

# The rest is noise: on describing cognitive multiplicity

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## Abstract

When we describe a thing, a person or a meeting, the simple question of what belongs in the picture becomes a methodological puzzle with serious practical and ethical consequences. A descriptive account touches the contours of what is being described, fluctuating between mere description and explanation and between paranoid and reparative writing. In our textual laboratory, we describe noise as a style of music and an example of cognitive multiplicity. Two accounts – of a concert and a noisy meeting – are put besides each other to explore methods, which allow us to understand noise not as an annoying otherness, but as an accessible source of multiple meanings. We suggest that reparative strategies of description, adding texture to the surface rather than uncovering the social forces beneath, broaden the field of describable experience while also enabling us to see the exclusion of people considered too noisy as a process with real effects.

## Keywords

Description, reparative reading, cognitive multiplicity, noise, Roman Radkovič Collective

It's only a bird in golden cage /  
But beautiful sight to see / Be not a nipping bird be a dove /  
the skylark handwriting / Though I was today a little trivial in one line / ale stará Blažková se  
má čísti Blažková.

(Blatný, 2011: 88)

When we write or talk about a place, a person or an occasion, trying to bring what is described 'clearly before the eyes' (Aphthonius the Sophist, 2003: 117), we are forced to deal with a simple and yet almost insoluble question: What belongs and what does not

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belong in the picture? The classical rhetorical exercise of *ecphrasis*,<sup>1</sup> the textual transposition of the non-textual, is a risky, situational and value-laden enterprise, always balancing on the edge between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ descriptions (Love, 2013), explanation and ‘mere’ description (Latour, 2005), uncovering depths and paying attention to surfaces (Best and Marcus, 2009; Marcus et al., 2016) and between paranoid and reparative readings (Love, 2010a; Sedgwick, 2003).

In our textual laboratory we explore noise as a style of making music and a paradigmatic example of abjected multiplicity (Sangild, 2002; Serres, 1995). According to Judith Butler (1993), the constitutive force of abjection produces an outside, which is in fact ‘inside’ the subject as its founding repudiation. Such constitutive refusal can be descriptively explored in the space inhabited by sound as well as in the realm of rational thought: like music, reason is born out of multiplicity through its displacement. In the world of the ‘rational man’, people identified as too noisy are shouted down by the refrain of reason. Their narratives silenced by the discourses of norm and deficiency (Foucault, 1988), they have no other place to go. And yet, their life is elsewhere.

Following the recent turn to description, ‘[w]e see the practice of description as well suited to emergent evidence that exceeds but might ultimately be essential to reformulating the frame of analysis, and as thus providing (at times) occasion for a writing that registers where objects push back against existing frames’ (Marcus et al., 2016: 4). As an internal/external Other, noise, even when partially colonised, disrupts patterns of rhythms, melodies, space and time. Like Butler (1993: xiii), we ‘[c]onsider this threat and disruption not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility’. Noise, as a way of making music, re-frames rules for what can and what cannot be understood as a relevant form of artistic activity (Goddard et al., 2012; Thompson, 2017; Thompson and Biddle, 2013). Noise overflows the frame. Similarly, our collaborative ethnography of cognitive multiplicity attempts to unsettle cognitive norms by attending to circumstances where ideas and utterances become or cease to be noisy. If we can register the overflowing of cognitive noise across the breakwaters of reason, we might come to a better understanding of how we enact rationality and live meaningful lives together.

First, we will describe a place and a performance. Then we will attend to a meeting. A meeting with members of a band, so we will talk about music. And about horses.

## **Description invites the question ‘What belongs and what does not belong into the picture?’**

An empty square at night. Right in front of you there is a big building with open windows. Noise is coming out; a band is playing. Cacophonous accordion, wild beating of drums. You recognise some words: ‘Where is my home, where is my home. The water is roaring, across the meadows. A tempest over the Tatras, a tempest over the Tatras. The thunder is rumbling [~], the Slovaks are rising.’ The drums beat a fast rhythm, then all is lost in the purple noise of the kick drum. And then: ‘There’s people there, there’s people there, there’s people there!’ The square is empty except for two strangers. They approach

the window, listen for a while and then leave. You see a photograph leaning against the wall, surrounded by burned-out candles. It is a picture of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová, the young journalist and his fiancée, killed recently by a crime boss in Slovakia.

You enter. You pass through the glass entrance into a wide empty corridor. This is ‘župný dom’, the seat of the regional government in the town of Liptovský Mikuláš. On the walls, official announcements hang side-by-side with posters advertising concerts and other events. After turning right, you come to a closed door. The sign on the door reads: ‘By opening this door you are making a hole into the world.’ *Diera do sveta*, or *Hole into the World*, is a café, a cultural centre and a bookstore. The drums beat wildly over the undistorted tones of a keyboard. ‘They’re there, they’re there, they’re there.’ There are two posters on the door. One is for ArtWife ’19, a feminist multi-genre festival, ‘the only one of its kind in Slovakia’. This year’s theme is ‘bodies’. The other poster presents the



programme for April. Today, the Roman Radkovič Collective, RRC, is playing ‘the Hole’.

