

The Subjectivity of Silence

Silence can be found everywhere, but still few humans discover it. It is the one tone that never stops, but is rarely heard because humans continue to shape vast soundscapes with their priorities in optical world. From this visually dominated society humans have caused many large issues in the soundscape. In regards to silence many other issues have stemmed such as; the relationship between silence and power, silence and women, silence and the mystic, and lastly the issue of silence as a metaphor. All these issue present themselves with one common root, the subjectivity of silence. I will discuss my experiences with silence in mediation, in backcountry hiking and in the home, while applying theory on these issues to each scenario then elaborating on my understanding of silence and finishing with how I can change my soundscape to encompass more silence. Overall, the following will provide examples and theories suggesting that the subjectivity of silence is an issue that should be address with diligence in order to preserve silence in the soundscape.

The first section will be devoted to the issues concerning silence; silence as a metaphor, silence and power, silence and women and the mystic of silence. Silence is used as a metaphor in the sense that it arises relative to the sounds that surround it, “a metaphor for auditory space between dominant sound events” (Frykberg, 2016, Unit 10, Silence as a Metaphor). The course material uses the example of the silence that is experienced before a concert as the conductor stands tall on stage ready at the flick of the wrist to end the silence. Another example of this silence would be the pauses in speech lecturers make to give rhythm to their speech. This is an

issue because when silence is portrayed as a metaphor it creates ambiguity in its definition, making it difficult to set silence standards over a long period of time. For example, what would be regarded as noise in the 19th century, may be referred to as silence in the 21st century. The second issue concerning silence is the relationship between silence and power. Traditionally silence has been acquainted with powerlessness while sound and power have held a strong bond, “the association of noise and power has never really been broken in human imagination” (Schafer, 1992). The strong bond is an immense issue concerning silence, as it spreads into many of today’s democratic problems such as digital communication systems, and the voices of marginalized groups. The issue with this power and noise bond in humans’ imagination, is that it neglects silence as a legitimate source of power. In the world today, it is conceived that the powerful are heard and the powerless are neglected, but Schafer brings to light a valid point stating, “to have sacred noise is not merely to have the biggest noise; rather it is having the authority to make it without censure” (Schafer, 1992). This illustrates, for example, how the big industries like aviation and media are flooding the urban soundscapes with their self-appointed authority that allows them to subtly disrupt the silence in soundscape and create noise that results in confusing. This authority that industries have appointed themselves has overthrown the silence that previously existed by subtly shifting societies attention towards the optical senses while dominating and destroying society’s aural space. The third issue concerning silence is in regards to women who historically have seen their voices in isolation from others. For example, women illustrate their voices by, “speaking up, [and] speaking out” (Frykberg, 2016, Unit 10, Women and Silence). These phrases show the issue women face in regards to silence as their voices are heard only to exemplify self-worth and to dignify themselves. The silence faced

by women is problematic because women should be treated equally. Their silence and voice should not be more or less meaningful than a man's; however, this issue of silence in regards to women is subjective because in certain situations women's voices are more dominantly heard than men's. For example, in a household where the mother is the alpha parental figure or in female heavy industries such as beauty and fashion this gender silence is reversed. This is why silence is subjective, each scenario presents differ people who all perceive silence and sound differently. Lastly, the issue concerning silence and the mystic. From the ambiguity that surrounds the definition of silence arises the mystery of its experience and purpose. For example, meditation in Buddhism and other eastern ideologies entail a person to sit still in a quiet space in order to calm the mind, bring it peace and ultimately silence. This experience of silence is subjective as each meditation is unique. The mystic of silence creates issues because no one has ever truly experienced silence, maybe upon death true silence is heard but no one can know for certain. This mysticism that surrounds silence stems from its subjectivity. If a person were to experience true silence how would they explain it to anyone, silence is a concept that the rational mind cannot explain, only through not explaining silence could one attempt to explain silence. Furthermore, sounds and vibrations are always present because listening never stops (Berendt, 1992). Unlike sight, you cannot stop hearing, even the deaf hear; therefore, according to Taoism, listening is the way and it is here where silence can be found (Berendt, 1992). This provides another example of how the issues concerning silence all lean on the issue of subjectivity. Just as one man's garbage is another man's treasure, one man's noise is another man's silence. From the mystic to power and women, silence creates issues both theoretical and practical.

