept of the equivocation of the nature which made his work interesting for researchers outside mathematical departments. He basically treated the thermodynamic concept of energy loss in the complex systems (entropy) and the communication concept of equivocation of the noisy signal as an informational problem, or as Matthew Wraith notes, “Shannon took the concept of entropy as it appeared in thermodynamic systems and applied it to informational systems. Noise was informational entropy, a heightened disorder within the communication system. What Shannon had really found was that thermodynamics had been about information all along”. Shannon endeavored to solve the old biblical problem: How to communicate through the channel without losing much of the information in the process? He learned that despite the tendency of the information systems to eliminate the environmental noise the channel without noise emits zero information. In other words, the no-noise position produces massive amount of entropy which, by definition, means no-information. On the opposite side, the prevalence of noise, or the complete inability for the sender and the receiver to communicate, also produces no information. Although by itself noise distorts the information, in the extreme sense it returns the subjects into the

primordial mash that gives birth to all the possible information. The pre-subjective state in its fullest is equivocal – multiple voices and multiple possibilities and communicational paths offer no room for any detectable message, even if our ears desperately try to filter it.

The lessons learned from the informational systems had a profound influence on the social sciences and art as well. Noise became treated not only as an auditory phenomenon but gradually as anything that disrupts the normal functioning of the socio cultural patterns. As the unwanted mediator it is present in literature, visual arts and in any artistic practice that destabilizes the culturally imposed forms of expression. Gilles Deleuze uses the concept of vacuoles as a synonym for the operation of the noise in the social sphere. Vacuoles is a medical term that describes the process of autophagy that stimulates the recycling of dead cells, but also serves to protect the cells from destruction. So the noisy vacuoles both disturb and renew the system. In social terms for Deleuze, vacuoles represent non-communicative political body. The resistance to the model of political communication as information sent to the public should, in his view, will result in the breakdown of the traditional model of political activity and will disbalance the social equilibrium. The no-communication (the noise) then is essential for the destruction of the unhealthy social processes and the formation of a trans-political social environment.

Deleuze contends that without noise there is no way to expose the contradictions and possibly to resist the system. The decline of the left worldwide is a clear example of the inability to impose new narratives in the way society could function. The only noise left to the masses is the visual noise of numerous ads that block the view on the screen and prevent us from communicating the desired data. What is paradoxical, what blocks our view are our search choices that the algorithms turn against us, unless we pay and multiply the profit of the platform capital. The right, on the other hand, pushes the positive feedback of the noise to the extreme to produce the meltdown of the existing social structures that block and protect the capital from endless mutation and multiplication. The cancerous politics has invaded the globe, the Trump administration being the obvious result of the process.

There were times when noise had a positive effect on the political, exposing the basic contradictions and ills of the age. Film Noir for example, expressed the paranoia and the crises of the male subjectivity after the WWII. Amidst the winning euphoria and the rise of the consumerism of the middle class America, Film Noir focused on the social contradictions (the rise of corruption and insecurity, the increased independence of women) that befell the disillusioned and traumatized soldiers after returning from the European and Pacific front lines. The newly established empire of the chosen ones, the dictating power of the global order, the land where the dreams can turn into a reality, was presented as a hallucinogenic environment, an unhealthy system of deceit and murders, a phony promise without a happy end. Nowadays, we may say that the digital control has successfully managed to create the docility of the masses that crave for more of the same rhythm of technological entertainment. Clubbing, Netflix, endless sport competitions, CNN, mall and social media blunt communication redistribute controlled doses of acceptable opiate excitement that effectively manages to block any natural expression of discontent and displeasure. The viral explosion of the media goes in parallel with the diminished viral resistance of the population.

We have polarized the world on the left and right, private and public, 1 and 0, developed and undeveloped world, rich and poor, abstract and real, simple and complex, harmony and noise, visible and invisible, immanent and transcendental. Our immune system is shocked by Covid 19 since it resorts to the binarity and cannot find solution to the intrusion of the third element. Covid 19 is in your body by mistake, trying to survive. Incidentally its object is not your destruction but its own survival. It is provoked to multiply since that is what it does, not what it intends. If there is a possibility for a communication, the virus will immediately make a pact with the host and dwell long enough in prosperity, as other viruses have been doing since the beginning of man's habitation on this planet. Unfortunately, there is no communication whatsoever, but a life and death battle. The immune system reacts by abruptly killing both parties in the process. It does so since it evolved to this level with the loss of interaction with the nature. Our commodified way of living did not give it a chance to mutate to a more sophisticated level that will allow it to understand when not to react. We have the same problem with histaminic reaction or the digestive neurotransmitters that have made life miserable to anyone suffering of IBS syndrome.

