The Eleventh of the Eleventh of the Eleventh

The Theatre of Memorial Silence

Ross Brown

1. A Reverberant Scenography

> […] here is one of the great paradoxes, that no broadcast is more impressive than the silence following the last dashing strokes of Big Ben. Its impressiveness is intensified by the fact that the silence is not a dead silence, for Big Ben strikes the hour, and then the bickering of sparrows, the crisp rustle of falling leaves, the creasing of pigeon wings as they take flight, uneasy at the strange hush, contrast with the traffic din of London some minutes before. Naturally, vigilant control of the microphone is essential. Audible distress near to the microphone would create a picture out of perspective as regards the crowd's solemn impassivity and feelings. Our job is to reduce all local noises to the right proportions, so that the silence may be heard for what it really is, a solvent which destroys personality and gives us leave to be great and universal.[1]

So writes an unnamed BBC radio technician in the Radio Times, November 1935. He is describing the British broadcasting institution that is the annual outside broadcast of the two-minute silence from Whitehall, in London. The silence is the centre-piece of a service of remembrance commemorating the moment of the end of World War I at 11am on the 11th November 1918: the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.[2] The memorial one or two-minute silence[3] stages urban sound through a some-

1 Cf. anon. in Gregory 2001.

2 See The Royal Channel 2010.

3 Henceforth referred to as the *silence*, to indicate reference to the memorial event.

what different interaction of media and participatory audience to the other examples in this volume. This chapter takes this quotation as a starting point for considering this interaction as a ritual practiced in an intermedially immersive theatre.

Silences, since Princess Diana and 9/11, have become increasingly popular ways of simultaneously celebrating community and paying respect to the memory of the dead. One might argue that they are part of a humanist meta-narrative; emblems of hope – of a human capacity, after all is said and done, to be solemn, great and universal in times that might otherwise suggest humans to be decadent, violent and trivial. On the other hand, one might argue that they are rhetorical rallying devices, both affective, in that they are *stirring*, and effective, in that they harness and focus crowd behaviour away from unruliness. There has been a proliferation of *silences* as preludes to large sporting occasions. Broadcast commentators, rather than relate their comments to any specific theme of remembrance, tend routinely to comment on how the »impeccable« observation of a *silence* is testament to the »spirit of the game« or to a human bond that transcends partisanship. It is as if remembrance is a McGuffin[4], in screenwriting terms, and the real point has more to do with being, presence and community.

There is a feeling of power in being part of a noisy crowd, and an electricity – a potential power – in being part of a resolutely silent one. We use the term *silent*, not *still*, or *mute* and this choice of word presupposes this power to be in some way aural. Belgian dramatist Maeterlinck, a pioneer-modernist of the dramaturgy of sound, suggested crowd silence produces a *dread*, suggesting the *sublime* – a term more usually associated with the thunderously sonic.[5] Reporting on the first Armistice Day event, the Guardian describes a »silence that was almost a pain«.[6] What interests me here, is the way in which some of this affect, which one might associate with the subjectivity of *presence*, permeates the airwaves and survives mediatization. The Armistice Day/Remembrance Day[7] service in Whitehall is as much a mediatized, and acousmatically dislocated event as it is a *live* one. The first ceremony in 1919 was filmed and John Reith placed microphones on the scene in 1929.

4 »McGuffin, n. In a film (now also in a novel or other form of narrative fiction): a particular event, object, factor, etc., initially presented as being of great significance to the story, but often having little actual importance for the plot as it develops.« Oxford English Dictionary 2001.

5 »We can bear, when need must be, the silence of ourselves, that of isolation: but the silence of many – silence multiplied – and above all the silence of a crowd – these are supernatural burdens, whose inexplicable weight brings dread to the mightiest soul«. See Maeterlinck 1897, 7-8.

6 Schwartz 2011, 612.

7 Up until World War II, the service was held on Armistice Day (11th Nov), but after WWII on the nearest Sunday – Remembrance Sunday. The format of the ceremony remains essentially the same.

The known presence of outside-broadcast microphones at a public event can in itself add electricity and a sense of supernatural *reach*. Indeed, the Whitehall event is definitively intermedial. Like Big Ben heralding the New Year, it is an icon that provides the focal point for simultaneously observed *silences* around the country, thus uniting them in a single networked theatre. One can imagine the extended radio/TV audience as part of the event's crowd, and their networked silence as part of its silence. In aural terms, the space of the event is an intermedial hybrid, and *presence* becomes an intermedial subjectivity.

