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The Silence of the World

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Derrida 2020 : frontières, bords, limites / Borders, Edges, Limits

> "What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking."
> (John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing*, 1959)

The manner in which I am beginning is not that which I had envisioned, though it will seem apposite upon reflection. At the time of writing, in the wake of the police-murder of George Floyd, we are in the midst of a political situation in which the ongoing imperilment of the lives and rights of black people is once-more contested in full view of an attentive world. That yet-another such killing demands the intervention of widespread protest to hold the justice system to account testifies to state endorsement of this excessive apparatus, and demonstrates the latter's concomitant reinvention as a machination of totalising power. The violence that silence inflicts upon the persecuted occupies a central position in this discourse. The particular orientation of this essay might therefore seem at once timely yet also at odds with the spirit of the moment, as the violent potential of silence also directs this text; however, where the aforementioned case is concerned with complicity in an egregious excess of state over citizen, my treatment considers silence as a significant absence which—through being unpresented—indicates the non-totality of world or state. There is therefore another violence of silence, one which is in fact a necessary figure for political and artistic invention as it affirms the threat of rupture which no order can foreclose.

Silence

Silence has, in some sense, been rich with content since the composer John Cage's notable preoccupation therewith. Famously, his interest was inflamed by the experience of hearing the operation of his own body in an anechoic chamber. He writes:

> There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot [...]. I entered [an anechoic chamber] at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. (9)

The apparent impossibility of silence was then artistically formalised in the 'silent' piece *4'33",* which presented the decoupling of musical content from both its determinacy—conformity to a prescribed and structured set of materials — and intentionality — enactment by a suitably-orientated subject. The score directs the performer to sit tacet, yet those listening do not encounter silence. Rather, they become attentive to whatever sounds occur in the vicinity at the time, though these may have passed unnoticed otherwise. What is presented as silence is contaminated by sound, suggesting that one can understand the former only in correlation with the latter, rather than as its proper opposite. Meanwhile, the vulgar sounding-world displaces and interrupts that of structured composition, demonstrating the untenability of their opposition. What was thought external to the work, then, was in fact that upon which it immanently depended. Now, this all seems straightforward enough in relation to Cage's writing, and of course it also conforms quite readily to the sense of familiar deconstructive readings: *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. Indeed, that silence can be understood to frame sonorous musical content has seen it coupled elsewhere with parergonality. Richard Littlefield's "The Silence of the Frames", for example, evaluates the framing silences around musical works as well as their registral limits (the highest and lowest notes used, as well as the capacity of human hearing) on this basis, while G.

Douglas Barrett proposes that *4'33"* "may be considered the anti-autonomous artwork *par excellence*" on account of its characteristically permeable border (459)). However, these trajectories are not my present concern. Rather, where Cage thought silence principally as the unattainable absence of sound, I'll progress here towards an understanding of silence as a suture of the unpresented to presentation. Correspondingly, I will treat points of the philosophies of Jean-Luc Nancy (world and sense), Jacques Derrida (counterfeiting), and Alain Badiou (the void) in turn, elaborating a discourse on-and-of counterfeit sense before proposing an indicative co-extension of silence with the void.

Sense/World

We turn first, then, to the question of world. Let's note, preliminarily, that Heidegger's use of world transforms across his writing, and while it variously connotes the conceptual history of world, *kosmos, mundus*; beings and humanity's relation to them; the world as mundane environment (and so on), it's ultimately its signification of human civilisation as a regime of sense-making (opposed to earth or nature) and humanity's power to form it which is our concern here. In "The Origin of the Work of Art", Heidegger writes:

> [W]hat is this item, a world? […] On the path we must here follow, the nature of world can only be indicated. Even this indication is confined to warding off that which might initially distort our view into the essence of things.
>
> World is not a mere collection of the things – countable and uncountable, known and unknown – that are present at hand. Neither is world a merely imaginary framework added by our representation to the sum of things that are present. *World worlds,* and is more fully in being than all those tangible and perceptible things in the midst of which we take ourselves to be at home […]. By the opening of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their distance and proximity, their breadth and their limits. In worlding there gathers that spaciousness from out of which the protective grace of the gods is gifted or is refused. Even the doom of the absence of the god is a way in which world worlds. (22-3)

