

# Silence in the Contemporary Soundscape

by Wreford Miller

*The following article is the conclusion to Wreford Miller's thesis of the same title, which was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for his masters degree in Communication at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada, in 1993. We encourage you to read the entire thesis, which is available in PDF format (280 KB) on the WFAE website at: <http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/FC/readings/Thesis.pdf>*

## Definitions of Silence

The concept, the word, silence, is itself a metaphor: "Of silence, paradoxically, one can only speak" (Tacussel, 16). Ultimately, a word like "silence" is underdetermined and ambiguous outside of a sentence. The sentence locates the meaning of the word. Silence, as a concept to be discussed, is only understandable as the turning point of a sentence, the specific relation of an expression to its fundament. This work has in part traced the way in which the word has become overdetermined with respect to discourse, and ideologically obscured with respect to the soundscape.

Silence as soundlessness doesn't exist, in any absolute sense, as far as we are able to ascertain. Silence as soundlessness relative to audibility and measurability does exist, however. That is, silence in a particular area or communicative portion of the soundscape can exist as soundlessness, which implies that we are not referring to our heart beating, etc., but reducing our hearing or measurement to specific tasks: silence is that which we cannot hear or measure in a situation. Similarly, silence exists as reference to the ambience of a soundscape, so that "quiet" and "silence" become nearly synonymous. With this movement of the concept away from the purely physical to the relational perspective of a listener, 'silence' refers to communication, or rather, non-communication, irrelevance, a non-message. This allows silence to be used to refer to metaphorical situations in discourse, where silence can be construed as an absence of input, reticence, tacit communication, and the like. The silence of omission, the unsaid, and silence as a gag are metaphors which extend from this. As a consequence of silence extending metaphorically to refer to a gap in communication, it becomes an ambiguous condition within discourse (the effects of which, however, may not be so ambiguous).

## Uses and Abuses

Communicative silences are based in the sound/silence dynamic. The tendency of metaphorical silences in discourse to move the basis of silence away from sound to the more general dynamics of communication, posits silence as an opposite to communication, and comes as a contradiction to communicative silence in the soundscape. The concept is fraught with tension where these differences and contradictions are unclear.

Nothing makes the full implications of silence as a concept more unclear than logocentrism. The naturalization of print and writing technologies as an epistemological and even ontological model, which is implied by logocentrism, means that wherever we are inclined to invert the systemic relationship between discourse and the

soundscape (discourse occurs within the presence of the soundscape<sup>1</sup>) we have obscured the real relations of interdependence, simultaneity and process in favour of linearity and static objects. It becomes difficult to understand how discourse could be differently organized, how truths could be punctuated differently, in favour of the ear, as in oral societies, and not the eye. Logocentrism and the visual bias, along with complementary modes of thought such as atomism and scientific reductionism, when naturalized and internalized as epistemology, alienate us from subject to subject relations with nature, and imbalance our perceptual abilities.<sup>2</sup> In this way silence is perceived as primarily a matter of discourse. Thus acoustic or ambient silence, as a predominant feature of most wild soundscapes, can signify the lack of discourse and activity which means the absence of humans, or, more accurately, of urban human life. Silence is threatening in common cultural associations of it with death and dissolution, and threatening to the profits of commercialized acoustic media and noise-producing industry. Acoustic silences have thus become too rare.

Silence in discourse becomes heavily ideological when it perpetuates domination, by suppressing the expression, identity, and culture of the oppressed, and by repressing awareness of the real relations of domination through omission. This has been well established. It is less well established how silence as a concept is ideological, but I assert that silence has been tactically redefined or deemphasized in the strategy of capitalist industrial and electronic expansion: as a romantic rural or wild quality of the soundscape to be opposed to the sounds of progress, to be contained and commodified as a condition of exchange value, or to be avoided as a non-state (for example). Thus I argue that the domination of the soundscape is inextricable from domination over the mode of production, and that this domination involves the conceptual marginalization of silence.

As a strategy of empowerment and insurrection, the skillful application of discursive and acoustic silences is also basic to any power struggle, and favours the marginalized. The skillful use of silence is also essential to any personal or collective development of ecological sensibilities, since silence facilitates careful listening. This is evident both in the effects of the loss of such abilities, such as in the numbing effects of "moozak," and in the positive experiences of naturalists or the ecologically sustaining cultures of First Peoples. Silence-positive cultural practice has the strength to build cohesiveness and flexibility in groups, and health and alertness in the individual. Such practices are also the source of cultural innovation, where they are used as the basis of existential inquiry or spiritual expression. The contemplative and the artist serve important roles in asserting the usefulness of silence in our communicative practice and theory.

## Commentary and Reflections

When I was asked about my research, if I responded that it was about "silence," almost everyone assumed that I was studying discourse; if I responded that it was about "silence, power, and ecology" the reaction was one of puzzlement, confusion, or disinterest. The motivation

behind this research is to redress this conceptual gap in the formally and otherwise educated general awareness of the interlocked nature of the processes of perception, identity, power, and ecology. Most, if not all, of the fundamental issues of communication exist at a nexus of these processes. I feel that the best place to start integrating these complexities into soundscape studies, and communication studies in general, is with the basic context of communication—silence—in order to understand how we relate to our communicative environment. Theory is a preliminary way to explore such basic communicative concepts in complex formations.