In the quotation above, the broadcast is described as having an intensive impressiveness, as though some of the overpowering effect of being part of the crowd silence permeates the airwaves. The *silence*, is »not a dead silence« and neither are radio broadcasts of it anything like the radio anathema of »*dead* air«.[8] The silence is clearly not that of malfunction or missed cue, but is planned and staged; ceremonially framed. The whole ceremony works towards the stroke of eleven. In the run up, the ear is prepared by an aural choreography of brass band music; the shouts, boots and rifle noises of military drill; the close-miked, almost liturgical, vocal cadence and rhythm adopted by outside-broadcast commentators on State occasions. Big Ben chimes the hour, then on the first strike of eleven a huge and distant artillery salvo sounds. The chimes in total take just over one minute, during which the crowd stands silent. Then the two minutes of silence themselves. Then, to mark the end, another artillery salvo followed by the *Last Post* on bugles. For three minutes in total the crowd has withheld movement and voice and tried to constrain coughs and sneezes. The centrepiece of the show is a performed cessation of human activity, but the silence it produces somehow consists of exhilaratingly *live* air. This is captured by live microphones situated in lively acoustic surroundings. In its aurality, this service for the dead, for all its solemnity, is a celebration of liveness, both in acoustic and broadcast terms. Liveness is in the sparrows; leaves; pigeon wings taking flight; the humanity of the unavoidable cough; the dropped object. It is also in incidents. Hillel Schwarz describes down-and-out veterans shouting »anyone want a medal« and Communists singing working class anthems during Great Depression *silences*.[9] In the 1969 BBC broadcast, protests may be heard.[10]

Ordinarily in ritual practices, the accidental has little value.[11] The *Radio Times*' philoso-

8 On television, of course, the moving pictures continue through the silence and the soundtrack, while still powerful, is not as intensively impressive as the radio broadcast.

9 Ibid.

10 These may be heard in the archival recording of the 1969 silence on Semper, 2001i.

11 E.g. Jackson 1968, 293: »noises of the natural world cannot, because of their unpredictability, be of much value in the ritual itself, which is not to say they are without significance; they may be ›commanded‹ to appear in the ritual«.

pher-technician, however, relates such noises to the *silence's* power to transform participants into a liminoid state where personality is dissolved and they become »great and universal« beings. He notes that noises »intensify« the silence, and that it is an important part of his work to depict them in relation to what he calls the »solemn impassivity« of the *silence*. In audio terms, we are told, there is a »right« proportion and the noises must be kept quiet, but in comparison to what? The sound of a crowd actively being solemn? A crowd enacting silence? How are such things represented in sound?

Sonic artist Jonty Semper's *Kenotaphion* project[12] helps answer these questions by abstracting memorial *silence* from the subjectivity of its time/space-specific context. Its second 2001 release, a double CD, comprises nothing more than a chronological compilation of archival recordings of the Whitehall silence, from 1929 to 2000, each cropped from the beginning of Big Ben's chimes to the end of the silence. Set out this way, as concrete art objects, one is able to listen to them analytically without being caught up in the liveness of the event and one hears that mediatized silence is *not* silent in two ways. As well as the background noise and occasional, faint accident in the acoustic scene represented in the recordings, there is also the noise inherent to the broadcast and archival media. This decreases over the time-period represented on the discs, whereas the background noise of London increases. Typically, in a signal-to-noise ratio, the *signal* is a foregrounded sonic event-object such as speech that stands out discernibly as a distinctive figure against the noise or interference of the medium. In a recording of silence the presupposed foregrounded signal is a programmatic *absence* of any foreground event or figure – an open channel without voice. On the face of it, all there is is noise: noise of the medium and somewhere amongst it, the little noises that, in this case, point to the unheard presence of the silent performance.

In the earlier recordings archived on phonographic disc, little random incidents such as birds or coughs or other indeterminate noises are only distinguishable from the crackle and hiss because they bear, faintly trailing behind them, the tell-tale reverberation of materially spatial events – specifically spatial events in a built environment of stone and glass. Some of the little pops and clicks reverberate and others do not, and the skilled psychoacoustic brain seizes on this differential. The dry clicks are assigned to the noise category, and the reverberant noises are used, like acoustic light, to paint an impressionistic mental image of a London scene. These reverberations are loaded with meta-data. They say that this is not just any sonic snapshot of London, but specifically a silenced scene in London. Their acoustic signature is clearly that of a built environment.

