



Shut the Fuck Up^{*}

Anthony O'Shea

And to be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible. That is why we desire it. (Maurice Blanchot, *The writing of the disaster*).

I am the sum total of my existence

[...]

I believe in the sense of silent sound

I have always been too loud

Won't you help me drown it out...

(I Giant Leap, 'My Culture', from the album *I Giant Leap*, Palm Pictures, 2001)

Some may take offense to what may be seen as a clear departure from accepted academic narrative both in the language used and the autobiographical style. Some may have stopped reading, already offended and unwilling to listen further, some may now wish that I obeyed the title and saved you from what follows. No doubt some will regard what follows as little more than a subjective and blatantly personal piece.¹ You're right, it is – but does that give you the right to deny me a voice? If it does, then join the queue. But whilst you stand in line to demand that I shut up take some time to consider this: I've only ever experienced one, as yet incomplete and less than perfect life. It's one I'd like to try to come to terms with before I die because it's the only one I have. Now tell me to shut the fuck up, you won't be the first or the last, just don't be surprised if I don't listen.

In this paper I want to evoke what it is like to be on the receiving end of demands for silence. I am less interested in theorizing what silence may or may not be or indeed how it may be related to other phenomena such as music and noise although some of my concerns overlap with those who do. (For instance, in this *ephemera* issue Cobussen's

* This paper is based on a conference paper originally presented at EGOS 2002. The presentation was centered on pre-recorded musical extracts and an edited version of a recorded interview with the singer, songwriter Nick Cave, separated by a scripted monologue. Footnotes in this paper attempt to repeat this by inserting musical references into the flows of autobiographical narrative. Why did I choose Cave? Perhaps because of the "bruised stoicism bordering on world weariness [at] play in many of his later lyrics"; uncredited sleeve notes from *The Best of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds*, Mute, 1998.

1 I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer both for the phrase 'blatantly personal piece' and suggestion to remain conscious of the potential power of this.

account, following Derrida, considers music as a *tout autre* of silence and noise;² Fuglsang and Böhm explore issues concerning The Impossible and The Sacred in relation to silence.) What I am interested in is exploring how various demands for silence may be, at least where I am concerned, formative, part of the 'sum total of my existence'; having been told to shut up for so long I'd now like a voice.

Whilst we do not possess silence – even in our quietest moments there is noise, the sound and fury of human existence (see Cobussen in this issue, who underlines the random sounds that form John Cage's supposedly silent composition 4'33'') – we seem so ready to demand it of others.³ Yet this denial, and our inability to represent it through and appropriate it into metaphorical language, does not deny it.⁴

My experiences of being silenced are both many and different. In order to convey some I will offer a number of short autobiographical vignettes interspersed by some brief commentary.⁵ The vignettes seek to illustrate these themes but be warned as well – there is pathos here as I also seek to convince by appealing to you emotionally and some may find it brutal.⁶ Just think what it was like to be on the receiving end. The first two concern what may be an attempt to silence me from figures of authority in my life – my father and a senior academic. The third reverses the structural positions and authority figures – it involves my then two-year old daughter telling me to shut up; this, temporarily at least, left me lost for words; something that neither of the previous two really achieved. The fourth piece considers a form of silence we may impose on ourselves – secrets, lies and silences exist in many families. Reviewers have enjoined me to be careful of sounding too detached particularly in this scene. They are concerned that by doing so it may sound artificial or contrived. I find it difficult however not to present it as rather stark and clinical since, odd as it may sound, I *want* to remain distanced from it and all the implications even whilst feeling a need to talk. I'm sickened by and hate my father, I'm glad he's dead. And I'm sickened that I feel this way about *my own father*. The one here continues to reverberate in mine even though the original cause, my father, is now silent: silence drives me and my sister apart. The

2 In keeping with Cobussen (this issue), language is *an* other of silence not *the* other. Whilst I cannot reproduce the audio files in this written paper, one of the purposes of these notes is to suggest some possibilities.

3 For a description of the audience response to the first performance of 4'33'' see [www.azstarnet.com/%7Esolo/4min33se.htm]. It is also useful to compare this with the reception that greeted Stravinsky's *Vesna Sviashennaya* (more commonly referred to as *Le Sacre du Printemps*) and Alban Berg's *Altenberglieder* when they were premiered in 1913. *Vesna Sviashennaya*, or Holy Spring, musically alludes to sacrifice and the sacred, themes common to Bataille and Blanchot. Stravinsky also opposes the concept of humanity as progressive.

