The Biopolitics of Noise

Kafka’s “Der Bau”

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Besides this, a certain lack of urbanity (Urbanität) is associated with music, since, above all through the composition of its instruments, it spreads its influence further than one requires of it (to the neighborhood), and thus imposes itself, and hence infringes upon the freedom of others outside of the musical society.¹

This well-known remark from the fifty-fourth section of the Critique of Judgment seems to say only what is obvious to anyone who has lived by others: music becomes, for those dwelling nearby—and precisely because of a forceful, imposing quality intimately bound up with its pleasures—a nuisance, noxious and obnoxious, noise. It is not just a matter of personal irritation, though. Music lacks and, through this lack, seems to threaten urbanity: a certain way of being with others; a basic form of political existence.² Moreover, the sense in which music disturbs this way of being with others is political through and through. For Kant seems to suggest that music, often regarded as giving expression to our inner life, becomes noise when it crosses a threshold: the walls that seal off interior from exterior, giving structure to urban life by creating an artificial world of silence.
Noise thus involves the violation of the barriers that constitute the relation between public and private—barriers that were themselves erected in an anticipatory defense against the threat of a noise that itself comes into existence through their violation. In this way, the problem of music and noise is, for Kant, intimately bound up with an urban rather than a rural form of existence.

A question thus becomes audible that, from the nineteenth century up to our own (with Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy, Hitler's radio addresses, Muzak, rock 'n' roll, personal music players), has become ever more unnerving: what is the political sense of noise, the sense of noise for politics? Does the sense of and for noise give us a sense for another kind of politics, a different sense in which the political might be understood?

The aim of this essay, more modest than this immodest question would suggest, is only to open up this question, to give it sense—and perhaps only a first sense. To this end, I engage in a reading of Kafka's unfinished story "The Burrow" (Der Bau), a text in which the political sense of noise presents itself in a particularly striking aspect: as interruption and, indeed, as an interruption of a "classical" political discourse based on the spatial, architectural management of the antagonistic interplay between two fluidly constituted forms of sonic community: the community of those who constitute themselves through shared sounds, and the community of those who seek to exclude noise (including the community of solitude: a community with one's one thoughts, feelings, inner life). The groundlessness of this "classical" discourse is exposed through the Wirbelstoß (whirlwind, undermining, and hence subversive activity) of the text even before noise presents itself as the decisive problem. The main body of this essay, like the text that it addresses, falls into two parts: the first relatively silent, the second noisy, with a middle section marking the transition from silence to noise.

My method belongs at the intersection of a phenomenological approach (such as that taken by Don Ihde) and the political question, addressed with extraordinary breadth and insight by Jacques Attali, of how noise becomes organized through political power and thus presents itself as the ground of power. The phenomenology of noise, the exposition of the essential structure of the sense of and for noise, as a particular liminal modality of listening and acoustic experience, can be best approached through the question of politics. And conversely, the political dimension of noise must be more explicitly understood in terms of the historicity of the political—its historically changing constitutive (a priori, transcendental) structures—developed in the thought of Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Michel Foucault, and, more recently, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito. The "metahistorical" thematic of biopolitics—by calling attention to the decisive significance of the relation of the political to a more or bare life shared between human beings and other living creatures and characterized above all by the biological, life sustaining and reproducing, functions of the body—suggests a way of developing the implications of, and perhaps complicating, Attali's invocation of a "political economy" of noise. The guiding insight of this essay is that the sense of and for noise discloses a sense of space that is constitutive for a political existence and that, moreover, at issue in the structure of this space (its particular mode of spatiality) is the relation to this biological strata of mere life. Hence, the politics of noise is always already the biopolitics of noise.