12 Cf. Semper 2001i and 2001ii.

Yet the fact that they are audible within the same earshot as the soundmark of Big Ben implies that this is not an everyday, central London soundscape, but one unusually stilled. This, the skilled, listening brain subconsciously deduces, is an area one would normally expect to be so loud in the daytime that one would not be able to hear sounds such as birds or coughs, reverberating discretely between stone and glass facades and the tarmac surfaces. Where there are large crowds present, as there were in the earlier Whitehall *silences*, it perhaps also recognizes the acoustically-absorptive presence of massed human bodies. In the later recordings, the permadrone of London traffic is noticeable, but the general city noise sounds strangely distanced. The spatially vast decay of the artillery blast on the first strike of eleven, which rolls around the sky almost like thunder, describes the greater London. But once it has subsided and the chimes end it is as though a perimeter has been set up around the vicinity of Big Ben and the noise pushed back to allow small noises to assume unfamiliar significance.

This then is how the silenced crowd is represented in sound: through the reverberations its stillness reveals. The »right« aesthetic proportion, to which the radio technician refers, is represented, in audio-production terms, through privileging the reverb – the *wet*, indirect wave-arrivals of accidental noises – over the *dry*, direct wave-arrivals of the noises themselves. The silence that destroys personality and effects universality is thus found in tiny sonic accidents reverberating more prominently than they should.

2. A Ritual Aural Practice

The sonic art performance project *Noise Memory Gesture: the Theatre in a Minute's Silence* (or NMG)[13] considered the *silence* as a form of theatre in which the participant is both performer and audience. Working with Butoh and Laban techniques[14] and vari-

13 Brown 2006.

14 Two different dance approaches to regimenting the body in relation to external space and sensory environment. Butoh reaches into psychic interiority and uses intense sensory imagination to embody the sensory environment in the nervous system. Laban is more consciously analytic, and concerned with spatial relationships and the effort of interaction between body and environment. Laban identifies goals when moving in relation to the environment, whereas Butoh abandons them. The relationship between these techniques allowed us to explore the dialectic in the *silence* between the aural and the performing body. See also Brown 2009.

ous practice-based workshop methods, it researched the *corporeal performance* of the silence. In particular it examined familiar postures of remembrance: standing still, hands clasped in front of the body; head bowed slightly, eyes focused indeterminately on the middle distance. It found these to be imitative of a known genre, learned through the media, and as a corporeal regime, inseparable from the notion of *observance* of silence as a performance of remembrance. In other words, participation in the silence was an act of the *whole-body* and this active corporeal attitude was somehow inseparable from the *aurality* both of mediatized and in situ *silences*. As part of its methodology, NMG convened *flashmob silences* in a range of noisy urban environments, including extremely noisy places such as Piccadilly Circus where the traffic and tourist chatter carried on and there was no measurable drop in sound level during the *silence*. Participants nevertheless reported that actively standing still in an adopted posture seemed to contribute to an increased panoramic awareness of surrounding acoustic space and a sense of more highly-defined sonic detail. The act of performing a *silence* through purposefully being still, while bearing in mind a given memorial purpose, seemed to transform a place even of oppressive, intrusive and sometimes painful noise-levels into a high-definition, surround-sound experience. Some reported this as pleasurable; others, in some way *fitting* to the memorial purpose.

This interdependent combination of corporeal performance, focused psychological purpose (remembrance) and heightened awareness of the circumstantial materiality of audition seems to fit with what Holger Schultze, *pace* Rolf Grossman, theorizes elsewhere in this volume, as an auditory *dispositive*. Schultze deals with three kinds of dispositive (spatial, temporal and narrative), each of which might be said to describe a theatricalization of the soundscape through the adoption of an apparatus that estranges one's subjectivity from its usual relationship to the sonic environment. I think the memorial silence is representative of a fourth kind of auditory dispositive: that of a ritual aural practice. Its apparatus is the active participation of its subject as performer enacting, with body and mind, a role prescribed by generic convention (i.e. standing in memorial silence, in this case). We saw before that in order to represent the *silence* on the radio, the philosophizing radio technician knew he had to represent correctly a ratio between circumstantial noises and what he called a »solemn impassivity«. This is the *ritual dispositive*: a dialectic between one's own enactment of a role and material circumstance. In assuming this dispositive by ritually observing a *silence*, one does not merely experience the incidental, insignificant, inconsequential or passing sonic environment within a picture frame, as one might in a sound walk or at a performance of John Cage's *4'33"*. Rather, one's auditory experience (and the event's audience) is subsumed *by* the performance and becomes part and parcel of a whole system of enactment. A preordained time and duration; a generically prescribed way of standing; a given topic to

be remembered; the required assuming of a sombre mood: all of this comes together in a performative silence that is the agent of liminoid transformation the philosopher-technician calls a »solvent«.