A world, then, does not merely collect its parts into an encyclopaedia, nor does it supplement them after the fact as a retroactive structure of representation. Rather, Heidegger's world is what structures and permits the relation of parts to one another such that they come to exist as they are, to meaningfully be and to be meaningful. Indeed, he continues: "World is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. World is that always-nonobjectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being" (23). So, a world is not a determinate object to be encountered but an enveloping environment of being, a total frame of signification in which we as living human beings make sense; to make sense is to be in a world. When Nancy suggests then that "there is no longer any sense of the world", he refers to the disruption of the world as vouchsafe for determinate meaning (*Sense* 4). This disruption is radical insomuch as this crisis is not only insurmountable in fact incomprehensible:

> We know […] that it is *the end of the world,* and there is nothing illusory […] about this knowledge. Those who strive to denounce the supposed illusion of the thought of an "end" are correct, as opposed to those who present the "end" as a cataclysm or as the apocalypse of an annihilation. Such thought is still entirely caught up in the regime of a signifying sense […]. But the same adversaries of the thought of the [cataclysmic] "end" are incorrect in that they do not see that the words with which one designates that which is coming to an end (history, philosophy, politics, art, world…) are […] entirely determined within a regime of *sense* that is coming full circle and completing itself before our (thereby blinded) eyes. (Nancy, *Sense* 4-5)

Thought of the end of the world as apocalyptic remains trapped within the system of signification and is thus incoherent, as the end is itself signified as apocalypse. Renouncing this signifier of the end is insufficient, however, for so long as the signification of and within the world is preserved intact the regime of signification remains secure. Nancy suggests therefore that "this cannot mean that we are confronted merely with the end of a certain 'conception' of the world […]. It means, rather that there is no longer any assignable signification of 'world,' or that the 'world' is subtracting itself, bit by bit, from the entire regime of signification available to us" (*Sense* 4-5). Crucially,

no transcendence beyond the limits of the world may grant sense to it. Nothing precedes world to confer meaning (*i.e.* a metaphysical god), nor can there be any promise of future reconciliation. Each would confer sense beyond the world and thus, as sense is precisely signification within the world, immediately lapse into world once more. Indeed, Nancy notes that "if one understands by *world* a 'totality of signifyingness or significance,' no doubt there is no philosophy that has thought a beyond of the world. The appearance of such a thought and of the contradiction it entails comes from the Christian sense of *world* as that which precisely lacks all sense or has its sense beyond itself" (*Sense* 54).

While sense and world, then, structure one another, the absence of "a proper and present signified, the signifier of the proper and present as such[,]" precludes the strict coherence of either; of legitimate sense, or of consistent world (Nancy, *Sense* 3). Sense is itself subject to this un-grounding of sense; it has "no unity of sense, no original matrix of sense, not even a univocal etymological derivation" (Nancy, *Sense* 76). Sense, then, refers variously to meaning, approximation, sensuous experience, our bodily senses, and so on. Significantly though, after the eradication of sense it also refers to sense as remainder, or to a sense after sense. Where for Heidegger inanimate matter is without world, for Nancy bodies (animate and inanimate) form this matrix of sense. He writes that

> all bodies, each outside the others, make up the inorganic body of sense. The stone does not "have" any sense. But sense touches the stone: it even collides with it, and this is what we are doing here.
> In a sense — but what sense — sense *is* touching. The being-*here,* side by side, of all these beings-*there* (beings-thrown, beings-sent, beings-abandoned to the there). (*Sense* 63)

Touching, then, describes the contingent relations of contingent objects as what gives or makes sense. In the wake of the abandonment or failure of sense, sense remains in the guise of the trace of material reality taken up in the movement of *différance*. It is here that another sense of world emerges, "in the very opening of the abandonment of sense, as the opening of the world" (Nancy, *Sense* 3).

