

Silence and the Notion of the Commons

by Dr. Ursula Franklin

This lecture was given in Banff, August 11, 1993, as part of The First International Conference on Acoustic Ecology, "The Tuning of the World." It has been transcribed and edited by Gayle Young with the assistance of Dr. Franklin.

INTRODUCTION

In a technological world where the acoustic environment is largely artificial, silence takes on new dimensions, be it in terms of the human need for silence (perhaps a person's right to be free of acoustic assaults), in terms of communication, or as the intentional modification of the environment.

This discussion consists of two separate but interrelated parts: 1) Silence as Spiritual Experience, drawing largely but not exclusively on the Quaker tradition of religious worship, and 2) Silence as a Common Good. The notion of silence will be examined in terms of the general patterns of the social impact of modern technology. Silence possesses striking similarities with those aspects of life and community such as unpolluted water, air or soil, that were once taken as normal and given, but have become special and precious in technologically mediated environments.

Silence and the Notion of the Commons

I would like to thank everyone involved in this conference, and the organizers in particular, for inviting me to deliver this talk. I am very obviously an outsider and wish to come to this group to talk about something that is central to all the work that you people are doing. And so I come in a way as a friend and colleague, in a field where I am fully aware that silence has been the subject of many publications. I know the chapters on silence in Murray Schafer's *The Tuning of the World*, I know that John Cage and others have written books on silence, and if I had my senses about myself I would have taken as a title for this talk something much more like "The Anatomy of a Soundscape," dissecting silence. Because what I really want to do is see how our concept, as well as our practice, of silence has been influenced by all the other things that have changed as our world has become what Jacques Ellul calls a *technological milieu*, a world that is increasingly mediated in all its facets by technology.

Let me then, give you an idea of what I hope to do during this hour with you. I will find it necessary to first of all very briefly say something about sound and the technological system. I want to spend the bulk of my time talking about silence, to define it and analyze it. (I had a bit of a problem with the gender but I decided to say her attributes.) I hope to be able to show you that we are faced with two domains in which silence is important and I want, as I describe how those two domains impinge upon each other, to talk about the notion of the commons, common needs, and our common heritage. I want very quickly, if I have the time and discipline myself not to be verbose, to talk about technology as practice because this has something to do with the last point: "What Now?" If in fact I am able to convince you that there is an issue, what might

we do? I don't ask you to agree, though I ask you to follow me for that hour, to accept my definitions and assumptions. I am happy if you question them, but just for that hour we will take them in and see what evolves from them. Let me begin to talk about sound and the technological system.

Before we had a technologically mediated society, before we had electronics and electromagnetic devices, sound was rightly seen as being ephemeral, sound was coupled to its source, and lasted only a very short time. This is very different from what we see in a landscape: however much we feel that the landscape might be modified, however much we feel that there is a horrible building somewhere in front of a beautiful mountain, on the scale of the soundscape, the landscape is permanent. What is put up is there. That's very different from the traditional soundscape. What modern technology has brought to sound is the possibility of doing two things: to separate the sound from the source and to make the sound permanent. In addition, modern devices make it possible to decompose, recompose, analyze, and mix sounds, to change the initial magnitude and sustainability of sound, as well as to change all the characteristics that link the sound with its source. Murray Schafer called this *schizophonia*, separating the sound from the source. We now have easy access to the multitude of opportunities that result from overcoming that coupling.

These techniques are pretty important when you think about the social impact of technology, because prior to these developments there was a limitation to sound and sound penetration. Even if you heard a bag pipe band there was a limit to the amount of time a bag pipe band would play; you could patiently wait until eventually the players got exhausted. On the other hand if you heard a recording of a bag pipe band, you are out of luck. It's never going to be exhausted. So in terms of the social and civic impact of technology, electronics make an awful lot of difference and change the modern soundscape. Modern technology is a source of joy for modern composing and the opening of many doors for expression. Modern technologies are also the source of a good number of problems related to the soundscapes, and to the way society as a whole adjusts, copes with and possibly ameliorates sounds. And in there sits the tale of what occupies us.

