‘Strategies of Silence’ abstracts

- Paul Stronge: *Relative Silence: Othering Talk and Time*

Taking its cue from the ‘impossibility’ hinted at in the Call for Papers, my paper approaches silence from an unabashedly relativist perspective. That is, I contend silence to be primarily intelligible (at least ‘sociologically’) neither as an objective property of the world nor as subjective experience, but rather as a ‘function of the particular’—that is, the event. Approached thus, silence’s keynote characteristics are that it is constituted temporally as much as aurally and is irreducibly contrastive. The notion of ‘falling silent’ thus always begs two further questions—Fallen from where (/what)? How long ago? While our responses to such questions are insusceptible to calibration against any absolute standard, it is through them that we (must!) dynamically create and sustain our notions of silence and its contraries. Silence is eventfully self-constitutive.

This double register of variance and duration takes on considerable pragmatic heft when it comes to evaluating the possible adoption of particular ‘strategies of silence’ as purposive regimens of control, resistance or transformation. The paper exploratively opens up a number of ‘fronts’ where silence/silencing puts itself at stake thusly as both difference and time within contemporary sociality. I suggest that attendance to ‘tonality’ might offer a productive route to rethinking the efficacy of such strategic silences. Exemplary material mobilised relates to headphone use in an open plan office, the deployment of notions of ‘unspeakability’ within international polity discourse, and the radical disappearance—or rather perhaps ‘disaudience’—of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

- John Welsh: *The Political Power of Closed Language*

The aim of this article is to analyse critically certain everyday language practices in contemporary political discourses. The argument is made that the proliferation of something called ‘closed language’ can be identified in our political discourses, which has certain power-discursive effects throughout the language community deleterious to emancipatory politics and individual thought-action. This ‘closed language’ or ‘functional language’ and its practices will be differentiated from the modes of rhetoric and propaganda, as a political characteristic of language use, by an analysis of various aspects of phraseology, semantics, and syntactic structure. This analysis will then form the basis of an exploration of the contemporary practice of closed language in our time. Historical exempla will be used to illuminate the modern rationality within such practices operate and to hint at their continuous and potential resultant effects in modern politics and society. By articulating a version of negative dialectics, (Adorno and Marcuse + a bit of Foucault) the article supplies an appropriate philosophical idiom through which a political counter-praxis to the phenomenon can be offered. The end of the paper is to work toward the promotion of a ‘critical social consciousness’ of the language we use.
Gabriella Calchi-Novati: Non Language: A “Theoretical Glitch” within Contemporary Biopolitics

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben claims that what lies at the core of testimony is an essential lacuna, the sound of which ‘is the non-language that one speaks when one is alone, the non-language to which language answers’. I suggest that the employment of this non-language could be considered as a subversive strategy of silence, namely one capable of provoking what I call a “theoretical glitch” within contemporary biopolitics. To prove my point I employ as metaphorical paradigm the work of Mexican artist Teresa Margolles presented at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, namely, the solo exhibition ¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar? (What else could we talk about?): a series of installations intended to bear testimony to the victims of drug-related crimes in Northern Mexico. In her work, which employs the material traces of the killings, from the victims’ blood to the water used in the morgue to wash their corpses, Margolles, by inducing the feeling of contamination, shows that biopolitics always-already produces disposable individuals. In doing so, Margolles performs a disturbance – a “theoretical glitch” – within the biopolitical paradigm. What we encounter in her installations is a strategy of silence, a non-language, which, not only ‘exposes a different path for biopolitics’, but also becomes a political form of resistance, capable of transforming ‘the repetitive into something unrepeatable’, so as to reveal ‘biopower’s final secret: a survival separated from every possibility of testimony.’

Paola Ghetti: The Passages of Breath – Body and Resonance in Jean-Luc Nancy

In this presentation I shall investigate the relation between the notions of “breath” and “body” in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. As though specific injunctions produced at the limit of the body and it’s outside, the “passages of breath” announce a resonant language, situated not so much as a privation of itself than as an aporetic relation from “self to self”. I shall address the study of Nancy on Lacoue-Labarthe about the “noise of the air in us” (“Un commencement”) as well as the theme of the “ear as a resonance box” (À l’écoute) in so far as these concepts converge in a thought of the sharing (partage), creating among them a space of resonance.

The work starts on Nancy’s study, À l’écoute, which revolves around silence understood as availability to resonance. There is no resonance without this initial availability or without a response (La pensée dérobée) to breath. In this way, silence goes through a modulation of thought towards a regime where body and language are oriented to an aporetic partnership between “inside” and “outside”.

Later, it will be necessary to engage with the space-time that presents itself through the “sensing” and the “representing”, between the musician and the musical (“Comment s’écoute la musique”) in the “back and forth” (Danielle Cohen-Levinas, “Le neveu de Nancy”) of the traversed body. I shall thus discuss the “modulation of thought” stemming from the contributions of Nancy about sound (À l’écoute), aiming to understand both the paradox of the sound writing of the body and the paradox of body as sound writing.
When a mother kills her child, the crime she commits constitutes a traumatic event that threatens the social fabric of a community in disbelief. Time and again news media engage in the production of narratives that attempt to explain such an unfathomable occurrence which challenges cultural assumptions of motherhood and maternal love. And yet, does the frequent appearance of maternal filicide in the media mean that the notion of a maternal potential for violence is allowed discursive articulation and access to the realm of cultural intelligibility?