Now, Nancy frequently emphasises bodily sense in articulating this deconstructive materialism. In *Listening,* for example, he argues that, as and for sense, music must resound, act upon the listener as an incursion upon the body but, more significantly, upon itself in combination, in anticipation, in retention. This temporal structure is music's distinguishing character, which philosophy might imitate: "Whereas painting, dance, or cinema always retain in a certain present—even if it is fleeting — the movement and opening that form their soul (their sense, their truth), music, by contrast, never stops exposing the present to the imminence of a deferred presence, one that is more 'to come' [*á venir*] than any 'future' [*avenir*]" (*Listening* 66). Music remains infinitely open to the coming of alterity at cost of its own true sense as sovereign; it can only be given to sense through the insufficiency of sense. Now, musical silence in the sense I have first alluded to conforms to this temporal structure, of course, but would silence thought in a more radical sense? As non-sound silence would act upon no body; it would not give itself to be sensed; it would transmit nothing; it would protain, retain, and resound with nothing; it would have no sense: for this would be precisely that which lacks sense. Silence must therefore be non-sonic yet bound to the sense of sound; void of content, yet it must persist temporally in spite of its absence, as trace of nothing. If, then, silence is not to be relinquished as unspeakable, it must meaningfully present itself, but present itself as nothing.

Counterfeit Sense

The sense of the above will become clear in correspondence with Derrida's reading of Baudelaire's short story, *Counterfeit Money*, the narrative of which runs so: after leaving a tobacconist's, the narrator and his friend encounter a beggar. Both give money, though the friend's offering is considerably larger. This prompts the narrator to voice his admiration of his friend — "[y]ou are right; next to the pleasure of feeling surprise, there is non greater than to cause a surprise" (reproduced in Derrida 32). The friend then reveals that the coin he gave was counterfeit. The narrator ponders whether good fortune or bad might befall the beggar upon giving the counterfeit coin, before the friend surprises the narrator by repeating his own statement back to him — "[y]es, you are right; there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he hopes for" (reproduced in Derrida 32). The titular reference of *Counterfeit Money* might

seem immediately apparent, yet Derrida's account demonstrates that it in fact has many possible references.

- *Counterfeit Money* refers to the counterfeit coin — to counterfeit money as an object; counterfeit money, though, is legitimately an object, for what would a false object be?

- In giving itself as real money although it is not titrated or vouchsafed, counterfeit money is a counterfeit sign. In signifying successfully, though, it would surely in fact be legitimate. What, indeed, would a false sign be?

Counterfeit Money refers to the fictionality of

- the story which Baudelaire tells, or

- which the (supposedly) fictional narrator tells, or

- to the (supposedly) fictional narrator.

The borders of what is included in the title and in the story are at issue:

- The title *Counterfeit Money* might itself be the story, which the narrative that follows immediately counterfeits.

- *'Counterfeit Money'* might be the narrator's announcement of a story of counterfeit money which the story presented to the reader may then counterfeit.

- *Counterfeit Money* refers to the conceit of literature, which presents fiction as if it were non-fictional.

- In pronouncing this, or even in presenting as non-fictional presentation of fiction something non-fictional which legitimately happened, *Counterfeit Money* is

counterfeit literature, for it gives itself as literature while violating its terms.

The legitimacy of Baudelaire himself is similarly in question.

- Baudelaire as the writer of the work might be fictional and thus a counterfeit author.
- Or, his signature on the work might be counterfeit.
- The Baudelaire who signs the work, if indeed he does, will in any case not be identical with the Baudelaire of any other encounter, each of which might thus stand as a counterfeit of the other.

Baudelaire's dedication of *Paris Spleen*, the collection in which *Counterfeit Money* appears, to Arsène Houssaye might be the counterfeit:

- in presenting as outside of the work when it is internal to it;
- or in presenting as internal to it when it is not.
- In feigning reference or producing ambiguity and so not meaning clearly what it says, the meaning of the dedication is not as it presents itself to be, and so is counterfeit.
- It announces, for example, that it is given to Houssaye, yet he acts as a prosthesis for (and so counterfeit of) all others who it is given to, or for giving in general.
- We cannot be assured that both Baudelaire and Houssaye are not the characters of a work of fiction — neither is vouchsafed or titrated — though they are presented as non-fictional.

- The narrative presented as *Counterfeit Money* might then counterfeit the above, as the two give the reader more than we expect.

Any number of aspects of the narrative (or of what is presented as if it were the narrative), meanwhile, might be counterfeit:

- That the two friends proceed from the tobacconist's, even, is indicative, as tobacco is imbibed after its annihilation; its consumption involves a symbolic displacement in which cinder counterfeits object.

