

■ David Wallraf



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6.3 Ingressions: The horror and benefit of silence

In geology, ingression is the slow advance of the sea onto the mainland. In contrast to the notions of abruptness associated with transgression, it is a creeping, imperceptible process that can change a given terrain no less fundamentally. Silence, the physical opposite of loud sound, can be interpreted in a similar way: as a state of the auditory which remains below the threshold of perception, or rather, denotes this threshold itself, but whose effects can be as drastic as those of loud noise. Positively, silence can be defined as a subtle intensity, a zone of noise that constitutes the lower limits of human hearing. Negatively, it forms the contrast of a loud, clearly perceptible sound event. Between these poles lies a web of relations, the experience and evaluation of which is embedded in the auditory field. Since the auditory field belongs to the social realm, this also means power relations, class differences and distinctions.

In the 20th century, the auditory field has changed fundamentally. Every technological innovation brought new sounds and noises, altered their mediation and created new relationships between 'natural' and 'artificial' sound. In the language of sound ecology, the soundscape of the natural space has been radically restructured, while anthropophony has triggered an exponential growth of possible auditory impressions. The immense fluctuation of shifting interpretations of these auditory impressions manifests itself not least in the difficulty

of neatly separating sounds and noises from each other. As Douglas Kahn writes, in the 20th century "sound became less natural. " (Kahn 1999, p. 162). The first or 'natural' nature is associated with silence, and it is the intrusion of anthropophonic noise that destroyed its tranquility. Luigi Russolo, at the start of the 20th century, characterized this intrusion and the accompanying transformation of the natural thus: "The life of the past was nothing but silence. In the nineteenth century, with the invention of the machines, arose the noise. Today, noise triumphs and dominates unrestrictedly the sensibility of man." (Russolo 1999, p. 9)

What for the futurist avantgarde was the object of passionate affirmation (for Russolo, of course, equated silence with boredom and noise with excitement and enthusiasm) has been replaced by weary disenchantment in the 20th century. The noises produced by the engines of industrial progress are now noise pollution. The 2011 study published by the World Health Organization, *Burden of Disease from Environmental Noise*, concludes that the environmental noise generated by industry and traffic has become a significant health risk in Western Europe. On the list of environmental factors that increase the burden of disease, environmental noise is second only to air pollution. One in three citizens is annoyed by noise during the day, and one in five is disturbed during sleep by road, rail and/or air traffic." (WHO 2011, p. vii). When Noise appears as harm in such a concrete way, the opposite pole of the auditory appears to be a source of physical and mental health quite naturally. In conjunction with the postulates of sound ecology a critique of the 'noise society' has developed during the last decades which has made silence or stillness its desideratum.

In the text *Die Lärmgesellschaft und ihr akustischer Müll* (The Noise Society and its Acoustic Garbage), the researcher Gerald Fleischer writes: "Silence is not [...] an acoustic situation that is particularly quiet, but rather an acoustic situation that enables rest and relaxation [...]. Quietness is consequently an acoustic environment, in which no noise, i.e. no acoustic waste, occurs." (Fleischer 1995, p. 9). Acoustic waste is defined by Fleischer as loud and disturbing sound, quietness as a relative absence of sound events (which does not necessarily have to be perceived as pleasant) while silence describes a difficult-to-define zone of pleasant acoustic states. Silence can thus not be positively defined, neither ontologically nor ethically or sociologically. Nevertheless, the anthology in which Fleischer's text appeared, is entitled *The Loss of Silence*.

This loss results from the impositions of the modern 'noise society'. In this context, silence is used less as a definable term but rather unfolds a metaphorical effect that builds on ideas of calm, peace, equilibrium and relaxation.¹ The literature on silence contains less concrete plans for the implementation of more silence in everyday life than general appeals whose addressees remain unnamed.²

But the dichotomy of noise and silence unfolds in a socioeconomic context. In his book *Noise*, published in 1970, the acoustician Rupert Taylor developed a negative concept of noise, i.e. his focus lies on the control of noise, the silencing of machines and industrial plants and techniques of sound insulation. When asked why machines, traffic and industry generate noise, he gives a simple answer: "We are always having to remember that quiet costs money. This means that no machine, vehicle or aircraft manufacturer is going to pursue quietness simply for philanthropic reasons." (Taylor 1970, p. 239). The simple fact that "quiet costs money" is also reflected in the WHO report, though in the form of an omission. On the relationship between noise-annoyance and socioeconomic class, this passage is revealing:

Some noise exposures may be worse for certain subgroups than for others. Facts such as lower rents near noisy streets indicate that the effects of noise are not evenly distributed across the population. Except in the chapter on cognitive impairment among children, this publication did not address the additional burdens on potentially vulnerable subgroups such as the elderly and for socioeconomically less advantaged groups. (WHO 2011, p. 104)

From the outset, the WHO study has remained limited to Western Europe and did not obtain its results along the fault lines that are produced by income inequality in a class society. However, there is every indication that the relative absence of disturbing sound has become a luxury. On the commodification of silence, Marie Thompson writes: "If silence and quietness have become increasingly scarce with growing urbanization, then this has enabled silence to become a lucrative commodity." (Thompson 2017, p. 105). Low noise emissions are a selling point, regardless of whether the products being advertised are washing machines, cars, or

¹ A quick search on Amazon reveals a vast amount of publications that offer silence as a concept of life- or self-help in more or less esoteric contexts. The connection of silence, stillness and peace can be found on various bestseller lists.

² In the publication *Die Vertreibung der Stille* (The Expulsion of Silence) by journalist Rüdiger Liedtke, this exemplary appeal can be found: "If we protest against the musical pollution, against the acoustic nuisance, it is nothing else than the representation of the legitimate claim to the right to silence that every human being has." (Liedtke, Rüdiger: *Die Vertreibung der Stille*, Munich: dtv 1988, p. 221)

computers. Noise-cancelling headphones have become a separate market segment in the hi-fi sector.

Silence is also an important point of reference in architecture and urban planning. Urban spaces are in a state of constant growth in which communication and traffic routes are intermingled; private and public space, everyday life, the spheres of consumption and production are woven into complex arrangements here. The city constantly produces images and sounds, each of which forms a specific background noise of the various centres of agglomeration. These chaotic territorializations of the urban space are difficult to represent. The text *Jenseits der Stadt* (Beyond the City) by Jean-Luc Nancy describes the dynamics of the boundary shifts in question using the example of Los Angeles in the early 2000s:

The city becomes diffuse, it evaporates, it disperses its functions and places to the periphery, which becomes less peripheral to the extent that the center empties, but without ceasing to be central. The center is everywhere and the periphery nowhere, or vice versa. There are enjambments and pulsations, flocculation and ondulation at the periphery, nodes of the entire urban functioning that is distributed over the telephone wires and electronic channels, creating and retracting occupations, and also outside the city, more and more vending machines, counters, booths, Internet cafes everywhere, scattered further and further out into the country, like the standardized garbage cans, the hazardous waste (glass, metal, non-ferrous metals, plastic, paper, organic waste, nuclear waste, medical waste, human body parts). It is the city itself that overstretches and spreads out like a star field, hanging on the net and sending out ripples and budding along its digestive pathways. (Nancy 2011, p. 23)

If one transposes this representation into the register of the auditory, one obtains a soundscape of voices, signals and chaotic background noises; a restlessness that can hardly be escaped by anyone who dwells in the city. It transcends and folds its space back into itself, it produces a noise that consists of the simultaneity of all its communication channels: foreground and background music, conversations and signals, ringtones and announcements, traffic noises in all dimensions of space. In this situation, peace and quiet become a luxury item that echoes in certain residential neighbourhoods, architectural designs and in the quality of building materials. The logic of 'better neighbourhoods' and gated communities leads to withdrawal and isolation that excludes noise as the other, the alien, the threatening. In a class society, noise is traditionally associated with the lower classes, a fact that has changed little during past centuries. Noise is always made by the others, especially those who do not fit into one's own context of distinction. What has changed in the course of the last decades is the direction in which withdrawal and voluntary isolation, especially of the upper- and middle-

classes, take place: from the suburbs back to the urban centers. The migratory movements of gentrification are changing the urban soundscape, they are segregating the auditory field of the cities into new zones, creating dynamic transitions and tensions between them. Thompson has described this process thus:

Though the quiet suburbs have historically been affiliated with the middle-class and the noisy city with the urban poor, these associations have been complicated by the emergent preference for post-industrial city living among the wealthy. Where the city was once 'clamorous', 'dangerous' and 'disruptive', it is now reframed as 'vibrant', 'lively', 'happening' and 'creative'. The migration of the middle-classes from the suburbs to the city has corresponded with attempts to 'regenerate' urban areas, as well as the displacement of poor, urban communities. This shift has its own auditory politics of noise and silence, with the continued desire for sonic control over one's own home existing in tension with the noisy soundscape of the urban milieu. (Thompson 2017, p. 108)