Entrances

"The Burrow" stands out even among the writings of an author whose every work opened up a literary terra incognita. Written as a first-person narrative, and indeed a monologue, the putative objectivity of third-person narration has been abandoned, together with the rhetorical conceit of the scientific report used in Kafka's other Bauwerk, "At the Building of the Great Wall of China." Yet it is also not exactly a stream of consciousness: there are no "broken off phrases, unfinished sentences, incoherent terms, and hither-and-thither associations," nor is there a single "sentence that fails to reach its grammatical aim." The first person, moreover, is not really a person at all but an unnamed, unidentified, mole-like creature, combining animal and human traits. This creature speaks, seemingly only to himself, of his lifework, the Bau ("burrow," "construction") that he has just finished and that seems to have turned out well, and of the anxieties attending to its construction and his life within. These anxieties are poignantly quotidian: they concern the defense of his life and his possessions. In one long passage, the creature wonders whether, rather than having a single central "castle keep" (Burgplate) where all his food is stored, he should have organized the burrow around several different castle keeps, so that his food would not be exposed to a single attack. And in another passage, following an expedition into open air, he struggles to think of a safe way of returning back into his burrow: there is no way to avoid a certain risk of exposure during the moment of reentry, and yet to remain outside also involves risks. In these deliberations, the creature confronts the impossibility of achieving a perfect technical solution to the danger of life. The source of this impossibility is not the limits of his technical skills but the nature of
The technical problem itself: the problem of defense. The perfect defense of life is impossible since life involves a necessary relation to the "outside" environment and to a perishable, unpredictable material reality. Life is always exposed in living.

For Heidegger, the creature's anxiety would lack relation to "authenticity" (Eigentümlichkeit). It is irretrievably distracted by the things of the world. Yet perhaps, precisely by refusing to allow anxiety to rescue itself from this distraction, Kafka calls attention to a political aspect of anxiety that Heidegger, despite his understanding of Dasein as being with others in a world, obscures. It is a commonplace, indeed, that the privileged subject of the modern (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century) novel is the newly emerged middle class. "The Burrow," like most of Kafka's writings, can also be situated within this tradition, yet it treats the middle-class subject with striking philosophical radicalness. Kafka's creature is neither the bourgeois of the popular imagination nor a sociological construct, characterized by a combination of inherited class values and individual personality traits. Nor is it an exemplification of a Marxist "scientific" concept of the bourgeois, defined principally by a certain relation to the means of production. Recalling the analyses of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, Kafka presents the basic mode of existence of the bourgeois, who, living in a constant fear of violent death, responds to this fear by accumulating property through various species of labor—building, accumulating, and maintaining. This is not to deny that the creature of "The Burrow" is also just a animal. The activities that I have identified as bourgeois are indeed common to many animals, and, moreover, this animal's specific form of life closely resembles that of the European mole. Indeed, it is as just an animal that Kafka's creature represents the bourgeois: whereas Aristotle would insist that man is political through the possession of language and reason—that which distinguishes him from other animals—the privileged subject of modern political thought is political in and through its animality: specifically political relations emerge from out of mere, animal life.

The striking role of solitude in "The Burrow" suggests the power of this analysis. The creature has no family, friends, lovers, or known neighbors. He has no one to talk to but himself. The Other appears in the text only as nameless and faceless enemies and prey: the Kleinmein (small fry) that he himself must consume to live; the larger enemies that might devour him or seize his stocks of food; or a similar burrowing creature that would wish to claim his burrow for its own. Solitude is perhaps not quite the right word for the creature's condition: true solitude presupposes a relation to the possibility of friends, lovers, family, and neighbors. Only thus can their lack be felt and even embraced. Yet while the creature is surrounded, and even threatened from within, by others, these are present to him only in the horizon of the struggle to survive in a world of limited resources. He lacks the very conception of an Other whose relation to him would be mediated through values and purposes (such as those of politics, religion, or erotic love) that somehow transcend, or even merely interrupt, the fear of death.

The impossibility of friendship in the world of "The Burrow" appears with particular clarity when the creature tries to think of how he might safely descend into his burrow. "If only," he thinks, "I had someone whom I could trust, whom I could place on my observation post, then I could indeed be consoled as I descend." He continues:

I would come to the agreement with him, whom I trust, that he precisely observes the situation while I descend and for a long time afterwards, and, in the case of dangerous signs, knocks on the mouse door. . . . That way, all the loose ends above me would be tied up, no remnant would remain, at most my confidant [Vertrauensmann].

Yet his confidence in his imagined confidant quickly dissolves. The candidate will, after all, demand some sort of reciprocation. He will want to see the burrow, at the very least. Yet to allow someone into the burrow would be extremely embarrassing; it was built only for himself, not for visitors. And so the creature concludes, "I believe I will not let him in; even if it makes possible for me to enter into the burrow, I would not let him in." 109

Friendship, in this most minimal form, promises a way out of the creature's impossible situation. But even this minimal friendship is impossible. This impossibility challenges every attempt, starting from Hobbes, to conceive of the political union in terms of a contract or covenant through which the contracting parties can depart from the state of nature. Lacking is the minimal condition of entering into a contract: the ability to conceive of a reciprocal exchange. This is because his burrow can only exist for him as something radically private—as private as the innermost reaches of the body. No gaze could penetrate his burrow without compromising it essentially: every envisioning of the burrow is an invasion. 11 Moreover, exchange itself requires the expropriation of one's property. But the creature's property is such that this expropriation is impossible: it can only be horded and perhaps enjoyed.