If you had Googled the band before coming to the concert, you would have found them on Soundcloud, tagged: experimental/avant-garde/avantgarde/improvisation/no wave/noise/side music/sound art/Tavíkovice. Their latest track, an excerpt from a soon-to-be-released album recorded during a studio session on 30 January, is called *Where Is My Home*:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-311637807/kde-domov-muj>

It is too late to run. You open the door and enter another corridor, this time lined on both sides by books. After buying a drink and a ticket from the counter – the entrance fee, subsidised by European Union grants, is €2 – you go through another door on your right. You are in the concert hall and the stage is at the opposite side of the room, in front of the open windows leading to the town square. The small concert hall is almost empty; if you wanted to, you could step right up to the stage, into the whirlwind of chaos.

The drummer is crazy. His four limbs beat continuously, side by side or crosswise, constantly changing their targets. Sometimes, you hear *just* the drums. But even without

the help of a microphone, you can still hear him scream: ‘Father, father, father, father!’ On the left side of the stage, a young, short and rather stout guy wanders slowly – mostly with just his right hand – across his red Roland GoKeys. He is either totally absorbed by the sound or totally distant – you can not tell. Behind him, an older, larger man in a black suit and a black hat tenaciously rings three triangles hanging from an improvised stand. On the right side of the stage, the accordionist switches between dutifully pulling the bellows back and forth, hitting the instrument with both hands and complete idleness. Between him and the drummer, a short man in big retro glasses and a leather jacket plays the harmonica, at times making it sing, at times just blowing into its holes. The high hat runs away from the drummer; he snatches it back with a quick move of his hand. Altogether, it sounds, as one critique recently put it, like ‘one million beavers shitting, forty pissing and one hundred vomiting’ (Klamm, 2018).

The multiple as such. Here’s a set undefined by elements or boundaries. Locally, it is not individuated; globally, it is not summed up. [...] It is not an aggregate; it is not discrete. It’s a bit viscous perhaps. A lake under the mist, the sea, a white plain, background noise, the murmur of a crowd, time. [...] Am I immersed in this multiple, am I, or am I not a part of it? (Serres, 1995: 4–5)

The noise is not individuated, it is not defined by elements. And yet, there are partially recognisable orderings. And because we all are, as Michel Serres puts it (1995: 3), Pythagoreans, and are all looking for a single God and identifiable individuals, the question posed by islands of provisional order is: ‘What, or, who, is this?’

The frontman of the band commands the scene by his single-pointed concentration. He looks like a spaceship captain from a new Star Trek series. The fingers of his right hand slowly and gently touch the acoustic guitar, his left hand embraces the neck, mostly just in one place. He raps, talks and sometimes sings, a Syd Barrett of noise. He wears a pigeon-purple sweater, a beige chequered jacket, blue jeans and new dark blue sneakers. The song goes like this:

Sandokan, Sandokan, killed the tiger! Tadada, tadada, tadada, tadada! // There’s soldiers there, there’s soldiers there! Tadada, tadada, tadada, tadada! // Marianna, Marianna! // Winnetou, Winnetou, Old Shatterhand of the West! // There’s soldiers there, there’s mares there, there’s Indians there [~]. [~] There’s people there, there’s people there, there’s people there!

The rest is drums.

He connects the incompatible. In his prescient visions, he enlivens Sandokan, Marianna, Indians, savages, the Titanic, Robin Hood, giraffes, elephants, tigers, Tarzan, monkeys, crocodiles, zeppelins, balloons, soldiers, cars, buses, trains, street cars, bicycles, discos. A truly self-confident hero who led his ark straight out of the psychiatric hospital<sup>2</sup> in Tavikovice and sailed the whole dying and disappearing planet so that he could give us a full account. [...] You say it has been a long time since you heard anything that truly shook you? Please, use this opportunity. A soundtrack to images of floating plastic, dead fish, cleared forests, melting icebergs... Our planet will survive, our planet is not afraid of anything, we will keep our planet. There are people there. The weather is good. (Juhás, 2018)

This description is problematic because the mention of the ‘psychiatric hospital’ leads us far, perhaps too far, out of the frame. First, Roman Radkovič did not lead his ark out of ‘the psychiatric hospital’. And secondly, if the information regarding RRC’s ‘home’ is not discernible from the band’s performance that is the object of this description, does it belong in the frame? Or is it itself a frame, one that encircles and encloses the picture?

