

Pali Meursault

**Infinite flow/Infinite friction**<sup>×</sup>.

<sup>×</sup>*Originally published in Flâneur #9 – Paris, Boulevard Périphérique, 2023.*

<https://www.flaneur-magazine.com/kiosk/p/issue-09-paris-boulevard-peripherique>

---

Listening from the side of the Parisian Périphérique, the sound environment is a mesh of frequencies, a dense noise, almost a white noise, that is constantly modulated by traffic fluctuations.

It is a constant flow, whose extreme variations range from long nocturnal waves to the steady rumble of rush hour. It modulates but, apart from exceptional instances, it never stops. Under the best of circumstances, it makes it seem like it is achieving the ideal of swift, regular, and predictable movement. Like all the main ducts of traffic runoffs in big cities, however, the ring road of Paris is a place where automotive modernity both comes true and fails. It is the sum of our individual and collective desires for movement, speed, and efficiency, and yet the flow seems to be opposing a constant resistance to its own fluidity.

Automotive modernity has always cultivated both the roar of motors and the silence of interiors, but while engine sounds have their lovers, the statistical undifferentiated noise generated by the infinite addition of trajectories are not sparking much interest. Acoustic ecology has set traffic noise as one of the main indicators of the gradual destruction of our ability to experience the soundscape<sup>×</sup>. It might seem difficult, indeed, to appreciate it as anything other than a nuisance, a pollution that adds, in the audible spectrum, to the environmental cost of our desire and need for mobility.

<sup>×</sup>*One of the shortcomings of Raymond-Murray Schafer's sound ecology lies in its semiotic principle: the soundscape is appreciated according to a signal-to-noise ratio. As much as anthropic noise raises, the signs that compose the soundscape lose their legibility. But this implies that significant and insignificant sounds have been distinguished and categorised beforehand.*

For lack or for want of reducing urban or industrial noise, pragmatic modernity has mostly worked at concealing it or moving it away from the centres of our attention. The ring road of Paris is such a centrifugal infrastructure, protected by walls, trenches, tunnels, and inaccessible areas, and to which the more exposed population is also the less able to voice its concerns – which is another way of keeping noise pollution relatively quiet.

And yet, just as anything one would start to listen to actively, the ring road turns out to be a phenomenon of infinite sound diversity: atmospheric modulations generated by vehicles large and small, various infrastructural vibrations, excitation of tire marks on the textures of asphalt, rhythmic pulsations of cracks in the tarmac and expansion joints of bridges hit by a thousand wheels, poorly tied carriages, failing engines, and radios leaking out cracked windows... Would it be possible, under the white noise, to reduce the listening<sup>×</sup> as much as to perceive the organic qualities of automotive modulations?

<sup>×</sup>*According to Pierre Schæffer's guideline, 'reduced listening' would provide the possibility to access sound-itself, without the cultural conditioning of our relation to sources, to the point of making an equal measure of violin and lorry. But if recording processes and electroacoustic studio experiments actually allow us to decompose the acoustic environment into 'sound objects', this might not be that simple from the side of the road, where vision, smell, and all kind of stickiness also collude with noise to proclaim the cultural obviousness of fossil capitalism.*

The sonic interest of the ring road might not be found in the *flow* itself – which remains an abstract and administrative ideal, but in the *friction* that it implies – which is the vibration that starts with everything that opposes resistance to the flow while allowing it to happen. The flow is like the wind, it does not produce any sound, but the obstacles that are animated in its path do. This notion of friction<sup>×</sup>, then, might provide some support to hold our ground along the road, not only as a countercultural stance allowing us to assert the beauty of the negative (as punk, industrial, and noise music did

wonderfully), but as a way of listening to the harmonies or dissonances which come with the rubbing and colliding of ideological models with realities in resistance.

*For Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, the 'friction' describes destructions as well as productions that result from the confrontation of differences between powers, people, and beings, the study of which implies to produce new forms of sensibility. It might be interesting to further this idea with what James C. Scott calls the 'friction of the terrain' to describe the topographical reliefs that slow down the expansion of the Empire.*

The idea of friction might provide us with an opportunity for reassessing our definition of noise, as a phenomenon the emergence of which would be political before anything else. Such a definition would help qualifying sonic manifestations which, through cultural, social, or economical mechanisms, are kept at the periphery of our perceptive experiences, and would open the possibility of elaborating in response cultural, social, and economical strategies to cultivate listening. Whether it has been deemed futile or essential, experimental music is certainly that kind of an attempt at renewing forms of listening<sup>x</sup>. Confronting some fields that might, just as here, literally be qualified as 'peripheral', it could also contribute to the effort of critical attention that we direct to our environments.

*I would rather delay, however, the moment to formulate a new kind of prescriptive listening. Is it not fair to state that the conceptual value of Pierre Schafer's reduced listening, the political and feminist agency that comes with Pauline Olivero's deep listening, or the welcomed emphasis on socio-historical materialities in Kim Cohen's response to the latter, shallow listening, have been feeding theoretical discussions much more than they have infused actions and practices? Paying attention to an environment such as the Périphérique might not be so much about conceiving ways of hearing it than about finding reasons to stand on its side. And we will have yet to keep in mind that whatever might be discovered about the subjectivity of sound artists passing by the big road will not tell much about the subjectivity of the refugees, removed from the centre, who reside there.*