The function of silence as a luxury item acts like a profane variant of its sacred and metaphysical attributes. Devotion, meditation, prayer and 'inner peace' are generally associated with silence, although this does not necessarily have to be related to the extensive absence of sound. In fact, certain impressions that are clearly audible can be characterized as silence. Often these are forms of noise: According to a common doxa ocean noise, the rustling of leaves, white noise etc. constitute the acoustic background which is experienced as 'silence'. Quietness and silence are commonly used as metonymies for 'peace'. The *calm after the storm* means that war, turmoil, and strife are over. But at the same time, silence is connoted with the absence of life: Dead silence (*Totenstille*) and graveyard silence (*Friedhofsruhe*) refer to the parts of the inorganic which do not emit sound without a supply of kinetic force. The dead are as mute as the stones.

However, the association of silence and death can also take on forms of politicized and politicizing activism. The slogan *Silence = Death* of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), founded in 1987, was a loud and noisy attack against the 'silencing' of the AIDS pandemic in the USA and other nations. The resistance that this movement took to the streets confronted the tacit ignorance and rejection of those infected with HIV and killed by AIDS with a concept of noisiness that was composed of protest and activism. Silence, silencing and being overheard can be experienced as a form of social death. In another form, silence can also function as a simulacrum of the experience of death, namely when people are helplessly exposed to it.

The prison is designed as a place of silence and fixed lines of sight. Corresponding to the panoptic gaze described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, the prisoner has to keep

quiet. The disciplinary power demands bodies that only stir or utter words when called upon. Brandon LaBelle has described an auditory overlap between the design of the suburban home and the prison cell.³ Whereas the cell keeps the criminal inside, the home or gated community is supposed to keep the crime outside. Both dwellings however are characterized by the architectural dispositif of silence which is enclosed and monitored by walls. All this is diametrically opposed to the positive concept of silence as formulated by Murray Schafer's sound ecology. Thompson has described this contradiction in thus:

From the Schaferian perspective, such uses of silence run against its 'true' character, capitalizing on the negative but ultimately false connotations it holds within Western society (i.e. isolation and death). However [...] it seems unsatisfactory to dismiss such utilizations of silence as exceptional and anomalous 'misuses'. Even in more everyday scenarios, silence may elicit responses of fear, unease and isolation. (Thompson 2017, p. 103)

The involuntary experience of silence, the coercion to hear nothing but oneself, can be understood as a form of auditory violence which in its intensity is in no way inferior to that of noise or forced music consumption. The ingressions of silence shift towards a transgressive power technique that commands what can and cannot be heard. Power in the auditory field does not only mean to be able to mobilize volume or to make decisions about what should be heard. It also consists in the ability to drown out, overhear or isolate. To mute an utterance can take various forms, ranging from silencing to institutionalized censorship. Silencing a person and commanding what s/he does (not) hear are aspects of a power technique, which, in the situation of solitary confinement, becomes a dispositif of power. Sensory deprivation and delivery to silence are techniques of white torture that can cause considerable damage to the prisoners' psyche. An impression of this damage can be drawn from journalist and member of the West German urban guerrilla group Red Army Faction Ulrike Meinhof's *Brief aus dem toten Trakt* (Letter from the Dead Wing), which she sent from solitary confinement in 1973:

Sentence structure, grammar, syntax - out of control. When writing: two lines - at the end of the second line, you can't remember the beginning of the first.

The feeling of burning out inside

- the feeling of saying what's wrong, of letting it out, that would be like hissing boiling water in the other person's face, like boiling tank water that scalds, disfigures for life

Frenzied aggression for which there is no outlet. This is the worst. Clear awareness that one

³ Cf. LaBelle 2010, p. 74-79

has no chance of survival; complete failure to convey that; visits leave nothing. Half an hour later you can only mechanically reconstruct whether the visit was today or last week.

Bathing once a week, on the other hand, means: thawing out for a moment, recovering – lasts even for a few hours

the feeling that time and space are intertwined

the feeling of being in a distorting mirror space

stagger

Afterwards: terrible euphoria of hearing something - above the acoustic day-night difference
The feeling that now time is running out, the brain is expanding again, the spinal cord is
sinks down again - for weeks.

The feeling that one's skin has been peeled off. (Meinhof 1987, p. 90 f.)

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