The reference to the psychiatric hospital conjures up ghosts (Love, 2010b; M’charek and Oorschot, 2020): mental illness, stigma, impairment. But are these ghosts really present at the scene, or does evoking them constitute a case of paranoid reading (Love, 2010a; Sedgwick, 2003: 123–151), of an “unveiling”, “behind” the actors’ backs, of the “social forces at work” (Latour, 2005: 136)? Our emphasis on ‘mere description’ forces us to refuse any easy leaps to a deeper level of analysis. In any case, such a frame offers a powerful explanation, one which might significantly rephrase the terms of the discussion, as in the following exchange on Facebook. The debate, which you might have read on the profile page of the Hole into the World before going to the concert, is based on the sleeve note quoted above and on a video recording of RRC playing at the Punctum club in Prague:<sup>3</sup>

Debater 1: That’s just sick!

Hole into the World: People with mental illness or impairment are first of all humans and have the same needs as everybody else. When they want to express themselves creatively or artistically, it is not ‘sick’; on the contrary, we think that they are still not being offered enough space for their activities, which we hope might finally lead to their personal development and integration into society.

Debater 2: I absolutely agree. But compare how you introduced them with what happens in the video.

Obviously, the problem is not that people with mental illness play at concerts, but that the sounds they produce are introduced with arty superlatives. This might be a matter of style. In the noise scene, noise can be talked about, and is analysed and prized (Attali, 2009; Hegarty, 2007; Thompson, 2017). In this exceptional space full of noise, RRC’s performance *is* art. But in the world of the debaters, the way the band sounds must be abjected from the realm of music so it can be listened to as to a fulfilment of some disabled peoples’ need for expression. Noise is labelled ‘sick’ to be tolerated as such: the way to inclusion leads through exclusion.<sup>4</sup>

You, the attentive observer, almost lost in the noise and yet alert to more focused signals, might notice a thin exercise book with worn pages on a note stand in front of Roman Radkovič. On its back, turned to the audience, there is some writing. It is impossible to read in the dim light of the concert hall, but if you were to take a photograph and later enlarge it on your computer, you would see a line of letters, starting on the top of the page and continuing all the way down, without spacing or punctuation. Some of the letters are capitals, some lowercase, some block letters, others cursive writing. The text is written

in Czech, and the combination of partial unintelligibility and the absence of spacing make it almost impossible to translate into any other language. It goes like this:

Idonothavepoweryet foranewrelationshipLucy[~]the metal ribbon of the note stand[~]  
maRRIAgesoiamlookingforwardTREasureisborn DAYdreamingPetraNěmcová  
KIRSTENDUNST[~]andstay withoutfriendsallalone[~]

Attached to the middle of Roman Radkovič's guitar by partially unstuck scotch tape is a sign printed on a small piece of paper. It reads 'Radkovič'. A mysterious detail. Why would anybody sign, for himself or for somebody else, a musical instrument in such a way? Is it analogous to having one's band name printed on a drumhead? Does it mean 'RADKOVIČ COLLECTIVE'? Or is it a signature not only of the guitar's user or his band, but of another entity as well, a person or an institution which thus demarcates not Roman, but his belongings? A white piece of paper, black writing in Times New Roman. Probably printed on an inkjet printer, then cut out with scissors and stuck in place with scotch tape. 'Mere description' will not lead us much further. But why is it taped to the front, for everybody to see? Is it displayed with purpose, or is its placement a result of neglect, the work of somebody who simply did not care that the sign would be visible to all?

We mention this detail with hesitation. Do you remember being embarrassed when somebody at summer camp pointed out that your shoes were labelled with your name? We do not want to embarrass Roman Radkovič and we do not want to portray him as a child. We want to write in his interest, in line with his concerns. And so we hesitate to say where he lives if he does not say that himself.



Signing his guitar in such a way, as well as writing about it, might be a way of conjuring up a ghost, of making dehumanisation visible. Does this ghost belong to the description, despite its flickering presence? Indeed, it is perfectly possible that Roman himself

glorified his name in this way, just like he did with the Scorpions poster in his room, onto which he wrote his band's name. 'Everybody knows me and that's the way it should be.'

But it is equally possible that the 'official' purpose of the label was to mark out private property in an environment where many people live together and/or many objects are institutionally owned. In that case, its placement, or rather, the neglect of placing, might signify that the representatives of the institution who labelled Roman's property did not take seriously the fact that he plays the guitar at concerts. Most probably, they did not consider his band a real band and his music real music. For them, it was just noise. Or should we paranoiacally assume that it was a stratagem on their part to discredit Roman in the face of his audience, to seal a stigma that might be otherwise dissolved by his success? Since we have seen many other similar signs in many other improbable places – like on the cigarette pack that RRC's triangle player carries in his pocket – we consider pragmatic reasons to be the more likely answer. But the pragmatic and the ethical are difficult to separate. In any case, these 'other improbable places' are far from the object of description, too far out of the frame. They are just noise, they do not belong to the description. Or do they?