All this suggests a subtle, if implicit rather than explicit, engagement with the history of Western political thought. The transition from classical political thought to the postclassical tradition initiated by Hobbes
of the kind of friendship constitutive of political relations. Within the classical tradition, political friendship involves the common commitment to values that transcend mere living (zoe). It does not involve the pursuit of mere pleasure or utility but of the "good"—something that is accessible only to human beings as rational animals, as animals having language. The postclassical tradition starts out from the realization of the political fruitiness of such friendships. Such friendships are certainly possible, and yet, as becomes evident in times of sectarian strife, they cannot possibly provide even the minimal basis for a flourishing political life. Postclassical political thought replaces a rich, value-driven friendship with a minimal friendship motivated only by the fear of death. This minimal friendship, as it were, an unnatural alliance grounded in our strictly natural condition. "The Burrow," however, suggests that even this minimal form of friendship is impossible. The privacy of property is such as to allow no friendship whatsoever—or at least no friendship with others.

Property, of course, represents one of the most foundational concepts for all political life. Regardless of the specific form that it assumes, property can be understood as the most basic structure mediating between the members of a group and the group as a whole. We might think of this mediation in terms of a correlation between the nature of property and the topology of the political: the shape of space structuring political theory and practice. The continuous, divisible space of classical political thought—I use this term to designate the Greek tradition of political philosophy consolidated in the writings of Plato and Aristotle—is a space that can be divided up, parcelled out, and separated off into separate regions, each of which can become the property of an individual or group. Not all property takes the form of land, of course; and yet land, in its divisibility, provides an operative metaphor for all property within the classical tradition. All properties are things that can be divided up, distributed. Those things that do not allow division and distribution—that cannot be coherently "projected" into this continuous, divisible space—stand at the limit of the sphere of the political, and hence the political itself comes to be determined through the limit that defines what is proper to it.

It might seem to contradict this claim that Plato's Republic, the preeminent work of classical political philosophy, conceives of the idea of the Good as something that, like the sun, can participate in it becoming divided into pieces. I propose, however, that classical property needs precisely such a superproperty, itself situated beyond the sphere of the political in the strict sense, to supplement and ground the system of finite property. The transcendental principle of the Good supports the particular system of divisions, such that, in the end, while each of us has our own property, our own piece of the whole, we also all share in the justice that joins all together into a unity through the distribution of goods. Classical property and classical space, moreover, are opposed not only to a superproperty—that which is absolutely itself and never otherwise than itself (the idea of the Good that grounds all finite goods) but also to a subproperty. This subproperty involves the biological and natural life on which property depends: the unappropriatable, and hence always "improper," basis of property. Refusing boundaries, limits, determinations, it is in constant flux and cannot become property.

The postclassical tradition of political thought consists in the attempt not only, as noted, to base politics in a minimal friendship but also to hold on to classical space and the classical sense of property, despite the fact that, so long as rich, value-directed forms of friendship—friendships involving shared virtue and the pursuit of the Good—are excluded from the realm of politics, the classical space has lost its anchor in the transcendental principle (the superproperty that all can partake in without division) around which the community of friends is assembled and which indeed only becomes an efficacious reality through this community of friends. Politics is thus conceived of as something artificial—man is no longer a political animal by nature: the artificial construction of a classical political space. And hence human reason assumes a new and decisive function: it is the very capacity of constituting classical space ab initio. It is not surprising that Kant, trying to make sense of the British empiricism descended from Hobbes, would realize that the intuition of a continuous spatial manifold belonged a priori to specifically finite (we could say political), and hence human, reason.