But then there is not only sound, there is silence. Silence is affected by the same technological developments, the same factors that make it possible to separate the sound and the source and to overcome the ephemeral nature of any soundscape. I said that I would try to define silence and to analyze the attributes that we would keep in mind, related to the value of silence. I struggled with the definition because defining silence as the absence of external or artificially generated sound is fine but it's a little bit shallow. You can say: *so what, silence is the absence of sound* but silence in many ways is very much more than the absence of sound. I feel that one comes to the root of the meaning and practice of silence only when

one asks: *why is it that we address, that we value, that we try to establish, silence?* Then, absence of sound is a necessary but it is not a sufficient condition to define what we mean by silence. The second attribute, the second parameter, from my point of view, comes out of the question: *why is it that we worry about silence?* Because silence is an enabling environment. When one thinks about the concept of silence, one notices the fact that there has to be somebody who listens before one can say there is silence. Silence or the absence of sound is defined by a listener, by hearing.

In a way, the modern soundscape and the modern understanding of silence divides itself into two domains. It divides itself into the domain that we have traditionally associated with silence, *the enabling condition in which unprogrammed and unprogrammable events can take place.* That is the silence of contemplation; it is the silence when people get in touch with themselves; it is the silence of meditation and worship. What makes this domain distinct, is that silence is an enabling condition that opens up the possibility of unprogrammed, unplanned and unprogrammable happenings.

In this light we understand why, as Christians, traditional Quakers found it necessary in the seventeenth century, when they were surrounded by all the pomp and circumstance of the church of England, to reject it. We understand why they felt any ritual, in the sense

of its programmed nature and predictability, to be a straight jacket rather than a comfort, and why they said to the amazement of their contemporaries: *we worship God in silence.* They justified the practice of silence because they required silence in order to hear God's voice. Beyond the individual's centering, beyond the individual effort of meditation, there was the need for *collective* silence. Collective silence is an enormously powerful



Photo © 1999 Florence Debeugny

event; there are contemporary accounts of Quaker meetings under heavy persecution in England when thousands of people met silently on a hillside. Then out of the silence, one person, unappointed, unordained, unexpected and unprogrammed, might *speak*, to say: *out of the silence there can come a ministry.* It is not essentially within that person, constructed in their intellect, but the message comes out of the silence to them. This isn't just history and theory. I think that if any one of you attended a Quaker meeting, particularly on a regular basis, you would find that suddenly out of the silence somebody speaks about something that had just entered *your* mind. It's an uncanny thing, but the strength of collective silence is probably one of the most powerful spiritual forces.

Now in order for something like this to happen a lot of things are required. There is what Quakers call: *to be with heart and mind prepared.* But there is also the collective decision to be silent. And to be silent in order to let the unforeseen, unforeseeable and unprogrammed happen. Such silence, I repeat, is the environment that enables the unprogrammed. I feel it is very much at risk. I will

elaborate on this but first I want to say: there is another silence. There is the silence that enables a programmed, a planned, event to take place. There is the silence in which you courteously engage so that I might be heard, in order for one to be heard all the others have to be silent. And in many cases the silence is not taken on voluntarily. This is the false silence that I am afraid of. It is not only the silence of the padded cell, the silence of the solitary confinement, but it is also the silencing that comes when there is the megaphone, the boom box, the PA system, and any variation in which other sounds and voices are silenced so that a planned event can take place.