### **In an account of a noisy meeting matters of care affect what is being described**

There is a large building with a large lawn situated on a hill overlooking the village. A bright orange-and-yellow concrete edifice set aside from other houses – a 'home for persons with health impairments', providing room and board for 80 men and women.

As I am parking near the back entrance, I see Miloš through the glass back door. Seeing him here means he is doing well enough to go outside and smoke his ration of much-loved cigarettes, three per day as assigned by a nurse. He lets me in with the help of an electronic key hanging around his neck. A dry handshake, a brief shoulder hug, a few words and smiles get me to a narrow vestibule. That small piece of plastic, the electronic key on Miloš's chest, is a sign of privilege. The house is usually quiet from six in the evening to seven in the morning and most of the keys are programmed to open the doors only during the day. But there are exceptions – Miloš is allowed to smoke his first cigarette at 5 and the last one at 10.

During the day, he spends a lot of time at the glass back door facing the designated smoking area. Originally a shelter for dustbins, the wire-netting shed with transparent plastic roof offers the comfort of a wooden bench and a metal bin for butts, but no protection against wind, cold and the supervisor's window. All smokers, residents, workers and visitors alike meet here to delight in their passion and to figure out ways of breaking the regulations imposed on their consumption. But while the others play Game of Tobacco only part-time, while at work or while visiting the 'home', for Miloš it is an almost unescapable everyday reality, the only way to survive in the grey zone between the severity of prohibition and semi-legal possibilities.

When not exercising his powers to let people in and out, Miloš tries to find other places where he can escape the unpleasant noise and hustle of the 'household' in which he shares a sleeping room with 1 and a living room with 14 other people. He is easy-going and

forgiving, which does not make him a suitable candidate for a single room, as those are reserved for ‘troublemakers’. Miloš’ excitement from going on tours and playing concerts is thus even more understandable. ‘At least I get out of here!’ he says, greeting every opportunity that music brings into his life with crow’s feet forming around his eyes.

Parting with the back-door guardian, I continue along the dusky corridor. It leads towards a cloakroom with stacks of metal boxes where residents must change their shoes when they come in from outside. As always during the day, there are many other people wandering the corridors besides Miloš. Amid brief exchanges of how-have-you-beens, I start climbing the stairs to the first floor. Before I can decide where to go first, I bump into Roman, who is cruising the area in front of the social workers’ office in a state of utmost concentration.

He gets straight to the point: ‘Hi, when are we meeting?’ Our meeting today is of great importance for all of us, because we are getting ready for a documentary about the band.

‘I don’t know. Is the band ready yet? Are we meeting back there as always?’ I turn my head and point to the conference room at the end of another long hallway. The narrow dark corridors that lead to several small rooms with just enough space for two beds and a closet feed the spacious central hall where we are standing with a constant supply of background noise consisting of chatter, talking and arguments, commands and reprimands, as well as the rattle of trolleys and television sets.

‘I don’t know, I don’t know’, Roman shakes his head. His big dark eyes stand out against his pale bony face and his fragile and skinny appearance. He shrugs, rubs his face very slowly and puts one of his hands into his pocket. It’s like being in the last century. We have not been able to arrange an exact time and place for our meeting, since neither Roman nor any other of the band members have access to a phone or the internet.<sup>5</sup>

So, dependent as we are on the institution’s staff, we finally jointly knock on the door of the social workers to ask them to open the room for us.

At two in the afternoon, the band members are finally beginning to gather in the conference room. I have tried to improve its sterile ambience with an offer of biscuits, potato chips, cold drinks, tea and coffee. This crumbly, crunchy and sticky achievement has been made possible only by my ignorance of the rules. There are no glasses, plates, napkins or coffeemakers in the room, since drinking and eating is not allowed. We have been breaking this regulation for more than a year, with cover provided by the head of social services, an RRC fan.

We gather around one of the four large grey oval tables, six men plus me with a notebook. The table is fixed to the floor and it is so large that it is impossible to reach the people on the other side. Pepa is sitting across the table from me. He gives me side looks, the corners of his lips turned down into a horseshoe. He would not eat or drink, turning down any offer with ‘don’t wanna’. He would not talk. It might take some time to connect with him. I am sorry he is so unhappy, but Zdeněk is sitting next to him, ready to console his friend.

In fact, Zdeněk is prepared to look after all of us – if we need a cup, a chair or an explanation. I admire and fear him for his endless patience with those of us who have difficulties understanding what he says. His speech might sound mumbled to an untrained ear, and I often ask him to repeat things. Sometimes it happens that I give up and

withdraw with an ‘oh, I see’, but Zdeněk does not. His desire for understanding is as infinite as his patience. He uses his face and body, he points to objects or he takes me to places just to make me understand what is on his mind. Right now, I am the only one who needs that assistance, the band members seem to understand each other well.