- The beggar is a counterfeit character, as he is not (merely) what he seems; he represents both the good fortune that something occurs and that we therefore have a story to recount, and

- the bad fortune that the friends are metaphorically placed on trial or in competition with one another as it is demanded that they give generously.

- The friend might lie about the counterfeit coin; the gesture of giving the counterfeit is counterfeit,

- as is the purported event of story.

- The friend's admission may be counterfeit as a gesture to gift victory and the sense of generosity to his friend.

- Deriving the satisfaction of giving the greater donation (whether as coin or handing over victory) is, however, a calculated expenditure, and so a counterfeit gift.

- The friend's admission of giving a counterfeit coin is counterfeit for it is of unsecured value; he might as readily be confessing his guilt as relishing having derived the maximum gain at minimal cost.

- Similarly, he may have given the beggar something for which he needed to feel no gratitude, but he equally may have forced the beggar into his debt at no cost to himself.

- Meanwhile, what appears to be charity is counterfeit, for the tolerance of beggars only in certain areas institutionalises them there; to pass through is to be called upon for a toll of alms — ultimately, it is taxation.

- The gift itself, properly speaking, should be an evental rupture of economy; it must be beyond any horizon of expectation, it can demand or take nothing in return, provoke no countergift, take no satisfaction for the giver, bear no possibility of burden, it cannot be a calculated expenditure of excess and so must be beyond reason. It must be subtracted from economy and iterability, yet these contaminating conditions would also be essential to the impossible-possibility of giving, which is thus itself counterfeit. “[O]nly an hypothesis of counterfeit money would make the gift possible. […] [Counterfeit money is] the chance for the gift itself. The chance for the event” (Derrida 157-8).

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Beyond the above, let’s not forget that Derrida’s own analysis throughout is also counterfeit (as would this reproduction be), as his meaning is feigned, presents something which it doesn’t say, isn’t ultimately vouchsafed or secured by anything — the performative dimension of the text depends upon this. Given this abyssal potential of meaning, the lack of any ultimate titration to determine value, the title *Counterfeit Money* is itself counterfeit.

> The title says, in effect: “since I say so many things at once, since I appear to title this even as I title that at the same time, since I feign reference and since, insofar as it is fictive, my reference is not an authentic, legitimate reference, well then I, as title […] am counterfeit money.” (Derrida 86-7)

What Derrida indicates here, then, is that a counterfeit worthy of the name — not merely a recognisable imitation, but something which presents itself convincingly as something other — is indistinguishable from the thing which it counterfeits. The counterfeit comes to act in place of the counterfeited, and in so doing it erases the border between counterfeit/counterfeited. The identity of the counterfeited was never fixed, coherent, or sovereign, but depended in fact on an economy of counterfeiting (read also: of annihilated sense) to grant it value. This relation is in fact necessary for economy in general, whose exchange relation substitutes objects which are incommensurate with one another while proffering their calculable value, not least via the familiar prosthesis of money. “No one ever gives true money, that is, money whose effects one assumes to be calculable,” but “as long as money passes for (real) money, it is simply not different from the money that, perhaps, it counterfeits” (Derrida 157, 153).

Let’s return, then, to silence. How does silence depend upon this economy of counterfeiting? Recall that I’ve suggested that silence must be void of content, yet it must nonetheless be presented — for silence to submit to sense, it depends upon a contaminating suture of the unpresented to presentation. Silence is at once this intelligible something which may be apprehended, but also the empty presentation of nothing as a mark of anteriority to sense. It’s according to an economy of counterfeiting in which something is given as, taken as, and serves as something other — and so a counterfeit sense, a retroaction of sense and non-sense onto sense, and so the sense of counterfeiting — such that a border of identity between counterfeit/counterfeited is meaningfully annulled, that we might understand this nothing as indicated by and retroacted onto intelligible silence, but also that silence-as-nothing can be given to sense. Silence can be thought on the basis of this contaminating suture as an intelligible mark of the unintelligible, as an indication of the unpresented. This does not associate a specific content to, sense for, or sense of, this ‘other’ silence, but proposes it as an immanent indication of the untotalisability of the world; of its capacity to be transcended and to become other than it is. On this basis, I propose that it might be understood as meaningfully analogous to the void as the always-unpresented phantom which sutures a world to being in Badiou’s philosophy, though without the specifically ontological connotations which the latter maintains.