4 Pat Metheny, #2, from the album *Zero Tolerance for Silence*, Geffen, 1994. For more information and a downloadable Mpeg3 file extract from this album see [www.artistdirect.com/store/artist/album/0,,195641,00.html] and [www.shunn.net/bill/music/album.cgi?191]. Marrs, *Pump up the volume*, @ 4AD 1987.

5 FireHose, 'Another theory shot to shit', from the album *Ragin'*, full on, SST, 1986.

6 Diamanda Galas, 'My world is empty without you', from the album *Malediction and Prayer*, Mute 1998. Much of Galas's work recently has focused on expressing her confusion and pain subsequent to her brother's death from AIDS related infections.

final piece again considers a connection between death and silence suggested in the previous scene to again reconsider how we approach them.

The first scene is from my childhood and is one of my first memories of my father. Even now I can remember how little noise there was in my home. I was brought up with the rule that children could be seen but not heard: consistently and violently enforced by my father, not a rule to be transgressed lightly.

Scene One

'Shut the fuck up', he screamed at the boy. The two were alone; the boy's mother had gone shopping with her daughter leaving him in the care of his father. The Racing Post spread out on the table, his father was watching the horse racing on TV whilst the boy played on the floor with some plastic farm animals. He was making too much noise, 'Horsey go clip clop', his father wanted silence, he wanted to hear the commentary.

'Shut the fuck up or I'll shut you up.' The animals were scattered across the floor by his lunge at the child. Grabbing him, jerking him up off the floor, he unceremoniously dumped him in front of the electric fire. 'Stay there. If I hear another sound from you this afternoon you'll regret it.' He turned his attention back to the racing and the boy knowing better than to say anything said not a word. The room was filled with the sound of horse racing and the boy's crying as the pain from the fire burnt its way up his legs. Silence descended with the finality of a dreamless unconsciousness.

Scene Two

'Shut the fuck up. No one wants to hear about your life.' Words expressed after a conference. He was evidently still saying too much, or saying what others didn't want to hear.⁷

It seems to be a recurring theme in my life, this demand for silence. From my earliest childhood memories right through to my current academic one people around me try to deny me a voice. It's as if I haven't a story to tell, or at least it's one of no value. Yet it's a demand that I ignore, a rule I refuse to follow; generally the more I'm told to shut up the more likely I am to speak.⁸

7 Ironically I don't enjoy presenting and talking at conferences and do it as part of my job. This is partly because I find it embarrassing to talk, and particularly to read, in public. My embarrassment stems from another aspect of silence in my early childhood. My father believed that my accent was 'too common' and insisted that I 'talk properly or not at all', an insistence that he would enforce. I used to refuse to read out loud at school because I was embarrassed by my accent and scared of making a mistake. I ended up in speech therapy at the age of seven. Given the choice I'd quite happily not present.

8 Perhaps even my musical interests reflect this element of rule breaking and transgression. As a teenager I was in to punk rock, as an adult I'm interested in alternative, often experimental music and

I've been asked by friends why I'm so interested in Bataille. Perhaps it's because of his interests in transgression, rule breaking, excessive experience and communication. If communication is supposed to join us in society then why demand silence? Is it because what I say has no value or is it perhaps a bit too painful, a bit too close for comfort? We are all human, all too human.

Scene Three

'Oooh Horsey. Horsey go clip clop.'

'Caitlin, tea time please.'

'No daddy. Horsey go clip clop. Shut up daddy.' And she smiled winningly as only a two year old can and carried on playing with her plastic farm animals.⁹

My daughter's demand for silence, to me, is qualitatively different to the previous two scenes. For me the previous two come from a supposed position of authority, call upon implicit rules of behaviour and carry some aspect of a threat. My two-year old reversed these positions and left me lost for words. Having assumed the role of the bad son just how do I perform the role of father?

Silence is not merely the absence of noise it is very real even whilst it remains ephemeral but whilst it may touch and affect us remains outside our control.¹⁰ To speak

groups. Just to return to Nick Cave briefly: I've been a fan since he was in The Birthday Party – an Australian punk rock group – renowned for its disregard for musical conventions and rejection of accepted/acceptable modes of 'rock and roll' performance. The Birthday Party were once described by the UK's *New Musical Express* as "a bloody awful row" (Bohn, 1983, cited in Johnston, 1995: 104).