Jirka is armed with a sword, as always when he is in or near the ‘home’. It is decorated with blue tape and two paper labels, one indicating the season for which it was made – 2019/2020 – the other stating the family name of Jirka’s favourite ‘educator’. His swords are very fine works. He makes them himself in a carpentry workshop. I know that Jirka’s electronic key is programmed to open the entrances of the building between two and five in the afternoon. At 20 o’clock sharp, he visits his friend, a former inmate of the ‘home’ who has managed to leave the institution and now lives in the village. This makes me a bit uneasy as we are still waiting for two more people.

Finally, Miloš and Zdenda make it to the meeting. Zdenda is dressed in blue jeans and a brown leather jacket, with rings and bracelets on his hands that underscore his stylish look of a hard-rock fan.

Roman, the bandleader, seems satisfied with the band members’ full attendance. Our meeting is dedicated to answering the question: ‘Would you like a documentary to be made about the band and what do you want to be in it?’ Roman leaves it up to me to announce the news, relaxing in his chair.

‘Well, there is this film director and he would like to make a movie about your band.’

‘Yes, director,’ welcomes the idea Jirka, ‘yeah!’

‘Yes, director, yes.’ ‘Director’ sounds good to Zdeněk as well.

‘Mm, mm,’ Miloš seems to be giving it some thought, while Zdenda is quietly giving the impression that he is not with us at all. Pepa is still somewhat withdrawn, switching between observing us and staring out the window.

‘The bhand, Ghott, yap.’

‘Noo’, Zdeněk stands up, raises his voice and points vigorously at Roman, ‘Homan Hahovitch, Homan!’ I follow the line from Zdeněk’s finger to Roman, who is slowly nodding and giving us a knowing wink. Up and down, up and down, with an omniscient smile. Cool. He is so confident.

‘Roman Radkovič? Roman decides, you mean?’

‘Yep,’ Zdeněk waves one arm, bowing and turning half way around.

‘I see’, I react with surprise. I had never noticed that the decisions are up to Roman. Or was Zdeněk’s performance not a confirmation of the decision-making rights of the bandleader, but an answer to Jirka’s exclamation of ‘Ghott’, the name of the famous Czech pop singer? Maybe Zdeněk just wants to make it clear that it is *their* band that is going to be filmed, and that Gott has nothing to do with it.

‘The band Dana’, Jirka says, replacing ‘Gott’ with my name while Zdeněk continues to explain his view. ‘Danushka, hehe’, Zdenda appreciates the combination. Jirka accompanies our laugh with table drumming.

‘I’d agree with those movies’, says Roman, focused on the response to Zdeněk’s appeal for decision. ‘I am for it, for those movies. I am all for it. It could work, those films, it could work, those movies. I agree to that, um.’ Roman wants to talk to journalists, and it looks like making a film for Czech public television is in line with his plans.

‘So, you agree?’ I ask again, just to make sure that filming is what all the members of the band want to do. I look at each one of them and get their final answers: ‘I would

agree, yeah, I would also agree. Me too. Yep and I yep. Yeaahah!' Shall we take Pepa's silent presence as an approval?

Mm, mm.

Great, glad you like it. I'll tell him and you should meet...

Yes and out. Mm, mm. Where? Here?

Somewhere else. HERE. HERE. HERE. Here? [~].

Out. P\_ha...

Where? He is from Brno.

You Praha, me Brno. And, but, so, also from Praha.

Who? The director? I think he is from Brno. From Brno, mm.

Brno, yes. And we would go, to Brno we would go? Haha. *Clap, clap, clap.*

To Brno or to [~] Praha.

Brno, I! *Clap!*

And should we go to Brno? Haha. *Clap, clap, clap.* Brno, to Brno.

Well, that's one option...

Or to Praha, to Praha.

...or, as the shooting will start at the beginning of next year...

Yes, yeah, yes. Year...

...there might be another concert before then...

Concert? Mmm, and where?

Do you remember recording your Golden Hits album at Tomáš's studio the last year?

Yeaah! Yes. With Tomáš. Um. I know.

I... I still have that tape.

Well, in studio, yes.

CD's.

Yes, yes.

[~]. Klara. [~].

Sorry?

Klara [the social worker] is not here. She went to a doctor.

I see.

Did you need something from her?

[~]. [~]. There.

What is there?

I see. Something is with her?

CD.

CD?

Yes, CD.

Wait a minute, which CDs does she have?

KLARA HAS ALL YOUR CDs, ALL THE TAPES?!?!

GRRRR.