There is a critical juncture that, I hope, you will keep in mind between the planned and the unplanned, the programmed and the "unplannable." I feel very strongly that our present technological trends drive us toward a decrease in the space—be it in the soundscape, in the landscape, and in the mindscape—for the unplanned and unplannable to happen. Yet silence has to remain available in the soundscape, in the landscape, and in the mindscape. Allowing openness to the unplannable, to the unprogrammed, is the core of the strength of silence. It is also the core of our sanity, not only individually, but collectively. I extend that to the collectivity because as a community, as a people, we are just as much, if not more, threatened by the impingement of the programmed over the silent, the

enabling of the unprogrammed. I think, much of the impingement happens unnoticed, un commented upon, and in some ways much less obviously than an intrusion of a structure into the landscape. While we may not win all battles at City Hall to preserve our trees, at least there is now a semi-consciousness that this type of struggle is important.

Where could one go to get away from

the dangers of even the gentle presence of programmed music, or Muzak, in our public buildings? Where do I protest that entering any place—from the shoe store to the restaurant—deprives me of the opportunity to be quiet? Who has asked my permission to put that slop into an elevator that I may have to use every day umpteen times. Many of such *background* activities are intentionally manipulative. They are not just noise that can be dealt with in terms of noise abatement. There are two aspects that I want to stress in this context. One is that the elimination of silence is done without anybody's consent. The second is that one really has to stop and think and analyze in order to see just how manipulative these interventions can be.

For instance, in the Toronto Skydome, friends tell me that the sound environment is coupled and geared to the game: if the goalie misses, there are mournful and distressing sounds and when the home team scores there is the sort of athletic equivalent of the Hallelujah Chorus. Again, the visitor has no choice, the programmed soundscape is part of the event. You cannot be present at the game

without being subjected to that mood manipulation. I am just wondering whether music will soon be piped into the voter's booth, maybe an upbeat, slightly military tune: *get on with it, get the votes in*. Joking aside, soundscape manipulation is a pretty serious issue. In any case, who on earth has given anybody the right to manipulate the sound environment?

Now I want to come back to the definition of silence and introduce the notion of the commons because the soundscape essentially doesn't belong to anyone in particular. What we are hearing, I feel, is very much the privatization of the soundscape, in the same manner in which, in Britain, the enclosure laws destroyed the commons of old. There was a time when in fact there was in every community what was called "the commons," an area that belonged to everybody where sheep could graze, a place important to all, belonging to all. The notion of the commons is deeply embedded in our social mind as something that all share. There are many "commons" that we take for granted. Millennia have taken clean air and clean water as a norm. Because of the ephemeral nature of sound, silence was not considered part of the commons in the past. Today the technology to preserve and multiply sound and separate it from its source has resulted in our sudden awareness that silence, too, is a common good. Silence, that we need so that unprogrammed and unprogrammable things can take place, is taken out of common availability without much fuss and civic bother. It is being "privatized," if you allow that expression.

This is another illustration of an often-observed occurrence related to the impact of technology. Things considered normal or ordinary in the past become rare or extra-ordinary, while those things once considered rare and unusual become normal and routine because of the impact of modern technology. Flying is no longer a big deal, but a handmade dress or a home-cooked meal may well be special. We consider polluted water now essentially as normal and people who can afford it drink bottled water. It is hard to have bottled silence. But money still can buy distance from sound. Today, when there is civic anger, it is with respect to "noise" like airport noise, etc. It is not yet with respect to the manipulative elimination of silence from the soundscape.

And this is I think where we come in, having acknowledged and seen the deterioration of the commons as far as silence is concerned, having seen that the soundscape is not only polluted by noise, so that one has to look for laws related to noise abatement, but also that the soundscape has become increasingly polluted by the private use of sound in the manipulative dimension of setting and programming moods and conditions. There is a desperate need to be aware of this, and to be aware of it in terms of the collectivity rather than only in terms of individual needs. I feel very much that this is a time for civic anger. This is a time when one has to say: *town planning is constrained by bylaws on height, density, and this and that, what does town planning have to say about silence?* You may ask, what would I suggest? First of all, the insistence that as human beings in a society we have a right to silence. Just as we feel we have the right to walk down the street without being physically assaulted by people, preferably without being visually assaulted by ugly outdoor advertising, we also have the right not to be assaulted by sound, and in particular, not to be assaulted by sound that is there solely for the purpose of profit. Now is the time for civic rage, as well as civic education, but also the time for some action. Think of the amount of care that goes into the regulation of parking, so that our good, precious, and necessary cars have a place to be well and safe. That's very important to society. I have yet (beyond hospitals) to see a public