Moving forward to the second section, I will elaborate on some personal experiences I've had that are relevant to silence such as my meditation practice, my weekend backcountry camping trips and the relative silence I observe in my own house. In meditation, I experience silence in two crucial ways; in my soundscape and in my mind. Although the majority of the time I meditate there is a ringing noise I hear being caused by my agitated auditory nerve, my mind often tunes that sound out as the meditation prolongs, slowly removing the awareness of the inner ear noise, I start to experience silence. After deviating attention from the ringing sensation, I hear what Cage described as the low tones of my blood circulation and breathing (Schafer, 1986). These two tones, the high and the low, allow me to recognize the tranquility of my environment. As if there should be an ultra hi-fi soundscape where one's inner workings can be heard, not only their footsteps. After the attention deviates from these natural human sounds, all I am left with are my thoughts, the voices in my head. As time continues and I get deeper into the meditation my thoughts gradually disappear. It is at this point when I start to fully experience silence. The soundscapes I meditate in have low sound levels ranging from 25Db to 40Db allowing the exterior noise to be easily forgotten. This experience with silence is unique in two ways; one, as time progresses I feel like the silence becomes deeper, and two, the silence is predominantly experienced from within. It is not as though the soundscape which I'm situated in is silent; but, through altering my sonic attention the noise heard by the conscious mind are not registered by the subconscious mind. This is why I say the silence comes from within. The second experience I have with silence is when I go away for a few days into the backcountry hiking. When I do this I generally go alone or with a small group of friends, we carry all our equipment in and out. The manual labor prevents any unneeded instruments to join the journey making it a tranquil time.

Far away from the city, the buzzing and the droning of the industrialized society cannot be heard, this is the first step towards silence. When I'm on these backpacking trips the remoteness removes the large ambient noise polluters from my soundscape. Occasionally a plane may fly nearby disrupting the peaceful soundscape; however, for the majority of the time spent in the woods it is quiet. Birds chirp casually in the day and the wind hisses through the trees from time to time. It isn't until the evening that I encounter silence. When no wind blows on a clear night up in the mountains, silence dominates the soundscape. Some of my companions find it unsettling and have urges to speak, but I embrace it. The silence in the mountains feels deep, mature and ever present. Unlike in meditation, the noise levels in the mountains hover around 20Db. This level of noise is relatively silent, especially considering the high ambient noise levels I experience daily at school and in my community. Coming out of each experience with silence in the woods I feel reenergized, my hearing is more sensitive to the city noises and my ears feel well rested because they spent time away from the heavy vibrations of the urban soundscape. In the mountains, the silence gives space for all the natural sounds to be heard individually. Each croak of a frog, gust of wind and buzzing insect can be heard by the ear as the sounds all happen in their own space and time making the soundscape environment in the mountains hi-fi.

However, unlike another hi-fi soundscape where the silence gives rhythm to the sounds, the contrary occurs in the mountains from my experience. It's quite usual because the natural sounds made give rhythm to the silence. The third experience I encounter with silence happens in my house, on evening when no one is around. The humming of the fridge downstairs is the loudest noise heard. It is in these moments of silence that the auditory nerve ringing of my inner ear becomes loudest for me. Again these ringing noises mentioned here and the other bodily

noises made are subjective in interpretation forcing the silence that surrounds them to be subjective. However, the silence heard in my home on quiet evenings is more commonly experienced by others than the previous two examples. This silence is reached when the electric utilities of a home, such as my fridge, dominate the soundscape. The occasional rustle of the blankets by my feet, or the sigh of my breath fill my ears from time to time, but only briefly before the quiet hum of the fridge returns to set the rhythm of the household soundscape. The silence of the home for me is rare, as my siblings and mother generally create quite a ruckus at home. Only when they are gone can the silence present itself, when no one walks amongst the halls, no computer noise seep from the bedrooms and no water flows through the plumbing. The silence in the home occurs when there is an absence of human noise. These three experiences of silence that I enjoy from time to time are all perceived to be silent for me. Whether it be meditation, backcountry hiking or resting at home, the silence is something I experience as a positive, peaceful and pleasant time. I have learnt to appreciate the silence I find and embrace the lack of noise. The absence of noise plays a crucial role in my life, giving me space to think, rest and recover from the increasingly noisy environment that society continues to foster in my urban life.