Listen, would you like to do another jam session with Tomáš?

Yes!

Yippe!

In Brno, in January.

It can be. It can be.

Mm.

Yes.

To Brno!

We move on with the script: 'Roman would like to talk to journalists about the institution. But what else should be in the film about YOU?'

'What about? Maybe... What could it be about?' Zdenda repeats the question for himself. The rest of the band is quiet.

'Well, it should be about the band. . . what should be happening in it?'

'What could be happening in it?' Zdenda keeps trying, thinking out loud.

'Snow is falling', says Jirka.

'Snow is falling', Zdenda repeats.

‘Snow is falling, mm.’ I don’t know how to pick up on the theme nor how to move forward, but then Zdeněk says ‘[~] [~]’, *claps* his hands and laughs, and I join him and frivolously kill the idea by saying ‘it isn’t snowing, the sun is shining’. The others start to laugh as well, and Zdeněk, encouraged, continues: ‘[~] [~].’ ‘Zdeněk, are you talking about something that you want in the film?’

Roman is observing the discussion quietly. I guess we are getting tired, and coming up with ideas for the film is too much right now. The silence in the room is growing.

After a while, Zdeněk gives it another try: ‘[~] [~].’

‘It’s snowing, you mean?’

‘Noo! [~].’ Zdeněk tries to help us understand by imitating the clatter of horse hooves. We all try to concentrate. ‘What could it be’, Zdenka mulls it over.

‘You also don’t get it? We are...’

‘It should be about horses?’

‘Uhm, [~].’

We are all stuck, and it makes Zdeněk a bit angry. ‘Noo, [~] [~].’ Jirka tries to help us by asking again, but also fails to understand.

‘I feel stupid, give me one more chance. Show me!’ I approach Zdeněk. He leads me to the door while the others discuss what his proposition might mean.

‘[~]!’ Zdeněk turns the light in the room on and off a couple of times. Zdenka starts giggling, while the rest of us just observe the light show. Then Zdeněk exclaims: ‘This is it!’

‘The light? You want to turn on the lights?’

‘Yes!’ Zdeněk circles his arm over his head and makes a whistling sound.

‘And that should be in the movie?’

‘Yes!’ says Zdeněk with relief.

‘The light effects?!’

‘Yees, eff\_ts!’

‘Ah! Hahaha.’

‘Yeaah!’

‘Nobody got it!’

‘Great!’

‘[~] [~]’

‘I was thinking...’

‘[~] [~]’

‘I had it in my head, but it was, mm.’

With the members of the group obviously refreshed, I dare to ask again: ‘So, what else should there be?’

And ho\_se. Iemtea. And\_THIS!

The sword?

Suo\_. Mapwai. Suo... fin.

Fin?

Yeah, fin. What’s fin?

Well, film is like...

Oh, FILM, sword in film.

Yes! Perfect. Noutheyoo. Nopat and Ka\_el Gott\_too.

And Karel Gott?

Yeap.

Dancee? Naheahnyo takham, I, drum, Pepee, Ji\_ka, Miloš, Denek and Homan.

Right, you all should be there.

All.

Yeap, tackeeDanoo.

And drum, this, yeap.

Brvo in B\_no\_bevo. In Brno noo... Noo. Hama, mu\_ic in b\_noo. Noo. Aladye Hoomaa. Dancee, I still have... Dancee? ...that picture, which they took... Anaemaam, tha, in Skopice or what's the name... Neenco, I on. Horse! ...on that country house... Horse, ounye... that Lada has... oeyea, horse. Boeayo, horse. Horse. ...in Kokovice... CD. What are we gonna do with that CD? Yao. With CD. What are we gonna do with that CD?

Dancee, fi\_m ho\_ses!

Horses in the movie? They should be there, right.

Yep. Herh ho\_ses.

And Pepee with h\_\_es.

Pepee with horses?

Yep... bot. Beer. And some music. And hancee haho. Shshshsh shaashh maac pentagonyu. Ieete. Hahaha. Brewski.

Some music should be there. Some, when...

When something is playing, some music, then...  
Dancee.

When... so we would start to, we would start  
to...

Patcoo.

Disco, some disco.

Wait a minute, what kind of music do you want to have there?      Yeaah?

Some, some, some nice music, so some theatre could start with music.

And shouldn't it be your music if it's a film about your band?

Some music must be in there. If we start playing, it would be much better.

The guys should start, that would be nice... To me... Daneec... then I will start to say something. That would be better.

That would be nice.

### **Noisy descriptions serve as antidotes to arrogant refrains of reason**

Descriptions of noisy meetings can be attempted in at least three different ways.