Kafka's "Burrow" should be conceived, first of all, in its relation to the classical theory of space and property and the concepts, such as labor, involved in it. The labor of the burrowing creature is the labor of making originary property: of turning a space that belongs to all and none into his own space. This labor must be understood in terms of the two spaces that it brings into relation: the chthonic space below the surface and the space of the surface. The space of the surface is principally nomadic—it is a space that one can move across and only move across. It is a space that has not yet become settled, that does not yet allow demarcations of property. The space below the surface, in contrast, can be claimed as property by burrowing into it. Whereas the former is undetermined and indeed indeterminate as property, the latter is overdetermined. The burrowing
The space that the burrowing creature burrows into, and that Kafka's story claims for its own, is a biological space, a nonclassical space of subproperty, in which geometric property divisions lose all sense. The habitat of one animal does not exclude, but rather includes, other animals and other habitats and indeed only exists through this inclusion. One cannot speak anymore of a single space but only of different interwoven and mutually implicating spatialities. What is my house to me is the house of another to another. The parasite presents an extreme example of this phenomenon, and, at the same time, evolutionary biology and ecology suggest that the essential structure of life is parasitic, that all life is nothing else than the living off other life.

Sound (and Vision)

If classical property is property that can be surveyed, taken in with the eyes either directly or through representations such as maps and globes, this other property never consolidates into a stable form that could be mapped out. Without clear limits, it offers nothing that could be—clearly or obscurely—seen. The experience of property is no longer visual and positive. It no longer involves the synoptic presentation of what one owns, with this appearing before us, as our property, in a single comprehensive vision. Rather, it is acoustic and negative. Whereas the boundaries of classical property become obscure in the nighttime, silence is the basis of the biopolitical experience of property. When property is fundamentally overdetermined and folded into itself, silence (which is always a relative silence, since the ear tunes our accustomed sounds and noises) affirms an absence of intruders and disturbances, of external and internal enemies. It does not present a specific, limited region that is exclusively ours, but it gives us to feel that our space, though it may be traversed by the spaces of many others, is at least for the time being more or less in our control, more or less our own.

The creature explains,

And it is not only the external enemies that threaten me. There are also such enemies in the interior of the earth. I have not yet seen them, yet the Legends tell of them and I believe firmly in them. They are beings of the inner earth; not even Legend can describe them. Even the one who has become their victim has hardly seen them; they come, one hears the scratching of their claws just below oneself in the earth, which is their element, and one is already lost. Here it is no longer the case that one is in one’s own house. Rather, one is in their house.
Here we find, in nove, an analysis of silence as a way that property happens. Starting with Plato, beauty has involved a limit experience of classical property space. Beauty allows what is wholly beyond the senses—goodness and wisdom—to appear to the senses and, principally, the sense of vision. Beauty presents as classical property (in finite form) the absolute superproperty on which all other properties, and all other property, depend. The passage just quoted turns Platonic beauty on its head: most beautiful is no longer the excess of light but the absence of noise. Silence thus takes over as the guarantor of property. Yet it no longer operates through transcendence. The beauty of vision and light (as in Plato’s Phaedrus) comes from beyond this world: the beauty of silence, in contrast, comes from within, since it is nothing more than the absence of the sounds emanating from the depths of the earth. And whereas the beauty of vision indicates something secure and permanent, the beauty of silence is always deceptive. It can always, at any moment, be interrupted “suddenly.” The temporality of silence involves only the present, yet a present never really present to itself, never fully and adequately given in self-presence—a present pierced through with the threat of sudden interruption, always already interrupted by its own anxiety about being interrupted.

While the burrowing creature seems from the beginning to desire silence above all else, he remains beholden to the desire for a synoptic vision of all that is his own: “it is stupid but true that self-consciousness suffers when one does not see all one’s stock gathered together and thus, with one single glance, knows what one possesses.”24 Kant’s critical philosophy, I suggested earlier, attempts to ground the classical political space, which the postclassical tradition had tried to preserve at all cost, in the active, constitutive powers of human reason. The homogenous, divisible space of classical property becomes a priori intuition. Yet for the experience of things in space and time to be possible, what is experienced must be held together in the unity of consciousness, and thus, ultimately, this unity of consciousness must itself be present to itself. The ultimate foundation of property thus becomes, in the postclassical tradition, self-consciousness.25 Yet the passage quoted earlier, read in the context of what follows, suggests that just this self-consciousness, the “stupid” ground of “truth,” might be impossible, threatening with incoherence the postclassical reconstruction of a classical political space.

The burrowing creature leaves his burrow in the hope, above all, of achieving this self-consciousness. Yet he comes to realize the futility of this endeavor:

What sort of protection [Schermung] is it that I observe here? Is it then at all possible to judge the danger in which I am inside the burrow according to the experiences that I have here on the outside? Do my enemies even pick up my scent correctly when I am not in the burrow? They certainly pick up something of my scent, but not my full scent. For is it not often the case that the existence of the full scent is the presupposition of the normal danger? The experiments that I employ here go only a quarter or a tenth of the way: they are suited to reassure me and put me in the greatest danger through false reassurances.