building that has a quiet room. Is not our sanity at least as important as the safety of our cars? I think one should begin to think: are there places, even in conferences like this, that are designed to have hassle-free, quiet spaces, where people can go? There were times when one could say to a kid: "Where did you go?"—"Out"—"What did you do?"—"Nothing"—that sort of blessed time is past. The kid is programmed. We are programmed. And we don't even ask for a quiet space anymore.

One possibility relatively close at hand is to set aside in those buildings over which we have some influence, as a normal matter of human rights, a quiet room. Further, I would highly recommend to start the inevitable committee meetings with just two minutes of silence, and to end them with a few minutes of silence, too. I sit on committees that have this practice; it not only can expedite the business before the committee, but it also contributes to a certain amount of peacefulness, and sanity. One can start a lecture with a few minutes of silence, and can close a lecture in silence. There can be a few minutes of silence before a shared meal. Such things help, even if they help only in a small way. I do think even small initiatives make silence "visible" as an ever-present part of life. I now invite you to have two minutes of silence before we go on into the question period. Let us be quiet together.

Questions from the Audience

Q: School libraries have become very noisy: aside from a general disrespect for knowledge, why do you think this has come about?

*UF: I have always thought that libraries are and must be places in which there is quietness. The automation of the libraries is largely responsible for the current, increasing noise level. As long as you had a sizable number of librarians around, when you talked to them, asking: *where do I find something?* their voices would moderate your voice. But when you sit in front of some catalogue on a computer and it says: "error message 23," you will ask one of your chums: *What's error message 23?*, and she might call across the room: *Jeanne, do you know what error message 23 is?* And there goes the silence of the library. I think the absence of knowledgeable and caring people is frequently at the root of that sort of problem. The moment there is a substantial reduction in staff there is noise.*

In other cultures there are openings for silence. Can you suggest an opening for silence in western culture?

I would possibly begin by correcting the word culture, that you used in terms of western culture, because the lack of opportunity for silence comes from our *non-culture*, our *not* caring for human beings. But we have to create that space beginning with small things, like a bit of silence before a meeting. I think I am developing a considerable suspicion of grand designs and plans. I think we are at a stage where in a sense we are taken over by the occupation force of the programme. And so it is the small things that one can do, the small things that are at a reasonably local level. But also our own awareness that we have rights; we are not just bags of potatoes. The change has to come first from seeing injustice as injustice. I think it is an unwarranted intrusion in my life to be programmed by people who have not asked my consent. Why should I be subject to that? Part of the obligation of government in terms of being the guardian of the commons is to not let citizens be assaulted. We have no problem to defend that on the street. Why do we have problems to defend not only the assault on our ear, but the assault on our mind?

What I appreciate most about the Quaker silence is that it is not just the silence, but the witness that comes out of the silence. There is that point when the silent person is called upon to witness but refuses to witness, when it seems to me that silence no longer has this good aura, but becomes recalcitrant silence.

Point very well taken. Silence then becomes quietism, and the importance of the unruffled self takes precedence over the need to witness, that is, to care about the state of silence, of her well being, and of the values that we hold. It is a distinct danger in which we have forgotten to remind each other that silence is an enabling environment, it is not a purpose in itself. It is what *happens* in the silence that makes the difference.

I'm a sound maker and it's my business to make noise. How do you feel the role of sound artists function in finding a balance between silence and sound in public places?