9 One of my daughter's favourite nursery rhymes is 'All the pretty little horses'. In the original presentation one of the musical extracts included a version of 'All the pretty little horses' recorded by Nick Cave and Current 93 (Current 93, 'All the pretty little horses', from the album *All the pretty little horses*, Durtro Records, 1996). Much of Cave's work concerns themes of the Sacred, life, death, desire and transgression; see for instance Cave's 'The secret life of the love song', from the album *Two Lectures by Nick Cave*, King Mob Records, 1999: "The love song is the light of God, deep down, blasting up through our wounds" (Cave, 1999).

10 Cobussen (2003) discusses the connections between silence, noise and music explored by the composer John Cage most famously in Cage's supposedly silent composition 4'33". However, as Cage makes clear, noise remains. Anecdotally the popular composer and ex-Womble Mike Batt was recently successfully sued by Cage's estate. On a recent recording Batt claimed to have sampled and condensed 4'33" in to a 1 minute piece that he felt must be better – because it was shorter – than the original... I don't sadly know whether he was sued for copyright violations, or his facile and derogatory comments or both. Silence remains something of a holy grail for music recording and recording studios spend vast sums of money on attempting to achieve a noise free environment where music may then be performed and recorded. But even in the most up to date professional studios it is not possible to record absolute silence even with all amplifiers and musical instruments turned off. There will be noise from the recording microphones, noise induced by leads, electrical supplies, analog or digital recording system and mixing desks, computer hardware and so on. Using modern computer technology and software I can insert 'silence' digitally in to music that I compose on my digital audio workstation (or DAW – and the lap top coincidentally that I wrote this paper on). Even

of silence is not just a philosophical endeavor but is also perhaps a recording of the fragility of our lives.¹¹ So how might we follow a demand to be silent, how do we 'shut the fuck up' when to be silent may deny our existence, imply and invoke Death (Fuglsang and Böhm, this issue)?¹²

Scene Two (contd.)

'Lets get this straight once and for all – there is no self-reflective subject...'

'So why do you keep talking about yourself? Why don't you just shut the fuck up.'

Why do I write in the first person? Why do I write about myself so much? It is not as some staging of a self-reflective subject. It is not some egoistic need fulfillment. It is not some cathartic process. I have experience of only one life and I do not fully understand even this, *but* it is the most that I have. In response to Blanchot and Bataille what else can I sacrifice if not myself, what else can I do apart from continually worry at, pick apart the semblance of my life to expose the ephemerality and lack of coherence? What else can I do except work over what I already have and waste it? Silence is both non-phenomenological – there is nothing that can be brought to presence – and a meta-phenomena, I can no more tell you to be silent as will myself to be silent, it "transgresses the boundary of the self-jurisdiction" (Critchley, 1997: 74).

Shut the fuck up? How? I cannot command silence. But if I cannot command silence must I then speak? But how can I talk about myself when I having nothing to reflect on? Perhaps I should be silent... This is a double bind that confronts Orpheus not some Narcissistic desire-for. I don't enjoy talking about my life, I don't get any pleasure, not even a perverse form, from picking at old wounds, but I can't at present be quiet. I cannot control silence, I can't just shut the fuck up no matter how much it may hurt because this is my life. Even so some things still remain unspoken.

Scene Four

It's late at night in Cape Town; I'm talking with my stepsister, sharing memories about my father.

this computer-generated silence isn't silent, monitored through a professional quality soundcard I can see the noise on the recording meters albeit at such a low threshold that we would not normally hear it. It's so quiet that if I monitor it via playback through headphones or speakers it is overwhelmed by hiss from these 'silent', 'professionally accurate' sound stages. I simply cannot achieve, or reproduce complete silence – it isn't ours to control.

11 Fugazi, 'Steady Diet', from the album *Steady Diet of Nothing*, Discord, 1991.

12 Cage (quoted by Lange, 1993) argued that "no silence exists that is not pregnant with sound" and thus "their equality becomes a metaphor for the awareness of life", but life itself is only a special condition of death (Bataille, 1988).

'I think I was lucky – I only had him around when I was young you had to grow up with him.'