Our understanding of discourse and power needs to incorporate the soundscape and non-discursive communication in order to inform political and philosophical agendas more holistically. I am not arguing for the priority of issues of the soundscape or silence itself over issues of social struggle such as poverty (although in some instances the latter may depend upon the former). Solutions to these problems of social justice, however, will likely include some kind of broad qualitative (thus revolutionary) change in cultural features such as the dominant mode of perception and the sense of how our relations exist within nature (a cosmology). Cosmological revolution is largely a process induced by the products of the labour of intellectuals. This is where theory has its political place: as a participation in the process of sociocultural change, as constraint and impulse to the processes of history. Gramsci argues that the labour of intellectuals places them within the roles of being “functionaries” of the dominant group, organizing consent in civil society and arranging the apparatus of state coercive power; likewise they play a key role in dissent and reorganizing or disrupting hegemony (304-311).

While the global ecological crisis is manifest in many catastrophic threats such as biodiversity collapse or the changing composition of the atmosphere, and manifest in many social injustices such as famine or toxic dumping, it is also clearly manifest in the soundscape. The origins of the crisis can be found not only in injustices such as disenfranchisement and resource exploitation but in our changing relationship with our environment as “nature,” and fundamentally in the massive desensitization to our ecological requirements. Silence is a key to our personal and cultural sensitivity, both acoustically and socially. If we lack sufficient silence, if we fail to appreciate or understand its ecological and communicative significance, we are likely to lose valuable ecological sensitivity and communicative skill. Communication and ecology theory is an important place to begin the process of integrating a fuller use of the concept of silence. Just as we have struggled in this century to develop an ecological sense of “the environment” in which all human activities are nested and thus dependent upon, it is necessary to understand how discourse is carried out within the soundscape, and to recognize that soundmaking occurs within silence.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis is political and insurgent in nature because it seeks to advocate a return to sensitivity via silence:

Noise—in the literal sense of a lo-fi soundscape—has become an accepted presence in urban society, something one puts up with. It is no longer recognized as a “weapon.” In fact, noisemaking is generally participated in, in an atmosphere of *mitmachen* as Adorno would call it. In many cases it is, in fact, the only “voice” people have and feel comfortable—even powerful—with: the noise of their machinery and gadgetry. But to participate in that voice means to silence human voices and to silence silence. Not to participate in it, *nicht mitmachen*,

but to listen actively *despite* the noise, to seek out silent soundscapes, and to use one’s own voice for soundmaking, seem to have become oppositional activities. (Westerkamp, 24)

Soundscape ecologists are specialists within the discipline of ecology, and like all specialties their subject of study is intricately bound up with and ultimately dependent on the larger systems of ecology in general. The general political nature of soundscape design is likewise unavoidable. I consider this research to have engendered an unavoidable polemic against the prevailing doctrines of late capitalism and reductionist science. It therefore participates in a broad range of critical discourses which seek to discredit and disassemble the various forms of domination which threaten and oppress us. However, I make no claims to complete and final arguments. As with any research, my own insensitivities, subtleties, and innocent or convenient omissions are constrained and defined by the limits of my own awareness. Some of these inevitable errors may themselves be ideological: that is, they may conceal or falsely resolve their own contradictions, depoliticize and dehistoricize the issue at hand, or disguise the interests and values of the argument, etc., and in so doing reproduce dominance.

Because of the paucity of research in this basic area of communication, and the need for an initial broad-based approach, this thesis contains plenty of disjuncture, fractures and gaps. The integration of multiple approaches which I have attempted is only partial and preliminary. But the overwhelming need to connect ecology, the ontological crisis of post-industrial culture, and social justice, must be answered. I have tried to do this through theory centered upon the soundscape, because our perceptual bias is central to our cosmology. I have also tried to avoid a casual syncretism by approaching the separate accounts of silence from within a communicational framework based on the organising principle of the soundscape, and the extension of the metaphors of silence from there.

Silence is the common denominator, the fundament to communication. If silence can be characterized as the ground we communicate on, the basis of listening, expressing, and experiencing, then it has been fractured and disrupted by the capitalist mode of production and all its underpinnings. Communication studies are on shaky ground without addressing this condition.

Wreford Miller named his first-born child Simone, because it means “one who listens intently.” He has been trying to apply theoretical respect for the soundscape in his own life, but his muffler needs repair and he moved to the rural Gulf Islands (British Columbia, Canada) only to find himself under the flight path. He is currently a writer, researcher, administrator, and producer of digital media.

## References

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- Tacussel, Patrick. (1988) “The Laws of the Unspoken: Silence and Secrecy.” *Diogenes*. Winter 1988, no. 144, pp. 16-31.
- Westerkamp, Hildegard. (1988) “Listening and Soundmaking: A Study in Music-as-Environment.” M.A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University.

## Notes:

1. but not necessarily constrained by the soundscape—see Chapter One, “systems, constraints and orders of complexity.”
2. This is to be distinguished from the effects of print literacy alone, which are complex and varied and allow for the expansion of social interaction and “interiorization” (Ong, McLuhan, Ashcroft et al.).
3. It could even be said that soundscapes occur within a silencescape.