As long as you make or perform your sound on request, that, I think, is the contribution of any artist, any writer, any performer. It is the performance of sound without request that I find problematic. If my consent is that I come to your concert and other people's consent is that they are quiet because they want to hear your art then that is a contribution to the life of the community and there can be nothing better. But it requires, I think, the invitation, and it requires the consent.

How do we apply this call for civic anger against the creeping privatization of the soundscape which has no legal basis, when we have no legal footing?

I think that's where a good deal of thought has to go. I am not sure that we do not have a legal basis. If you look for instance at C. B. Macpherson's book on democratic theory, there is what I consider a very helpful definition of what is public property and what is private property, in which he says private property is the right to exclude others from the use and benefit of something, whereas public property means the right not to be excluded from the use and benefit of something. That I think you can find in law. Now the sound environment in an elevator we would like to be seen as a piece of public property rather than a piece of private property.

How can silence and sound co-exist?

It doesn't have to be in the same place. In the case of beaches I can well see that there is a quiet part of the beach just as there is a low end in the swimming pool. One can certainly respond to the different needs that people have, even that the same person has at different times, by setting aside a part of the park, a part of the beach, to be a quiet section. I don't think that one needs to put oneself in an either/or situation, but on the other hand one cannot be in a situation where certain needs are excluded because other needs are incompatible with them. We are fortunate enough that among ourselves we have enough imagination to think and negotiate ways of coexistence of different needs.

The world lived without elevators as well as without elevator music for quite some time. Where there is a bank of elevators, can you have one quiet elevator? In Toronto we have a very well known and good Jewish hospital and the elevators take into account that orthodox Jews cannot work on the Sabbath, and it is considered

that pushing elevator buttons is work, so there is one elevator that on the Sabbath stops at every floor going up and down. I think that is a very respectful solution for the presence of people who may be a minority, but who must not be disenfranchised. The elevator music is usually in the banks of elevators, in any case, not in the single ones. Negotiate one quiet elevator.

I know many people who are anxious about being quiet, who need sound and music. What would you say could be the essentials of teaching people the appreciation of silence?

I don't think you can do that. I think you can invite them to share silence with you. Quaker children are an example. We take our youngsters to meetings, and they sit there for half or three quarters of an hour. They are fidgety but they manage, they are quiet, and they get quite addicted to it. But the fear of silence, I think, has to be overcome by people themselves. I'm not a great believer in teaching except by the example of friendship, and I would suggest that you simply sit quietly with somebody. Sit with that person who you care about, sit with him or her quietly just with a cup in front of you, for five minutes, and again in a week's time for ten minutes. There's nothing to fear from quiet, and there is no need to fear silence and I have always experienced that people begin to be very grateful for silence and become quite dependent on it, but the only way in which I could see teaching is to be with somebody one cares about and say: *why don't we try it?* I have no other answer.

I was interested in your understanding of silence as leaving room for the unprogrammed and the unexpected, and was thinking about the role of technology in programming. Is it necessary that technology have that role?

I would think that apart from some isolated cocooned individual situations, technology requires conformity. You can be creative only within a set of quite closely defined parameters which includes the computer itself. I think we have to realize that as the world gets more and more structured by technology, the possibility of the unexpected is reduced. The nooks and the niches in which things can happen become more and more constrained. I don't deny in any way that there may be individual detours around that but we have to talk more about it to see whether this is not just a manipulation of an environment, like an umbrella, so that it doesn't rain on you, but it still rains.



Reprinted with permission from the author from "Proceedings, Volume One, The Tuning of the World," August 8-14, 1993, Banff, Canada.

Dr. Ursula Franklin is an internationally respected scientist who has spoken and written on many different topics, dealing with subjects ranging from the social impacts of science and technology, human rights, and women's issues, to Canada as a conserver society, each time emphasizing the integration of and the interrelations among disciplines. She is Professor Emeritus at Massey College, University of Toronto. Her Massey Lectures *The Real World of Technology*, were broadcast by CBC Radio in 1989, and have been published by General Publishing (House of Anansi).