While it might be possible to observe the burrow from the outside—from the perspective of a space in which things could be surveyed and taken in at once glance—the sense of security that such observations yield is utterly deceptive. The dangers of the burrow are such that they can only be grasped from within, only when, through the scent that one gives off, one is exposed to these dangers. Yet the moment one is within the burrow, exposed to real dangers, one is no longer able to observe the dangers to which one is exposed. We can never take in what we are synoptically, through apperception, since what we are is a scent and the sensing of this scent. Both the scent and its sensing belong to a realm of materiality that escapes visual order.

This futility has another aspect: one can never observe oneself sleeping. The creature continues: “No, I do not observe, as I believed I did, my sleep. Rather, I am the one who sleeps while the destroyer [Verderben] stays awake and keeps watch.”26 If it is in stillness and quiet that we appropriate our life—our merely biological existence—then deep sleep, rather than the fullest wakefulness in the light of the truth, would be the experience on which all property rests. If the burrowing creature leaves his burrow, the cave of an inverted Platonism, to venture into the light, it is in search of a supplement to the logic of quiet and the new kind of property space that it implies. The observation of sleeping is the promise of a metaphysical supplement to silence. Silence can never hear itself—all we can hear is a minimum of noise, and perhaps, as Jean-Luc Nancy would argue, silence must be understood not as privation but as an “arrangement of resonance” such as the resonating sounds of the body.27 But perhaps it can see itself. Precisely this hope proves illusory. And so the burrowing creature descends. With his descent, he leaves metaphysical dreams, and the remnant of the classical metaphysical political space and the classical concept of property, behind him. He enters, fully, into the realm of silence.
In words that resonate uncannily with Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the creature greets his burrow again in its *Stimmheit* and *Leere*, its dumb, unspeaking emptiness:

For your sake, you passages and spaces [Plätze], and you above all caste keep [Burgklane], I have come, holding my life for naught, after having long been so stupid as to tremble for its sake and postpone the return to you. What do I care about danger now that I am with you. You belong to me, to you, we are bound together. What can happen to us? Even if the people [Völk] above throng to get in, and the snow is ready that will break through the moss. And with its unspeaking silence [Stimmheit] and emptiness, the burrow now also welcomes me, and confirms what I say.19

The biopolitical space announcing itself in "The Burrow" does not simply overturn the classical property space that the postclassical tradition seeks to recover through a detour through subjectivity. Rather, biopolitical space necessarily contains classical space, which maintains its structural coherence and yet is also folded into this other space, becoming dependent on, and even compromised through, it. Silence indeed first allows the disclosure and constitution of a classical space by suppressing the sensory noise of a purely biological existence: the noises produced from within our bodies and from the life surrounding us. Classical political space, the space of meaningful, purposeful activity and value-laden properties, is above all else the space in which signals can appear above the noise. Burrowing, I suggested earlier, constructs a mediating space between chthonic and nomadic space. What this means should now be clearer: the burrow, in its silence, is a sort of limit space between the nonclassical space of the earth and the nomadic open space above. And thus constructing the burrow resembles the hidden labors of the body—of making our bodies and living in our bodies.20

Silence first exposes us to noise, but it is noise that reveals the sense of silence, which is nothing else than the opening up of space. The creature's return to the burrow, we saw earlier, is a rejection of security as the highest value. He returns to danger. To live in the element of life, rather than seeking to transcend life, is to live dangerously, to live in danger.

This danger, I propose, is the danger that comes with being exposed to sense. This, above all, indicates the fundamental shift in the sense of property entailed in the rejection of classical politics. The sense of property is no longer its permanence, security, and absolute self-presence but the risk of danger. The moment that the creature embraces danger, he can also say, "You belong (gehört) to me, to you, we are bound together, what can happen to us." Property now becomes a question of gehört. To have property is not to see and understand that something is mine by taking in its limits and the marks that make it unique, distinguishing it from other things in the world, and hence uniquely my own. It is, rather, to dwell in the silence that involves, above all, the always preliminary, never final accomplishment of a sphere of regularity and order, in which unusual events, disturbances, and disruptions of the normal order are kept to a minimum. Property, so understood, is not what grants legal recognition, backed up by the force of the law, to what we would otherwise possess in a merely transient way but is the exposure to the risk of first having something to lose. In this way, moreover, the concept of property also involves a self-referential, medial structure. What is our property not only belongs to us; we belong to it.