Aside from any feelings of greatness and universality, this effects a hyper-real auditory experience of accentuated panorama and heightened definition, but it does more than this. Traffic and other noises cease to be incidental or background to a moment of everyday transience and instead become monumental (if one can imagine a monument as an immersive rather than an objective figure). Like the Cenotaph *empty tomb*, it is an anonymous monument; a cipher for multifarious losses; a collectively-pondered dialectic between a ritually performed organization of stillness in the living and the noises of a world carrying on. Indeed, participants in the *silences* staged by the NMG project tended to report that they were too engaged in the material »here and now« to experience thoughts that one might describe as memories. If anything, some said, the performance silenced memories.

3. The Dramaturgy of the Silence

Lévi-Strauss observed that silence receives meaning only by contrast to noise.[15] As Hillel Schwartz describes, the first time the Armistice Day silence was observed, it was set up and announced not only by canon blasts and clock chimes, but by all manner of noise making, including »loud guns, rockets, churchbells, fire alarms, and a bugler on the balcony of Selfridge's Department Store«.[16] I have already discussed how the sounds of Big Ben and the specific acoustic properties of a built environment, impart, to ears culturally equipped to recognize it, a time-place specificity to recordings of the *silences* that would otherwise sound mostly like noise. Perhaps what Stephen Feld termed *acoustemology* may also be pursued through silences.[17] Were they able to negotiate the acousmatic dislocation of a recording, the Kaluli people, for example, would perhaps also be able instantly to place the sound of a *silence* in their jungle.

15 Lévi-Strauss 1964, 306-07, 333-36.

16 Schwartz, ibid.

17 Feld's term acoustemology is a compound of acoustic epistemology. It is concerned with the culturally-specific knowledge that might be derived from listening to an acoustic environment, the sounds it contains and the relationship between environmental sounds and cultural soundings (such as the cadences and rhythms of speech and discourse); see Feld 2005 and *passim*.

There are many versions of memorial silence around the world. In the Netherlands, for example, a memorial silence is held at 8pm on 4th May, with its emblematic epicentre in Amsterdam's Dam Square, commemorating the victims of World War II. In Turkey the annual silence on the stroke of 9:05am on 10th November, the moment of Ataturk's death, is topped and tailed by wild noisemaking much as Hillel Schwartz describes in relation to the original UK 1919 silence. Bosphorus ferries, cars and buses all blast horns. The silence itself is then immaculately observed for its two-minute duration, with cars stopping dead in the street, ferries cutting their engines and drifting free, and pedestrians freezing on the spot in impressive synchronicity. But it is the two-minute armistice silence of the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in Britain that created the template. Let us recap its history.

The idea for a universal *pause* had first been the subject of a popular newspaper campaign originating in a letter to the *London Evening News*, 8 May 1919, from the journalist, Edward George Honey, entitled »Appeal for a memorial silence on armistice day« which called for

> a very sacred intercession, […] church services, too, if you will, but in the street, the home, the theatre, anywhere, indeed, where Englishmen and their women chance to be, surely in this five minutes of bitter-sweet silence there will be service enough?[18]

At first, this campaign was ignored by a government wary of public protest and reticent to sanction anything that located such obvious power in a locally *ad hoc* and uncontrolled event. This was a time of the post-WWI economic depression, industrial unrest and Spanish flu pandemic – even of mutinous murmurings among the armed forces. Instead, at the beginning of July, the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens was commissioned to design a military parade and ceremony to take place around a cenotaph dedicated to an unknown soldier whose body was to be brought back from France and whose coffin would be paraded up the Mall and down Whitehall to the monument on the 11 November anniversary. However, the popular campaign for the silence grew, and on Nov 4 1919, former South African High Commissioner Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, who had lost his son in France in 1917, wrote to the Colonial Secretary and War Cabinet member, Lord Milner, that:

> During the War, we in South Africa observed what we called the ›Three minutes' pause‹. At noon each day, all work, all talk and all movement were suspended for three minutes that we might concentrate as one in thinking of those – the living

18 Cf. Gregory 2001.

> and the dead – who had pledged and given themselves for all that we believe in […] Silence, complete and arresting, closed upon the city – the moving, awe inspiring silence of a great Cathedral where the smallest sound must seem a sacrilege […] Only those who have felt it can understand the overmastering effect in action and reaction of a multitude moved suddenly to one thought and one purpose.[19]

Whether or not this letter directly informed the change of heart, a realization seems to have taken place that an officially-sponsored silence event might have the dual effect of locating the power not only within the paternalistic gift of the State but also within a galvanizing *universal* (i.e. Empire-wide) shared moment – in other words, in a moment of grand theatre. Within days of Sir Percy's letter, the War Cabinet charged Milner with progressing *one* minute's silence following a precedent set at Theodore Roosevelt's state funeral in January that year. In the event, the King, it is believed, increased the allotted time to two minutes, and issued a decree on 7th November 1919 that scheduled the silence for the following Tuesday

