
Silence and the Notion of the Commons

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The following is a condensation by Gayle Young of the talk given by Ursula Franklin at the Banff Centre, August 11, 1993, as part of "The Tuning of the World", the first international conference on acoustic ecology.

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 disciplines, and the inter-relations among them.

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. 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 in a sense impinge upon each other, to talk about the notion of the commons, common needs, and our common heritage.

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 soundscape. However, what modern technology has brought to sound is the possibility of doing two things: to separate the sound from its source and to make the sound permanent. In addition to that, of course, modern devices make it possible to decompose, recompose, analyze, and mix sounds and to change the initial magnitude and sustainability of sound, to change all the characteristics that link the sound with its source. Murray Schafer calls this schizophrenia.

But then there is not only sound, there is also silence. And 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. 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? 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 talk, 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 there who listens before you can say there is silence. Silence, that is, the absence of sound is defined, by a listener, by hearing. In this way the modern soundscape and the modern understanding of silence divides itself into two domains. It divides itself into the domain that we traditionally associate with silence, the enabling condition in which unprogrammed and unprogrammable events can take place. That is the silence of contemplation; that is the silence where people get in touch with themselves; that is the silence of meditation and worship. And what makes

this distinct is that it is a silence that is an enabling condition, that opens up the possibility of unprogrammed, unplanned and unprogrammable happenings.

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And in that sense we understand why, as Christians, seventeenth century Quakers, who were surrounded by all the pomp and circumstance of the Church of England, found it necessary 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 centring, beyond the individual effort of meditation: there was the need for collective silence. The collective silence is an enormously powerful 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 that 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 unprogrammable. I feel its very existence is 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 form of forced silence that I am afraid of. It is not only the silence of the padded cell, the silence of solitary confinement, but it is also the silencing that comes when there is the megaphone, the boombox, the PA system, and any variation in which sound and voices are silenced so that a planned event can take place.

Silence is being taken out of common availability

There is a critical juncture that I hope you will keep in mind, between the planned and the unplanned, the programmed and the unplanable. 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 unplanable to happen. Yet silence has to remain available in the soundscape, in the landscape, and in the mindscape. Allowing openness to the unplanable, to the unprogrammed, is the core of strength of silence. It is also the core of our sanity, not only individually, but collectively. I extend these considerations to the collectivity because as a community, as a people, we are just as

threatened by the impingement of the programmed over the silent, over the enabling of the unprogrammed. I think much of the impingement happens unnoticed, uncommented upon, and in some ways much less obviously than an intrusion of a structure into the landscape. While we may not win a battle at city hall to preserve our trees, at least there is now a semi-consciousness that this is important.

How can one get away from the dangers of even the gentle presence of programmed music, in public buildings? There are two aspects that I want to stress. One is that the elimination of silence is done without anybody's consent. The second is that one really has to stop, think and analyze to see how manipulative these interventions are. In any case, who on earth has given anybody the right to manipulate the sound environment?

Here 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 anybody. What we are hearing, I feel, is very much the privatisation of the soundscape, in the same manner in which, in Britain, the enclosure laws destroyed the commons. 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. Millenia have taken clean air and clean water as a norm; now we see our environmental commons threatened. The silence that we need so that unprogrammed and unprogramable things can take place, is, without much fuss and civic bother, being privatized, if you allow that expression. Silence is being taken out of common availability. By the use to which modern technology is put, societies have come into a position where something that had been normal becomes rare and precious and something that was abnormal becomes normal. Today people consider water pollution essentially normal and those who can afford it drink bottled water. It is harder to have bottled silence, but money can buy distance from sound. When civic anger erupts these days it is with respect to noise such as airport or factory noise, though 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 situation 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 knows the constraints of land use, density and scale, but what does town planning have to say about silence?

... what joy it can bring to be quiet together ...

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, without being 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? We don't even ask for such sanity-restoring space.

I would think one of the possibilities 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. I sit on committees that do that and it not only expedites the business before the committee but it also contributes to a certain amount of peacefulness and sanity. There can also be a few minutes of silence before a meal. I would now invite you and all of us to just have two minutes of silence before we go on into the question period. Let us be quiet. (Two minutes of silence) I thank you for your attention and I hope you see what joy it can bring to be quiet together. Thank you.