Noise

The creature's return into the burrow marks the midpoint in the text. With his descent, he abandons the metaphysical dream of observing his burrow from the outside—the hope that the biopolitical space and property of the burrow could be incorporated within, and secured through, the classical, primarily visual space of extension.

As long as the visual maintains its privilege as the "organizing sense"—the sense through which all senses are organized into a single sensorium—noise is not able to threaten us completely. Visual boundaries do not eliminate noise, but they neutralize the danger it conveys by reassuring us that we belong to a different space, that the noise is outside and we are inside, and that, while the noise may annoy, it cannot threaten. Even as sound becomes noise when it crosses the boundary from outside to inside, our visual sense suppresses its danger by reassuring us that, while inside, we remain safe from the source of the noise. Indeed, the very localizability of noise—which alone allows a distinction between noise (as mere sign) and the source of noise—is the accomplishment of a visual-spatial sense. As soon as the creature abandons the world outside and the dream of living in the outside of his inside—as soon as he abandons the distinction between inside and outside—then, in his newfound silence, he becomes exposed without reserve to noise in all its danger. Having just found his way back into his burrow, the burrowing creature falls into a deep, long sleep, and yet he is then awakened from the last, shallow remnant of his sleep by a hardly audible hissing (Zischen). The rest of the story is devoted to his futile, increasingly desperate, attempts to cope.
His first response to the noise is to think he understands it. The small fry, which he supervised (beaufsichtigt) far too little and treated far too gently, have, in his absence, bored another path somewhere. This new path collapsed with the old, and the air, caught in the intersection, is responsible for the hissing noise. Still thinking in terms of a visual, classical space, he insists on locating the noise in a "somewhere"—a not yet determinate yet determinable space—and thus sets out to localize the noise and remove it.

Like a scientist or engineer, he starts out from a hypothesis based on preliminary observations and then proceeds to test this observation through experimentation and further observations. While also driven by the need for silence ("es soll still sein in meinen Gängen"), it is first of all the "technical problem" that preoccupies him.

This first investigation leads nowhere. He makes some observations: the noise is not constant but intermittent and wavers between a hissing and a more musical, song-like squeaking. Not only is he unable to locate the source, but he finds, contradicting his first hypothesis, that it remains everywhere the same. Still refusing to abandon the assumption that the noise can be localized in a classical space, he supposes that the noise emanates from two centers: approaching one center, he moves away from the other, and the noise's total intensity remains the same.

In confirmation of this hypothesis, he almost seems able to detect small differences in the noise as he moves about. Yet he is also aware that such observations are unreliable. Because listening is at once passive and active (hören and horen), involving both practice and mental attention, the boundary between the subjective and objective, inner and outer, becomes hopelessly blurred. Moreover, noise confuses the understanding and hence the very ability to listen attentively. The scientific method already begins to seem more questionable.

Proceeding with his investigations, he discovers, to his distress, that the noise has even penetrated into the "castle keep." He now regrets that he was never able to carry out a plan dreamt up in his youth, separating the "castle keep" off from the surrounding earth with a thick empty space. This empty space, "the most beautiful place to stay," would have allowed him not only to frolic about—hanging from above, pulling himself up, sliding down, flipping himself around, and coming to rest again with the ground beneath his feet—"on the body of the castle keep, but not in its actual space," but to watch over the castle keep while enjoying a state of complete silence.

This dream of his youth, one could say, represents the failed attempt at a synthesis of classical and biopolitical space. In a silence undistracted by noise, it would be possible not only to listen to but literally to envision silence. Empty space, indeed, would become a vision of silence, allowing the enjoyment of silence, in the space opened up, through exuberant gymnastic movements no longer pursuing any worldly purpose.