4. CONCLUSION

Serres believes that science took the philosophical position of Diogenes who decided to completely remove the parasites from his communication with the sun, with the nature. In other words, he wanted no mediators between him and the world. Linearity prevents the working of the noise that bifurcates the information and in the excessiveness of its operation opens numerous options and paths for the society. The circulation of the noise in the previous quasi object forms (the joker, the scapegoat) guaranteed fresh beginnings for the community. If the society wants to create the conditions for the new start and for the new possibilities, it must bifurcate the linearity. Science failed to do so and now for Serres it is garbage that “no longer makes the world better.” The vanity of scientist is the same as those of generals, tycoons or religious leaders: “Scientists receive from their skills only social rewards,

positions, prizes, renown. At birth, their knowledge was devoid of stakes, fetishes, merchandise. Now the objects of knowledge are full of these.” The final paradox is that the science, determined to find a way out of the natural violent cycles, has managed to fully dominate the nature only to make humanity live in what Serres terms “the shadow of Hiroshima.”

Serres advocates the view that although the place of knowledge is a non-place (utopia), the task of the philosophers is not to *find* but to *create* that place. At least that is the message in his book *The Northwest Passage*. Scientists and philosophers should sit together and invent, instead of discovering the space, or as Steven Connor argues, the task is “To bring together culture and science” and to find “connections, mediations and passages”, taking the god Hermes as a lead since he is “the god of messages and crossroads.” To define a place for a thought that will unite physics and the myth, Serres uses the topology as a model. Topology does not deal with geometry but with the “spatial properties of an object that remain invariant under homeomorphic deformation”; in other words topology does not measure the exact position of the objects in space but their spatial relations. Connor explains that Serres considers topology as “what remains invariant as a result of transformation...geometry plus time”, which is to say that topology involves the relations of objects in space, their movement in time and the phenomenological projection of subjects into space. In short, Serres is interested in all the in-between unclear, noisy relations and mediations between subjects and objects. Subjects and objects project themselves into space and in the process relating to other subjects and objects equally projected into space; given the temporal element, they are connected either in linear (cause and effect, irreversible time) or topological time (folded, reversible time). Serres claims that linear time exists on the vestiges of violence. The movement of that time is dull and monotonous. Connor explicates its deadly rhythm as a succession of “argument, contradiction and murder”. This triad resembles Rene Girard's triad of violent rivalry but also the dialectical thought of Hegel. The work of negativity in the dialectical triad requires violence,

Seeking to defeat one's opponent, or slaughter one's enemy succeeds only in putting one in their place, as a future victim to be defeated and slaughtered in one's turn. The world of endless conflicts, upheavals and usurpations is, for Serres, ultimately static. All analytical thinking, all thinking which distinguishes and separates, which aims to effect a clean break with the past and a pure leap into the future...is complicit with this violence.

The logic of complexity that we have been unintentionally immersed in since our birth, denotes that the mistaken evolution and intrusion of the contagion (noise) from outside will be regulated by the immense capacity of our immune system to best function when it fails to function properly. As with Covid 19, it will always develop some chance mutation that will be deadly for the viruses spread, and will contain its deadly march. The evolution of the human organism on the basis of the principle of self-organization has secured our position high in the evolutionary history of this planet. We are adaptive to changes when we leave our mechanistic and rational paradigm of life. The virus, as many others before, has no chance in dealing with the self-organizing capacity of our organic system, obviously designed with ulterior goals that are still undecipherable to us. In that respect, the noise cancelling procedures that modern technology and the political systems are obsessed with might devoid humanity of possibly the only potent weapon it has against the world, against the environment that constantly threatens its extinction. Claude Shannon expressed the same concern when he stated that, “...where no noise is present, nothing is communicated because there is simply no uncertainty to begin with. If information cannot exist without uncertainty, if, that is, the entropy of a channel is the measure of its information-giving capacity, then a signal of no entropy would provide absolutely no information.” If science continued resisting the basic human urge to communicate the universe and turns the equivocality of the nature into a univocality of the human culture, it will effectively block human evolution which has always been based on the openness towards the outside as an information, a signal, and consequently, as an entropy resistant energy, necessary for the development of the human society. Shannon, a mathematician from MIT, describes the whole process in informational terms but also speaks like a social theoretician, “In a state of zero equivocation all is entirely predetermined, all is entirely within the realm of the given and the assumed. Any message given across a noiseless channel would necessarily have to be already predicted with absolute certainty on the other side of the communicational divide. No uncertainty would be displaced; nothing would be resolved. Nothing would be secret and thus nothing could be revealed.” As primitive societies knew very well, the equivocation is information depending whether you are sender or a receiver of the message. Katherine Hayles reflects on the paradox, “This ambiguity in equivocation's sign is related to the observer's position within the channel. If the observer is at the source, she knows what the “correct” message is and will consequently regard the equivocation as interference. By contrast, if she is the receiver, she can see the effect of the noise on the system and will therefore observe instances in which it has positive effect.”

As noted earlier with Serres, in order to resolve the informational problem, the science should act less from the position of the source of knowledge but - as ancient civilizations did - take the position of a receiver of a message, and start listening to the world.

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