



Intro

Steffen Böhm and Attila Bruni

You see half the moon, its crescent, and one of the planets, *maybe Saturn*, maybe Jupiter, in the early night sky over Berlin, *through the windows of a taxicab*, near Potsdamer Platz. You think: Beauty. No, this is not beauty, *maybe not*, maybe, this is the rest of it, *maybe not*, maybe, the rest of beauty, *maybe not*, maybe, what remains of beauty, *maybe not*, maybe, what is visible, *certainly*, uncertain. Your arms would not be able to stretch as far as necessary to form an adequate gesture for beauty. (*You know that, don't you?*) So, [] beauty remains in the impossibilities of the body. (Einstürzende Neubauten, 'Beauty', from the album *Silence is Sexy*, Mute, 2000)

In the year 2000 the German band Einstürzende Neubauten released an album called *Silence is Sexy*. For people who know the music of this band it is clear that they are anything but 'silent' (and 'well-behaved') members of society. Instead, their music is full of 'noise', produced on self-manufactured instruments that range from power drills to washing machines. Silence: an expression of sound, or even noise? Silent sound? A contradiction?

Maybe not.

Maybe.

[] (silence)

Perhaps for Einstürzende Neubauten 'silence' is not necessarily something that is silent. Maybe silence is something like 'beauty'. In their words, beauty cannot be named easily. Perhaps it is even unnameable. It cannot be simply put into words: one cannot 'form an adequate gesture for beauty'. Beauty is impossible. It has to 'remain in the impossibilities of the body'. Perhaps the same is true for silence.

Maybe not.

Maybe.

[] (silence)

So, how to express silence textually? Text is silent – in a way. But equally, the silence of a text can be anything but silent. Text can be screaming out loud. The silence of a text can produce a sound that says more than any (sonic) sound.

When Einstürzende Neubauten write “So, [] beauty remains in the impossibilities of the body,” what does ‘[]’ stand for? Is it perhaps an expression, a symbol, for silence? ‘[]’ as a symbol of the unsymbolisable? But how does Blixa Bargeld, the lead singer of the band, express this textual symbol, ‘[]’, with his voice? How to perform ‘[]’? How to express silence through sound? Sound: an expression of silence? The sound of silence? Another contradiction?

Maybe not.

Maybe.

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Awkward Silences

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[] (awkward silence)

Silence can produce awkward situations: Like, when nobody says anything. Or, someone ‘plays’ a piece of ‘music’, such as John Cage’s *4’33”*, yet nothing can be heard – supposedly. (Has the Emperor got new clothes on; or is he perhaps completely naked?) What might also be somewhat awkward is when we, as editors of this (special) issue of *ephemera* on sound and silence, are not entirely sure what exactly we are on about.

[] (very awkward silence)

We are quite happy to admit that when we talk about sound and silence we are not entirely sure what it *is* we are actually talking *about*. This comes, perhaps, as a bit of a revelation, especially in a trade that constantly demands and promises concreteness, exactness and specificity. And are there not many good examples of how sound and silence can be and has been ‘defined’? Can we not simply adopt one of these ‘definitions’ of sound and silence?

Take the recent special issue of the *Journal of Management Studies*,¹ which was dedicated to ‘the dynamics of voice and silence in organizations’. As the editors state in their introduction, the special issue focuses “on the question of when and how people in organizational settings will *choose* voice and how and when they will *choose* silence.”² Here sound and silence assume the roles of fairly discrete behaviours that one can consciously choose. For example, in the first article of that special issue readers will find an analysis of three types of silences and their parallel types of voices as well as various matrixes showing the consequences of the intersections of different types of

1 Morrison, E.W. & F.J. Milliken (2003) ‘Speaking Up, Remaining Silent: The Dynamics of Voice and Silence in Organizations’, *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(6).

2 ‘Speaking Up, Remaining Silent’, 1353, emphases added.

voices and silence. Drawing on the idea of a ‘spiral of silence’, the second article makes propositions such as: “The more the climate of opinion within a workgroup is perceived as supportive of different sexual orientations, the less likely [gay and lesbian] individuals are to be silent about their sexual orientation as part of their personal identity.”³ Or, in one of the last articles, readers will discover that employees often do not voice their concerns to supervisors because they fear being labelled as troublemakers.⁴

‘Giving Voice’

It seems that one of the ideas behind the *JMS* special issue is that silence is seen to be a (managerial) problem that needs to be overcome to facilitate change, innovation and development. An employee who is silent about certain issues is seen as somebody who does not fully contribute to the potentials of an organisation. Hence, the task of organisational leaders is to create an environment in which silence can be overcome and everybody can voice their individual concerns – and the task of the intellectual, it seems, is to help to ‘give voice’ to those people who remain silent.