In this paper I take 1970s Japan as a case study and focus on a historical moment characterised by a striking increase in the number of media representations of maternal child-killing. I investigate the rhetorical and linguistic specificities of these portrayals, and call attention to the strategies of silencing and erasure that effaced the possibility of thinking maternal violence at the very moment when they appeared to speak most loudly about it.

I consider two major categories under which maternal filicide was represented in Japanese media coverage: kogoroshi (child-killing) and boshi shinjū (mother-child double-suicide), and I argue that both categories foreclosed the possibility of conceiving maternal violence as a human, albeit tragic, potential. The former linguistically acknowledged violence qua killing, but was employed in contexts where murderous mothers were indicted as monstrous and expunged into a realm of abjection. The latter described the crime in terms that encountered greater cultural acceptance, but which simultaneously silenced maternal violence behind the poetic image of a double-suicide between lovers.

Maurice Blanchot says ‘Il faut parler – parler san pouvoir’ (you must speak – speak without the power to do so). In The Birth to Presence, Smock and Nancy argue that this represents a demand from the other asking you to listen to this call and enable her to speak without grasping who she is: a commitment to an address without knowing the content, a risk in the face of an enigmatic figure who continually frustrates you naming them. It represents a demand from the other that allows no identification, no communion.

This speaking without being able to speak is a demand that arguably re-treats and reacts against what is for many thinkers the failure of Heidegger’s work, Being and Time, that is to say the radically individuated authentic self and its conceptual complicity with what is ultimately Heidegger’s identitarian thought. This tension is most obviously found in the ontological phenomena of the call of conscience, which Heidegger says is the voice of the
friend that every Dasein carries with her. Following Jean-Luc Nancy, it is my contention that whilst the Heideggerian concept of authenticity holds the potential for radical and creative transformation, it is only by rethinking the importance of this silent voice, which is on the margins of the text, silent, for the most part forgotten, that we can begin to rethink authenticity as a relation.

Heidegger did not allow the other to speak, but that doesn’t mean that we cannot listen to the voice of the other and answer the demand to let her speak, to listen and resonate with and towards her, which is at the same time a resonance with our finitude, the ecstatic opening up of our being to existence. In this paper I will therefore draw out this question of silence through what Nancy calls the ‘subject of listening’ and argue that the silent other is a ‘resonant’ being who intrudes upon our existence and demands that we listen.

- Hyun Höchsmann: Silence in Daoist philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi

In the beginning is the dao beyond the word
The celebrated opening of the *Dao De Jing* of Laozi (ca. 604-531 BCE) announces the extent of the *dao*, the limitation of our effort in describing it and the unbridgeable gulf between words and what they aim at. Words describe objects and their properties by drawing boundaries around the objects. But if we have a process whose characteristics are infinite, like the *dao*, there are no finite sets of words which can fully capture its meaning. The *dao* cannot be circumscribed within the boundary of words and things. All that is written about it in the *Dao De Jing* and other texts are at best only approximations. The *dao*, as the totality of all things, is indescribably great. Zhuangzi (ca. 369-286 BCE) explains that the concept of the *dao* is a metaphor for the process of reality underlying all phenomena and thought beyond the limit of silence.

The *dao* is at the limit of the world of things. Speech and silence are not adequate to represent the idea of it. Neither speech nor silence can be the highest expression of our thinking about it (*Zhuangzi*, Book 25).

Language and reality
During the period of classical philosophy in China in the fourth century BCE the philosophers explored the precarious way in which language was connected to the world of physical reality and the world of ideas. The philosophers writing in the Confucian tradition were seriously concerned with the correct usage of names and insisted that the names be accurately applied to corresponding objects. The gulf between language and what it aims to express was felt sharply by Confucius, who stated, ‘I wish that I could do without speaking.’ The Daoists go further. If truth is what we seek, let us dispense with words altogether. Let us kick off the ladder of language lest we mistake the pointing finger for the moon. Once we kick off the ladder of knowledge, where do we land? The way continues when the words stop. Zhuangzi would take us further than the limits of language. But he is aware that even to express the limitations of language we depend on language as he exclaims, ‘I wish to meet a man who has forgotten the words so that I could have a word with him.’

Silence and action
In Daoist philosophy silence does not lead to quietism but to active engagement with all
forms of life. Laozi advocates action not discourse.
Use words sparingly, then all things will fall into place …
If you set about your work with the dao
You will be at one in dao with those who have dao,
At one in life with those who have life,
At one in poverty with those who are poor.
If you are at one with them in dao
Those who have dao will come to meet you gladly (Dao De Jing 23).
There are two aspects of silence in Zhuangzi. The first is regarding the origin and the nature of the dao itself. This is the silence of Laozi – we cannot say what the dao itself is or what was beyond the beginning of existence. There is also the silence as all activities reach their completion. At the completion of all actions what was potential becomes fully realised into actuality and all things manifest their ‘proper characteristics.’ Then we have ‘reached the limit beyond which words cannot penetrate’ and we can be so still that we might be able to ‘enter the cage without setting off the birds singing’.
We are then like the birds who sing with their beaks closed. Being like this, we reach a union with the universe. The closing and silencing is like the union of heaven and earth at the beginning. It is the same as the grand submission to the natural course (Zhuangzi, 12). In our silence at the completion of our actions we are aligned with ‘the original way of heaven.’