Forced again to abandon his hypothesis, the creature makes, and rejects, new conjectures. Could it be the sound of small fry at work? No: the essence of the small fry is never to be heard at work. He would otherwise have never tolerated them but would have exterminated them, even if it meant starving to death. An animal he does not yet know? A large herd of nomadic animals slightly larger than the small fry? Innumerably tiny little animals? Brought to despair by these speculations, he strikes on a new strategy. He will build a single, straight tunnel, burrowing until "independent from all theories," he "finds the real cause of the noise." He will remove the disturbance if it lies in his power to do so, and, if not, at least he will have certainty. All that he did before now seems overhasty, absurd. His mind still too clouded by the cares of the world above, he wished not so much to actually find something as to do something corresponding to his inner unrest. And thus he almost became like the small fry: laboring completely without purpose. Yet if the new strategy is motivated by the need to insist on purposeful, rational action, it ultimately exposes the irrationality that underlies scientific rationality: certainty of knowledge emerges as an end in itself, eclipsing all pragmatic considerations. Sensing this, he admits he has no confidence in his new plan, postponing its implementation and setting about first to repair the damages caused by his Wahrnehmung: the labor of digging that is, at the same time, a "subversive activity"—at once a construction and an undermining.

Yet he is too distracted even for this work.

It is at this point that the creature comes to the critical realization that his entire strategy of construction, up to this point, has been misguided.

One leaps back from the wall, one seeks with one glance to take into view überschauen all the possibilities that this discovery will have as a consequence. One feels as if one had never actually organized the burrow for defense against an attack. One had the intention, but, contrary to all life experience, the danger of an attack, and hence defensive arrangements, seemed too distant—or not distant (how would that be possible) but ranked far below the arrangements for a peaceful life that were everywhere privileged in the construction of the burrow.

The creature's sudden dissatisfaction with the arrangement or organization of the burrow that, in the first sentence, he had declared a success suggests nothing less than a final, decisive rejection of the classical political tradition. The exemplary construction of classical politics is the defensive wall.
wall defends the city from the outside, but, at the same time, it creates an inside, opposed to the outside. This inside is not only defended, but it is defended against defense; it becomes a region of peace and tranquility, in which a life can unfold that transcends the exigencies of defense. The laws of the city, in turn, are a metaphoric extension of its walls. They give definition to the normal order of things. Even though the creature's construction, as I have argued, is already built in a chthonic, biopoliitical space, it nevertheless follows a classical organizational concept, insofar as he sought to organize it in terms of more inner and more external spaces, so as to guard against an attack from the outside that could be localized in space. When he realizes that the noise has penetrated the innermost sanctum of his construction, the castle keep, he sees the futility of such an approach. If the enemy penetrates everywhere, if the enemy is no longer an external enemy—if the very localization of the enemy within classical space is impossible—then every single part of the construction must be constructed around the exigency of defense. No place within the construction can be devoted to peace, but every part of it must be built in anticipation of an attack that could happen at any time and anywhere. The constant state of emergency becomes the order of the day. Suggestive, in this regard, is the creature's observation, when, at the moss covering of the entrance to the burrow, he hears a complete silence, that a complete reversal has taken place: the entrance, once a place of danger, is the place of security, whereas the castle keep, previously a place of security, has been turned away into the noise of the world. Danger can no longer be localized in the places that open out to the outside. And precisely because safety can no longer be localized, the silence of the opening is itself deceptive: “Even worse, here too there is, in reality, no peace.”

The creature will abandon the quest for knowledge that at first consumed him. He no longer seeks discoveries but only to still his inner conflict, and indeed he realizes that his desire for knowledge was secretly determined by his will. If he did not previously conclude that a single large animal—an animal much like himself—is approaching him, circling around him in execution of an incomprehensible plan, it is not because it was implausible but because it was too plausible yet also too dangerous and hard to accept. Before, it was a question of a population (Volk) of small, insignificant creatures, which could threaten him only by creating disturbances and interrupting his silence and, at worst, stealing his food. Now, however, the danger that surrounds him seems to have taken on the concrete form of a single enemy.

When the creature imagines a possible confrontation with “the one who approaches,” he returns us to the Hobbesian primal scene: the war of all against all. Yet this does not lead to a postclassical restoration of a classical politics. While he may dream of reaching an understanding, he knows that he and the other creature, in the moment in which they first see each other or even have a mere premonition of the other in the vicinity, will go at each other (gegenmander aufwärts) with claws and teeth, mindlessly and “with a new, different hunger.” If there is no longer the possibility of a moment of understanding that would interrupt the war of all against all—if the Hobbesian premise has been cut off from the Hobbesian conclusion—it is because the body that would confront another body possessing equal force is not the original, integral body of the individual human being but a body that has been constructed through the ongoing labor of living. The body and the burrow, this is to say, have become one, such that it becomes impossible, with respect to what is most essential—the question of defense—to draw the limit where the body ends and the construction, the product of the body, begins. The sensitivity of the burrow, the creature observes, has made him sensitive, and its injuries injure him as if they were his own. For just this reason, he should have thought of not only his own defense but the defense of the burrow.