'Yes,' she replies and there are tears welling up in her eyes, 'he used to beat up my brother when he was angry. That's why he won't go and see Frank in hospital. He got away from him as soon as he could. But it wasn't just the physical violence.'

She starts crying, 'He used to molest me, put his hand up my skirt, touch me, tell me I was special, tell me I was his favourite. He used to say it was our secret, that we shouldn't tell anyone else, that we should keep quiet about it. He only stopped when I was 14, when I hit him and told mum. He threatened to do the same to my eldest girl, the bastard was smiling. That's why my husband attacked him, that's why the children never visit him.'¹³

I feel physically sick and I'm scared. I have a sister two years older than me. My dad used to tell her that she was his favourite. Christ, but I don't even want to think about this. Four years on I don't know how to ask her, I don't even know how to begin asking. So there is silence between me and my sister because I'm too scared to ask. I can't even face her.

My father demanded silence from us as children. Four children – we each have more than 30 years of secrets and lies, broken lives, self loathing, nightmares and a refusal to forgive him even whilst he wasted away from emphysema, even whilst he died (O'Shea, 2002).¹⁴ Even now – nearly four years after his death so much noise remains. I look at my daughter and I am both *glad* that he's dead and disgusted that I feel this way – but at least it keeps her safe from harm¹⁵ and perhaps it's too late for the rest of us. I thought that his death would bring an end to it; that he would pass in to the night; 'remain silent as the grave' and be at so vast a distance in death from my life so as to be unable to touch me. It just isn't so.

13 Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, 'Do you love me? (Part 2)', from the album *Let Love In*, Mute, 1994. In this song Cave sings about child abuse from the perspective of both child and abuser and how the latter also turns it in to 'if you love me then we'll keep it our little secret.' Yet again an abusive demand for silence. Do all abusers tell the victim to keep it as their 'special secret'? I really don't know but I believe what my stepsister said. For a different perspective see Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (this issue).

14 I am the sum total of my existence | [...] | Hello dad, remember me? | I'm the man you thought I'd never be, | I'm the boy that you reduced to tears, | Dad I've been alone for 27 years. | [...] | I believe in the sense of silent sound | I have always been too loud | Won't you help me drown it out... (I Giant Leap, 'My Culture', from the album *I Giant Leap*, Palm Pictures, 2001).

15 Stand in front of you | Take the force of the blow | Protection (Massive Attack, 'Protection', from the album *Protection*, Circa Records, 1994). Isn't his supposed to be the parent's role – to protect their child from harm rather than be the cause of it? I'm glad my father's dead because it keeps her safe from him.

Scene Five

He died from emphysema, his breathing so poor that he could hardly speak to me when I saw him last. Few words passed between us. Two years later a hospital consultant is speaking at me, he has the results of my recent lung tests.

'The blood tests show that you have alpha 1 antitrypsin deficiency or genetically inherited emphysema. I see your father died from emphysema, he was obviously a carrier. You should have your daughter checked when she's older to see if she has it.

What does it mean to you? Do you smoke? No? Good, don't and avoid those who do. Also avoid dusty and damp environments anyone who has chest, lung or nasal infections. Avoid stressful situations and consider living in a warm dry environment.

Is it treatable? Well we may control its progress, slow it down with steroids, maybe a lung transplant in a few years but we can't cure you or arrest it completely. Look on the bright side you have more idea of what is most likely to be the cause of your death than most of us. However with A1ATD you are also prone to heart failure and cirrhosis of the liver. How long have you got? Well your best case scenario indicates that you won't draw your pension and the worst case ...¹⁶ Every time however that you get a cold, flu, any lung infection, that sort of thing, you are likely to accelerate the progress and increase your chances of dying earlier.'

In the two years that have passed I've been through periods of denial, anger, depression, at present I've sort of reconciled myself to the inevitability of death. With a three-year old daughter in the house whatever is going around is likely to reach here and so I'm now very familiar with all sorts of chest infections. I now dread the start of autumn in the UK.

In this shadow life whilst waiting for my death, there remains too much noise; there are just too many fucked up things that I can't change but I try to deal with some of them. This paper is one way, I'm thinking out loud, putting my thoughts down on paper, addressing myself. So perhaps I am a narcissist, just not a particularly reflexive one.