> […] at the hour when the Armistice came into force, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, there may be for the brief space of two minutes a complete suspension of our normal activities. No elaborate organisation appears to be required. At a given signal, which can easily be arranged to suit the circumstances of the locality, I believe that we shall gladly interrupt our business and pleasure, whatever it may be and unite in this simple service of Silence and Remembrance.[20]

The two-minute silence also became the centre-piece of Lutyens' parade. The British Movietone Newsreel silent film that disseminated this imagery around the Empire shows the journey of the Unknown Soldier back from France.[21] It then shows the unveiling of the monument, with the moment of the silence framed, *in lieu* of audible chimes and canon blasts, by a shot of Big Ben (in negative so as to provide a black background for an intertitle reading »At the first stroke of the eleventh hour from Big Ben, London was hushed into the Great Silence«). This Great Silence itself is represented by a shot of a busy London street, with motor cars and buses, horse drawn carts, bicycles and milling crowds, cutting abruptly to a shot of the same

19 See National archive.

20 Ibid.

21 See MovieTone Digital Archive.

street-scene standing still, with only the horses' heads moving and the crowd with hats off. The 1923 Pathé news follows the same pattern, with a more prolonged close-up of the clock-face of Big Ben, followed by a shot of the crowd removing their hats.[22] The archival version of the clip holds for a while on the stilled crowd, and then there is a cut to the men putting their hats back on, and a military band and church choir beginning to perform.

This brings us back to where we began, with the silence as a mediatized event. It took until 1929 for John Reith to secure the Home Office permission he had sought since the beginning, to situate BBC microphones at the event. Newsreel footage also acquired sound soon after. As a live event, the circumference of the *silence* now extended via the radio network, across the land and beyond. As well as gathering in local communities to perform the silence around local monuments, or wherever they happened to be at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, people now also joined in around parlour radio sets, adopting the now familiar pose. Enacting the *silence* in the home made hyper-real and monumental the sounds of domestic circumstance: of ticking clocks, dripping taps or humming refrigerators. People shared in the greatness and universality of the crowd in their own home rituals, enacted before the altar of the wireless set. Through its acousmatic portal from London came the reverberating, urban noises of Whitehall, illuminating the room and projecting onto the domestic ceremony an imagined scenography of Royals, Generals and politicians standing to attention in the acoustic after-image of Big Ben's chimes. This silence and these urban noises, staged and made epic by a profoundly immersive, intermedial theatre, have a special place within mediated cultural heritage.

22 See British Pathé.

Figure 10: Two-Minute Silence, Armistice Day, London, 1919.

4. Sources

British Pathé: Armistice Day 1923, http://www.britishpathe.com/video/armistice-day-2/query/armistice+day, 2012/04/30.

Brown, Ross (2006): Noise Memory Gesture. The Theatre in a Minute's silence. Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project, UK

Brown, Ross (2009): Noise, Memory, Gesture. The Theatre in a Minute's Silence, in: Mock, Roberta / Counsell, Colin (eds.) Performance, Embodiment & Cultural Memory, Newcastle, 203-21.

Feld, Steven (2005): Places Sensed, Senses Placed, Towards a Sensuous Epistemology of Environments, in: Howes, David (ed.) Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader, Oxford / New York, 179-91.

Gregory, Adrian (2001): The Silence and the History (sleeve note), in: Semper, Jonty (2001) Kenotaphion, Charm Records, UK.

Jackson, Anthony (1968): Sound and Ritual in Man, New Series, 3.2 (June), 293-299.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1964): Le Cru et le Cuit, Paris.

Maeterlinck, Maurice / Alfred Sutro (translator) (1897): The Treasure of the Humble, London.

MovieTone Digital Archive: story no. 7020, http://www.movietone.com, 2012/04/30.

National archive: ref PRO CAB 24/C45, quoted on http://www.veterans-uk.info/remembrance/ two_minutes.html, 2012/04/02.

Oxford English Dictionary, Third edition (2001): online version March 2012, http://0-www.oed.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/Entry/239856, 2012/05/30.

Schwartz, Hillel (2011): Making Noise. From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond, New York.

Semper, Jonty (2001i): Kenotaphion, Charm Records, UK.

Semper, Jonty (2001ii): The One-Minute Silence from the Funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, Charm Records, UK.

The Royal Channel (2010/10/14): Remembrance Day at the Cenotaph 2010 (extract), http://youtu.be/pSol1JxSniU, 2012/05/25.