The Silence of the World/The Sense of the Void

A full treatment of Badiou's philosophical system would be too expansive for the purpose of elaborating and clarifying my proposition here; for now, we'll content ourselves with attending to those points of Badiou's philosophy which are most pertinent, namely the ontological and evental implications of the void.

Badiou decisively rejects the Parmenidean ontological unity of Being, stating that "the one *is not*" (*Being* 1). Following Georg Cantor's theory of transfinite numbers, then, infinity is de-totalised from the One-all, registering instead the existence of an endless sequence of infinities of escalating cardinality. Having rejected the one, the regime of presentation is multiplicity, which an operation — counting-as-one — presents as putative unities. Even still, this minimal operation of structuration must always be in effect so that being is not relinquished to some originary One. Badiou describes his ontology, therefore, as the discourse of the "presentation of presentation", of the structuration of pure multiplicity into consistent (*i.e.* countable) multiples (*Being* 27). It is only via retroaction that inconsistent (*i.e.* uncountable; unstructured) multiplicity is indicated as what is prior to the count-as-one, as pure presentation. It must be maintained, though, that "there is no structure of being" (*Being* 26), that being *qua* being is, strictly speaking, neither one nor multiple because these are each already under the structuring law of the count; it is necessary, therefore, that "the 'first' presented multiplicity without concept has to be a multiple of nothing, because if it were a multiple of something, that something would then be in the position of the one. And it is necessary, thereafter, that the axiomatic rule solely authorize compositions on the basis of this multiple-of-nothing" (Badiou, *Being* 57-8). This ontology, then, is a theory of the void, of the composition of consistent multiples on the basis of this nothing.

Let's be clear that I propose no such ontological function of silence; the void as this grounding-nothing is idiosyncratic to Badiou's ontology. The affiliation I have in mind is rather in the register of the void's belonging to situations or worlds (understanding these simply as contexts will suffice here) as "phantom remainder — of the multiple not originally being in the form of the one" (Badiou, *Being* 53). It is the "non-one of any count-as-one" which is ultimately "unpresented" in every situation as its suture to being

(Badiou, *Being* 55). As such, the void acts as an indication of the contingency of the composition of any given world, a suture which holds its possibility of transcendence and which cannot be severed. In order to affirm the consistency (and therefore unity; calculability; totalisability) of the situation while excluding the inconsistency of the void (which will not submit to this unity), the count-as-one is doubled in a metastructure ('the state of the situation', emphasising its parallel to the political state) which effectively counts the count of a given situation or world: "the resource of the state alone permits the outright affirmation that, in situations, the one is" (Badiou, *Being* 98). Although, outside ontology proper, unity prevails within worlds, then, the suture of world to being via the void is the indication of the ontological primacy of multiplicity over the One and thus the untotalisability of any given world such that its potential for (evental) transcendence persistently haunts it, a possibility which the state cannot proscribe. Events are points of radical rupture, excesses of undecidable relation to the worlds which they meaningfully alter, be it politically, artistically, scientifically, etc. For now, it should suffice to note that the conditions for an event necessitate an errantly self-belonging 'site' registering evanescently maximally within a world and "invoking 'by force' [...] an entirely new transcendental evaluation", a re-ordering of the world (Badiou, *Logics* 366). The maximal consequence of the event brings forth an inexistent — something said to be at the edge of the void — into existence. Now, silence is not to be coupled here with the event; the exceptionality and profound consequences of events prohibit such an equation. Silence may nonetheless be understood in meaningful rapport with the void as immanent mark of anteriority; as a world's suture to senseless anteriority and so its capacity to be transgressed and transcended, even radically. Badiou suggests that "because it carries out a transitory cancellation of the gap between being and being-there, a site is the instantaneous revelation of the void that haunts multiplicities" (*Logics* 369). Silence's suture — of sensible to senseless, presentation to the unpresented — might be another such point of confrontation with the annulment of border, a haunting of — threat to — violence upon — consistent and totalising order; an incalculable (non-)mark of in-totality which therefore cannot be effaced.

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(John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing,* 1959)

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