The postclassical tradition takes its departure from the individual body. Yet the individual body, to the extent that it allows for reciprocal understanding and hence political relations to emerge, is already inscribed into, and described through, a classical political space. Only because the body of the individual is set against the world that surrounds him, with a difference existing between the body itself and the goods and possessions to which the body can lay claim through its powers, would it be possible to negotiate and enter into political relations. If the body were folded out into its properties and its construction, then every infringement on these would be a matter of life and death, and no understanding could ever be possible. Precisely this is the situation of the burrowing creature. The burrow has become an extension not only of his powers but of his affectivity.

This sensitivity is above all an aural sensitivity, and it is precisely this aural sensitivity that precludes the social contract, making it impossible to construct a politics around the burrowing creature's solitary construction: “Even if it were so strange an animal that its burrow would tolerate a neighbor, my burrow does not tolerate that; at least not an audible neighbor.” Within the biopolitical space of aurality, no sound from the vicinity, no audible neighbor, can be tolerated (übertragen). Noise leaves no room for negotiation (übertragen).

The burrowing creature finally comes to the decisive point: if and what the other creature knows about him. Perhaps, he thinks, the creature could
have heard of him, but it cannot be hearing him. How can he be sure? Because if the other creature heard him as he returned into the burrow and started digging to investigate the noise that he himself heard, then the other creature would have stopped working, at times, in order to listen; and yet he did not hear this. The last, strange words before the narrative breaks off are, “But everything remained unchanged.”

Conclusion

The burrowing creature’s descent, in the second half of “The Burrow,” begins with the dream of a silence that could listen to itself, that could take pleasure in its silence. It ends with his terror before a noise that cannot listen. Whereas the first half of “The Burrow” suggests the failure of classical and post-classical concepts of politics based on a principally visual construction of space, the second half, after the noise, suggests the failure to conceive of politics within the biopolitical space given, in silence, with noise. Yet this failure issues from his insistence on “coping” (in German, zurechtkommen) with noise in the first place. Perhaps a positive biopolitics would only be possible when we cease to treat noise as that which must be located and removed or set right. Kafka’s “The Burrow” hints at how another relation to noise might be possible: at one point, the creature observes that the hissing (Zischen) is also a whistling (Pfeifen): not just noise but almost musical. And whether it sounds like a hissing or piping, moreover, depends more on an act of interpretation than the objective qualities of the sound: it sounds “sometimes like hissing, sometimes like whistling.” Its sounding is a sounding “like” or “as.” The burrower, nevertheless, remains too beholden to his scientific method to abandon himself to the freedom of interpretation. Convincing himself that the sound could not have been caused by a water breach, he remarks elsewhere, “it is a hissing, and is not to be reinterpreted as a rushing.” Perhaps, however, the prospect of biopolitics, of living with others in mere life, depends on nothing else than the power of “hearing as.” The sense of noise for politics is the need to give sense to noise. This need is not first of all a subjective need but exists as the very urgency with which noise announces itself. Politics takes place, and constitutes its spaces, by giving sense to what emerges. It involves interpretative decisions, but not decisions that can be attributed to a single sovereign. Indeed, the voices of those who would claim to be sovereign are still also noises awaiting sense.

Could this be the point of Kafka’s last story, his curious allegory “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse-folk”?

Chapter 8

Torture as an Instrument of Music

John T. Hamilton

When one broaches the topic of music and torture, one generally has in mind how music or sound has been and continues to be used as an instrument for inflicting pain. One perhaps thinks about the disparate claims, substantiated or not, that describe all manner of acoustic assault and torment, most recently as a nefarious tool in America’s ongoing “war on terror.” What is rarely considered, however, is the converse case, one that may be discerned at some peculiar moments within the Western tradition, namely when torture has been used as an instrument of music. I have in mind not simply the more or less conventional image of the “tortured artist” or merely the cops-and-robbers techniques that corner some poor soul to “make him sing”; rather, I am thinking about those few but highly suggestive instances, scattered across cultural history and literature, when torture and torture devices are employed to produce musical sound. What light might these singular and horrific cases shed on today’s music-torture discussion?

Most of us are, unfortunately, by now familiar with the reported usage of musical material as a means of torture. The target may be either an individual or an entire population. News items include subjecting Guantánamo