I did what may be my last conference paper this year, I just haven't got enough breath left for them, I'm instead going to concentrate on writing up, on finishing the stories I've left incomplete. I find that I can leave behind all this noise, all the chatter of my failed life by retreating in to what I've long enjoyed – composing, recording music and being noisy. I've yet to finish a recording though – much to my partner's continued bemusement – I'm enjoying playing my instruments, my music, and just playing around, too much to want to finish. Here playing, to me, is more important than a final product, perfection, or theory.

(A primal scene?) You live later, close to a heart that beats no more, suppose this: the child – is he seven years old or eight perhaps? – standing by the window, drawing the curtain and, through the pane looking. What he sees: the garden, the wintry trees, the wall of a house. Though he sees: no doubt in a child's way, his play space, he grows weary and slowly looks up toward the ordinary

16 He did tell me but I'm not about to repeat it. Perhaps silence can be golden?

sky, with clouds, grey light – pallid daylight without depth. What happens then: the sky, the *same* sky, suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had broken) such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein – so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature) is the feeling of happiness that straightaway submerges the child, the ravaging joy to which he can bear witness only by tears, an endless flood of tears. He is thought to suffer a childish sorrow; attempts are made to console him. He says nothing. He will live henceforth in the secret. He will weep no more. (Blanchot, 1986: 72)

I don't think I can be silent until I die. Even now whilst I'm running out of air, finding it difficult to breath I'm still much to noisy. In short I can't just shut the fuck up – that's asking too much – but one secret remains unspoken, pulls me apart and distances me from my sister. Perhaps that's why I love music so much – in all the sound and noise I can temporarily forget the silence.

Epilogue¹⁷

October 2003 and my daughter is playing around in my recording studio whilst I'm working on – ok playing about with – a music project. She wants me to turn a controller keyboard on so she can make some noise with a 'synth'. I'm too distracted and evidently too slow to do this as quickly as she'd like so she tries to do it herself. Somewhere in the house the fuses blow and power stops. Everything goes quiet. I look at my daughter.

'Sorry daddy.' There's a pause, then, 'Daddy can I play the guitar please? Can I have a blue guitar like yours for Christmas? Can I? Can Lucy come and play?'

Noise again and then a few moments later the electricity is back on. The computer hums back in to life, there is audible hiss from most of the 'amps', 'synths' and monitors (but the 'sloblow' fuse has blown on one valve amp), and the mixing desk visual meters show signal gain on all the right channels. Now where was I?

references

- Anonymous (1998) Un-credited sleeve notes from *The Best of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds*, Mute.
Bataille, G. (1988) *Inner Experience*, trans. L.A. Boldt. New York: State University of New York Press.
Blanchot, M. (1986) *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. A. Smock. London: University of Nebraska Press.
Bohn, C. (1983) 'The Sound and the Fury', *New Musical Express*, 26 March 1983.
Cage, J. (1993) *Winter Music*. HAT HUT Records.

17 Silence dominates my early childhood memories. From being told to shut up, through being punished by my father for having the 'wrong' accent, to having no TV, stereo or musical instruments at home from the age of 7 until I was 14. Now I love music, both playing it and listening. There are radios in every room in my home, and HiFis, CDs, MiniDiscs and records in most. There are guitars, keyboards, synthesizers lying around my 'office'. Perhaps my love of music and sound is yet another refusal of silence?

- Cave, N. (1999) Sleeve notes to Nick Cave's album *The secret life of the love song/The flesh made word: Two Lectures*, King Mob.
- Critchley, S. (1997) *Very little ... almost nothing: Death, philosophy, literature*. London: Routledge.
- Johnston, I. (1995) *Bad Seed: The Biography of Nick Cave*. London: Abacus.
- Lange, A. (1993) Sleeve notes to John Cage's *Winter Music*. HAT HUT Records.
- O'Shea, A. (2002) 'Writing with(out) God', *ephemera: critical dialogues on organization*, 2(2): 119-130 [www.ephemeraweb.org].

the author

Tony is a lecturer in Organization Studies at Sunderland Business School. Apart from spending time with his family what he really enjoys is composing and recording music in his home studio – or the bottomless money pit as his partner refers to it – he maintains that if he ever has a hit record it will all have been worth it. Now if only he'd finish a recording...

Address: Sunderland Business School, University of Sunderland, St Peter's Way, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear, SR6 0DD.

E-mail: tony.oshea@sunderland.ac.uk