First, as simply and succinctly as possible, by conveying the most important circumstances, the participants' basic characteristics and the key points of the discussion as seen from a particular, clearly defined point of view. This was the form taken by the report we prepared for the movie production team: it stated where and when the meeting took place, who participated, and, most importantly, its results – that is, the band members' ideas for the film. For production purposes, this description was fully sufficient.

Four months later, we all watched the long-awaited documentary, *Sing As Long As You Can*. The ideas that RRC's members collected during the meeting were brought to the public arena: 26 minutes about one way of making noise. The film shows the musicians' talents, personal histories, loves and losses, as well as their favourite companions: horses, drums, beer, Gott's CD as a representation of the singer, and cigarettes.

Secondly, as a more detailed rendition of the meeting, including a full transcript of the words spoken by the participants.<sup>6</sup> The conversation was recorded on a voice recorder and then transcribed with the help of transcription software. Each immersion in the audio's surface brought up new sounds, meanings, associations, surprises, paranoid worries, joys and other emotions and 'things'. The gradual addition of texture cultivated our ability to create silences for the falling snow and to describe ghosts as ghosts (Best and Marcus, 2009) and institutionalisation as institutionalisation. But it also revealed additional instances of cognitive silence when somebody's message was lost. Thus, in places where sounds could not be transcribed by words or parts of words, we used a special sign – [~] – to signal that an attempt at understanding was made but no message was received.<sup>7</sup>

Among other things, a transcript interspersed with signs for cognitive silence shows that communication did not stop because of this silence. As Zdeněk has repeatedly taught us, if we can continue in conversation through affect and touch and do not read [~] as an ominous sign of annoying difference, then we can go over it together and the meeting can continue.<sup>8</sup> It proves that the themes depicted in the documentary – the horses, the sword, the light effects – were formulated through mutual exchanges between the discussion's participants. It shows that a debate can be noisy *and* productive and that noise does not

have to be incomprehensible or annoying, but that it can be understood as a highly accessible source of the meanings that offer themselves for comprehension.

In a noisy meeting, many rules of reasonable debate are not being followed. People talk over each other, both to the person trying to facilitate the conversation and to each other. Words are articulated differently than the listener expects them to be, and the syntax often seems unusual. And then there is the issue of sticking to the topic. Objects of conversation appear suddenly from long-past phases of the conversation, from other places and times, or from nowhere in particular. They often take the listener by surprise, as when snow starts to fall in the middle of a warm and sunny day.

In that particular case, the ethnographer might have misunderstood Jirka's suggestion that the movie include Karel Gott's cover of *White Christmas*, discredited by its association with the institution's talent shows, which she considers antithetical to noise. But was not this in fact an instance of bad silence, one that unnecessarily stifles noisy ideas? Should the institution's talent show culture have been included in the film and in the description of the meeting in an additive move akin to reparative strategies of camp (Sedgwick, 2003: 146–151)? After all, camp, as understood by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, fits well with the creative style of the RRC, since it is to a large extent constructed on repetitive and yet surprising combinations of pop cultural elements, including those connected to life at the institution. 'What we can best learn from such practices', writes Sedgwick, 'are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them' (2003: 151).

If that is the case, then the ethnographer's critical move, favouring one side of the band's creativity while side-lining the other, deprived the documentary's audiences not only of the somewhat dubious aesthetics of the pop-cultural mainstream, but also of a chance to appreciate the strategies by which the band members appropriate originally hostile cultural motifs and use them to their advantage. Such paranoid thinking, censoring occasions of suspected exploitation, mirrors the reasoning of the Facebook debaters from the first part of our story. While they labelled the band's artistic production 'sick' to allow for its inclusion in the realm of acceptable messages, the ethnographer's exclusive association of RRC with the alternative noise scene excludes it from the cultural and societal mainstream.

Instead of the bad silence created by the ethnographer's critical gesture, could a good silence be created instead, just long enough to accentuate Jirka's tune, which would then add to the 'descriptive richness' (Love, 2010a: 238) of our account? Perhaps. But, giving the noisiness of the meeting, it is still equally possible that Jirka's pronouncement was just what the ethnographer thought it was at the moment – or what she made it into by her laugh – a surrealist remainder of the possibility for chance encounters. Besides, misunderstandings are often productive. In this case, the ethnographer's semi-conscious mistake allowed the discussion to roll on and prevented, if only for a while, Karel Gott from stealing the show from RRC.

But it is not only the messiness, iterations, diversions or moments of misunderstanding in a debate that are the objects of the description.

We have mentioned our hesitation to associate Roman Radkovič with an institution that labels his belongings with a sticker bearing his name. And yet here we are, trying to

describe not only the institution where the band members live, but also aspects of its regimes with dehumanising consequences. What ‘matters of care’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), besides noise, are involved in describing the meeting at the residential institution where the band members live? Our hesitation and embarrassment related to describing the messiness of the debate have nothing to do with noise, cognitive multiplicity, surprising ways of saying things, and so on, nor with concerns that we or somebody else is being portrayed as stupid. Feelings of cognitive frustration are nothing to be ashamed of – in fact, as Sedgwick has observed in relation to the work of textile artist Judith Scott and to her own writing, it can be experienced as affective and aesthetic fullness (2003: 24).

