

Disjunctioning Silence

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...The common denominator is zero, where the heart beats
(one never means to circulate his blood).

Show me something new; I'll begin all over again.

Of course “it is another school” — this moving out from zero.

*Flowers! But, dear lady, it is too soon!*²

Is John Cage conversing with Eric Satie over Zoom? Depending on the disjunction between the two you might think so. Bad joke?

The disjunction is impossible to miss though. As parties connecting through online platforms, we the professors are not teaching anything, and I highly doubt students are learning something; because we — as students and professors — are *not sharing silence*, and since we do not have a common silence to share, nothing resembling education is taking place. It is almost a non-relationship a la Lacan: you think you are giving your students a frog; wait until you discover that they took it for a beer!³ But then again, maybe education has always been a non-relationship, and as such it has never delivered an isomorphism between the allegedly taught matter and the presumably learned topic, except only in the fantasies of idealist professors and eager administrators.⁴ And maybe the only way they belonged to what we called education was because there was a ground where the mutual fantasies were able to breed: the shared silence. Silence that belonged to none of the parties present in the classroom, a de-subjectivized silence; silence that acted as the mediator, as the topology that distributed the positions: silence that was in-between; silence that was the *milieu* (Deleuze). This is what online teaching, in its perverted way, is showing us: that being physically present in a classroom was ever so precious because we had silence as the atmosphere we all partook and immersed in. Try performing John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing* as a collective, in a classroom, with whomever is there at that moment; and you'll understand what I am talking about.

The problem with online platforms is not that they do not provide shared spaces. They do, and virtuality does not make them less of a space. But one way or the other, silence is not where we used to find it. Somehow it is dislocated. We are used to 4'33s; but in online platforms we are in anechoic chambers. Each of us are connecting through our individualized silences in our own ambient surroundings. I am connected through intermittent construction noise; one of my students always finds the class through the sizzling sounds of her kitchen; another student's environment is the noises of the cafe she sits at during class hours; another student's voice echoes with the chirping of birds in her back porch, and so on. Is that why the “Zoom silence” (a la

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² John Cage, “Eric Satie”, in *Silence — Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973): 80.

³ This is a rip-off from a joke Žižek made somewhere I cannot remember. (*The Plague of Fantasies*. 2nd Ed. London: Verso, 2008, 94-95 – Ed.)

⁴ I don't think it would be too much of a stretch to entertain the possibility that Freud somewhat had an intuition about this when he drew a parallel between impossibility of analysis (or healing/cure) and teaching. Because neither the analyst nor the teacher have complete effect on their analysands and students, neither analysis nor teaching has ever been capable of reaching a definitive end.

Burnham) is bothering us; because it is essentially a dislocated silence? A silence that is the real, not because it is an object, but because it is essentially a hole,⁵ a dislocated emptiness?

On one level what Zoom or any other online teaching platform is giving us is a grid that effectively partitions silence as if it is of a quantifiable nature; divisible and numerical, pretending that it is the same silence with no difference in kind. It does so by distributing silence to each and every one of us, and in so doing, individualizes us, returns the silence back on ourselves — again, as if silence can be ours alone — silence as property, silence as a possession. As such, it is performing what grid is as a ruling technology is supposed to:⁶ through Foucault's neoliberal governmentality, it is gently pushing us to build up our own *milieu* in which we are expected to manage teaching-learning through a recognition that we are alone in our silences, and enjoy it while we can.

The question is whether or not this 'us' presents us with a dystopian present that will bleed into an exaggerated futuristic Weberian iron cage? I think not. What it presents is probably a new condition where we need to read disjunction as a matter of limit, a horizon (Tschumi).⁷ We don't know how long it will last; but just in case it lasts long, it might not be a bad idea to experiment with finding new weapons.

⁵ Jacques Alain Miller, "Being as Desire," <https://www.lacan.com/symptom/being-is-desire-jacques-alain-miller/>

⁶ Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques — Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015)

⁷ Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996).