Taking a look at the issues discussed previously and relating them to my personal experiences with silence, it is fascinating how applicable the knowledge learnt about silence can be used to analyze my experiences with silence. When interpreted through the issue of silence and the mystic, I find it useful to know that silence is just a perception of the individual who is experiencing it. This subjectivity helps remove some of the mystery behind silence allowing me to embrace and enjoy it more. Another useful interpretation of silence and the mystic, is

analyzing why and how other cultures associate with silence; for example, the Judaist who take silence during the services several times do so “to keep them pure in thought” (Frykberg, 2016, Unit 10 Silence and the Mystic) or the Hindus who see silence as a way of “always thinking of self-realization” (Frykberg, 2016, Unit 10, Silence and the Mystic). In analyzing these different interpretations of silence that others have it helps connect portions of the ambiguous definition so that the meditations I experience are not as abstract. The second issue worth analyzing is between silence and power; however instead of interpreting sound as power, I find the opposite feeling stems from me when backcountry hiking. The silence in the mountains represents the eternal power that mother nature contains, it represents the patience nature has and the vastness of its abilities. When silence in the mountains is broken by a clap of thunder or a violent gust of wind, that is when I see the power of nature. For example, when yelling at the peak of the mountain your voice disappears as quickly as it appeared. The silence swallows it whole like a snake swallows a rat. This exemplifies the magnitude of silence and the power required to disturb such a powerful soundscape for an extended period of time. I feel mother nature’s silence humbles me by showing me that the silence is always there, and needs nothing done for it to arise. The last issue worth referring to is silence as a metaphor. I find this concept lays the foundations for other silence theories. Metaphors are used because true silence does not exist, but instead is said to be the “absence of sound or the absence of noise” (Frykberg, 2016, Unit 10, Silence is a Metaphor). For example, when analyzing the silence in the home I said it was the absence of human sounds in the house that create the silence. Another example would be in meditations where the absence of thoughts or noise in the mind is understood to be silence. This vast concept of silence as a metaphor largely enables the subjectivity of silence to exist within its

definition. Take for example Evelyn Gennie, the deaf musician who perceives sound through what she sees, feels and hears. (Frykberg, Unit 10, Silence and Hearing Loss). For her sounds are interpreted differently compared to others; as a result, her interpretation of silence is different from others. For her deafness is not silence at all. In summary, these main issues regarding silence and the subjectivity that surrounds it helps create a more concrete reality of silence so that it can be experienced by groups of people in various ways.

This last sections will expand on the knowledge acquired through this course about silence and suggest some behaviors citizens take change to enable a more silent soundscape to improve the current soundscape. This course has demonstrated three main ideas in regards to silence; silence as a foreign concept, the subjectivity of silence and the attitude towards silence. Silence is an experience many people in today's society don't think about because, as a whole, society is overly focused on their visual senses. As a result, the soundscape is unintentionally polluted by uneducated citizens and destructive industries. Furthermore, this course has shown that silence is unique to everyone and that silence can arise in many different areas. Whether through a quiet mind or a relatively quiet home, silence can present itself in any soundscape. In these moments silence should be appreciated. This idea that silence is to be feared, like darkness, is absurd. Silence is a beautiful thing that should humble humans by bring awareness to their long term powerlessness. It should be respected, appreciated and experienced for all that it is; a rare event. The absence of noise today is rare because noise pollution continues to flood urban and natural soundscapes. In order to achieve this appreciation, the uneducated citizens should be educated through a quick demonstration of silence and noise pollution, along with what the future soundscape resemble if society continues to pollute soundscapes

carelessly. This will help others to become more aware of silence, giving them a choice to change their lifestyles. In consequence, this could lead to quieter environments. Another important factor in improving silence in society would be to understand how community member interpret silence. This would allow the different types of silences to be heard through the voices of the community. All in all, this course has shown that the soundscape has been neglected in our visual society resulting in silence to fall beneath all aspects of modern life, turning it into something feared, unusual and rare.

In conclusion, the issues of silence today arise from its inability to truly exist. In turn, this causes the silence to be a subjective matter riddled with mystic and power that cannot be explain in simple language; but rather, silence attempts to be expressed by many metaphors. This ambiguity in the definition gives silence the ability to surround all soundscapes, even the soundscape of the inner mind where thoughts create noise. However, with the ability for abundant silence, society continue to favor the visual world polluting each soundscape with unnecessary noise. In order to help the aural world reign supreme over its optical counterpart, awareness and education must be prioritized so that “the voices of angels”, (Schafer, 1986) can be heard and appreciated once again.

Bibliography

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