Our embarrassment pertains rather to the fact that we implicate RRC’s members and ourselves in institutions that partake in the exclusion of people who are officially considered too noisy. But such a statement is perhaps far out of the frame, as this text cannot describe systematically and in detail the many practices by which such exclusion is carried out. Our text has barely managed to juxtapose mere descriptions of a noise band’s performance with a meeting of the band’s members. It cannot hope to do much more than to offer, by emphasising the affective difference between the two scenes, a way of seeing the dehumanisation in the lives of RRC’s musicians as something unnecessary *and* yet real.

Even so, this account is still some distance away from the true sound and feel of the meeting. At some points, the description verges on the incomprehensible, as with the rendition of the lyrics on the Roman Radkovič’s note stand. Could there be a way to transmit not only the music but also the noise that is its foundation *and* distortion at the same time?

So, thirdly, we have tried – increasingly throughout the text and especially in the last part – to construct a description that is full of noise. After much hesitation, we have opted to write down the words that we did not understand as sounds, as when linguists transcribe the pronunciation of a foreign language. This decision is problematic in many ways. First, the words in the conversation were produced as messages expressed in a code system that the speaker shares with the listener and not as signs in a language foreign to her. Secondly, since they were spoken in a language different from the language of this article, the reader cannot – at least if she does not make the almost impossible effort to compare the transcription with a Czech-English dictionary – make any attempt at understanding by herself. Thirdly, the sounds could hardly be written down in a way that would allow for their reproduction. Still, there were solid arguments in favour of such an approach as well. As in noise music, the unintelligible, untranslatable sounds were there, existing outside of recognisable harmonies, melodies and rhythms, and writing them down as [~], as instances of cognitive silence, would signal to the reader that they cannot be comprehended, thus ignoring other, non-verbal and non-rational means of sharing.

At moments, a listener who is focused on reading the sounds stops looking for refrains. As with the distortion effect on an electric guitar, the overload of the amplifier creates a fraying of the signal. Words do not produce a conveyable meaning, and sounds are not recordable by letters or signs. As with noise music or abstract painting, we lack words to describe our experience. But this does not mean that the experiencing has stopped. If we

do not push the signals coming towards us into the realm of the impossible-to-listen-to, then the cacophony of sound offers room for understanding – and, maybe, room for something else as well. The anchor of clear meaning weighed, the safety-belt of reason unfastened, together we sail out into the open sea.

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## Notes

1. We use the term in its general sense, denoting not just a 'rather obscure literary genre (poems which describe works of visual art)', but 'verbal representation of [audio]visual representation' (Mitchell, 1994: 152). However, since we often use audio-visual recordings as a basis for descriptions, the first narrower meaning is relevant as well. See also Marcus et al., 2016: 16, n. 7.
2. In the Czech Republic, the institutions known as 'psychiatric hospitals' are still very much asylums.
3. <https://vimeo.com/295598981>
4. Such views are by no means entertained only by non-specialist audiences, as the judgements of some critics on the work of the famous textile artist Judith Scott clearly show (Sedgwick, 2003: 23).
5. Since then things have changed. Three members of the band now use mobile phones and one of them coordinates activities with the help of Facebook. This development has been possible partly to earnings from playing with the band.
6. According to Martyn Hammersley, description, more obviously than strict transcription, involves interpretation and judgement on the side of the describer. As a result, it 'always amounts to answers to some explicit or implicit set of questions about the phenomenon concerned' (2010: 562). As we, in line with other texts of the descriptive turn, consider the description itself as emphasising an attention to the 'givenness' of things, we do not pursue here the analytical possibilities offered by the distinction between description and transcription. Besides, our descriptions are often partly transcriptions as well, and with noisy talk it is seldom true that 'there is only one true way of transcribing a stretch of talk in the strict sense of writing down the words' (ibid.).

7. Jefferson (2004: 31) marks occasions when the transcriber did not understand what was said with empty parentheses – ‘( )’. While our description does not focus solely (or mainly) on talk, the attempt at producing a verbatim transcript of the noisy meeting shares conversational analysis’ emphasis on the surface reading of interactions in specific material conditions (Best and Marcus, 2009; Love, 2013).
8. When exploring several studies dedicated to conversational analysis of ‘impaired’ communication, ten Have (2007: 199–202) concludes that any successes achieved in conversation and its analysis were reached collaboratively and required co-production and creativity. In addition to that, we emphasise the importance of materiality, touch and affect.

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