‘Giving voice’ to forgotten, marginalised and silenced (groups of) people and constituencies of society can be, of course, an important political and ethical task. But, as some feminist and postcolonial theories have been highlighting for some time, is it not equally important to put the politics of ‘giving voice’ into question?

What about the politics of Freudian psychoanalysis, for example, which, one could perhaps argue, aims to uncover the hidden, unconscious, repressed truth of an individual? The task of the Freudian analyst, it seems, is to ‘give voice’ to the hidden sounds that have been silenced by the various repressions and traumas experienced by ‘the subject’. But whose voice is being heard here? The subject’s? The unconscious? The analyst’s? How do ‘we’ know that the other – such as ‘the Iraqi people’ – ‘wants’ to be heard? How do ‘we’ make sure that it is not ‘us’ who construct the ‘subject’ – such as ‘Oriental people’ – as a (colonial) object that ‘we’ lend ‘our’ voice to? How can one voice anything in the name of (essentialist notions of) ‘us’ or ‘the other’ and how does this ‘voicing’ silence, perhaps, other ‘others’?

Interrupting Silence

One alternative to the strategy of ‘giving voice’ could be to simply remain silent. In the case of psychoanalysis, Lacan, for example, thought that to remain silent, to refuse to give the master-signifier (the dominant voice of ‘the subject’) what it wants, is one

3 Bowen, F. & K. Blackmon (2003) ‘Spirals of Silence: The Dynamic Effects of Diversity on Organizational Voice’, *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(6): 1403.

4 Milliken, F.J., E.W. Morrison and P.F. Hewlin (2003) ‘An Exploratory Study of Employee Silence: Issues that Employees Don’t Communicate Upward and Why’, *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(6): 1453-1476.

strategy to interrupt and therefore question the reality of that very master-signifier. Remaining silent interrupts hegemonic voices and promises to give access to the Real: the silent, the unnameable, the unspeakable, the unconscious. But this is not only a listening to the voices and sounds of the silent Real; it is also a questioning of those forces that 'do the silencing'. That is, instead of uncovering the hidden and essentialist truth of the unconscious, one aims to expose that which renders something silent or unspeakable.

So, instead of 'giving voice' to someone, one remains silent and therefore fails to echo the voice of the master-signifier. The failure to hear its own echo potentially disrupts symbolic reality and exposes its lack. In this context, emancipation is maybe not an act of 'giving voice' to a marginal group of society, but an act of keeping silent, perhaps of being bored with the refrain of the social: Capital, War, Academia. Before anyone thinks that this is yet another 'postmodern' nihilism, it is important to point to the political possibilities of refusing to reproduce the language of the master. By refusing to reproduce the reality of the master-signifier, one opens possibilities of exposing the limits of the (hegemonic) other.

Maybe not.

Maybe.

Sounds and Silences

One might expect several things from an editorial introduction to a special issue: to be informed about its exact scope; to have the main concepts defined; and to be provided with a clear overview of the contributions. We are afraid that we have failed on all of these counts.

What we have tried to point to in this 'Intro' to 'silent sounds' is the (political and ethical) importance of not being too confident about the 'object' of our study here. 'Silence' and 'sound' are complex concepts that cannot be simply defined. One cannot 'find an adequate gesture' for them. We therefore see this issue as an exploration: a playful experiment that does not necessarily aim to give any precise answers, but first and foremost hopes to raise interesting questions.

This questioning began with the experience of the EGOS conference stream ('Silence is (not) Sexy: Organizing Sound and Silence'), which we organised together with Alessia Contu in Barcelona in the summer of 2002. At this conference a diverse but unique bunch of people gathered to discuss issues of sound and silence from a variety of perspectives: the sociology of work and organization, philosophy, psychoanalysis, music theory, cultural studies, to name but a few. But as conference organisers we also had the luck and pleasure to include a variety of artistic performances that engaged with the themes of sound and silence by using visual and sonic multimedia technologies. Overall one can say that this conference stream was a creative event that operated at the boundary between art, philosophy and science.

The Barcelona event provided us with a unique space for cross-fertilisation and contamination between fields of study and thought that are usually not brought together in an academic conference. This special issue of *ephemera* assembles some of the best contributions originally presented in Barcelona, which we hope will 'repeat' the cross-disciplinary excitement that was felt by most participants of the conference stream (differently).

Maybe not.

Maybe.

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the editors

Steffen Böhm is the co-editor of *ephemera: critical dialogues on organization* and has recently moved to the University of Essex. He's got a tinnitus and is therefore very noise sensitive. He's forgotten what 'silence' is supposed to be like...

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Attila Bruni has just finished his PhD in Sociology and Social Research. His thesis deals with the sociality of objects and the materialities of organizing. He used to play in a rock band, but actually he is currently more excited about exploring the sounds of computers. But his current favourite band is still the Queens of the Stone Age.

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