

SILENCE!

THE BACKGROUND OF ATTENTION AS A BATTLEGROUND

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ABSTRACT

The commodification of silence responding to a disturbing environment is integrated in the growing attention economy. This paper suggests that the idea of silence embedded in these products preclude fruitful understandings of—and interventions in—the problematics they address, and it proposes Cage's *silence* as a more efficacious model for understanding our problems with a disturbing environment, and a better practice for intervening in it. Informed by Yves Citton's ecology of attention the paper argues that Cage's silence centers the interplay of attention, subjectivity and intentionality, as it takes play between us and the background, which to some extent produces us. And finally, it suggests that the Cagean practice of paying attention to this background is what Citton calls a "micropolitics of attention", because it reveals the background as a battleground.

KEYWORDS

Silence, Attention Ecology, John Cage, Background Soundings, Attention Economy

*What would our world look and sound like today
if the 'freedom of attention' was a right?*
—Russo, 2009

I. SILENCE

Noise cancelling headphones, apps that monitor and restrict our use of digital devices or books and retreats that teach us to turn them off, and silent spaces to which we can buy access at airports and trains—silence has become a valuable commodity.¹ These products are designed to either reduce the impact of our surroundings or mask them, providing a remedy for the ever-increasing noise of our world, and the technologies of the expanding attention economy, which compete to seize and steer our focus. As a result, these products reflect the fundamental premise of the attention economy, which posits that individuals have finite amount of attention to allocate.² This implies that attention is a quantitative and individual phenomenon.³

John Cage's aesthetics of silence reverses this approach by encouraging us to listen to our surroundings rather than masking them. Drawing from cultural theorist Yves Citton's idea of the "ecology of attention"⁴ this paper proposes that Cage's approach challenges the idea of silence being a simple quantitative measure of the absence of presence of disturbances. Instead, the Cagean silence suggests a more complex distribution of attention and intention between us and our attentional background. The following paper explores this argument in depth by analyzing Cage's aesthetics of silence, with a focus on the unrealized *Silent Prayer* and his later tacet piece, *4'33"* (1952).⁵ Both works were created during the intense debate over Muzak, an early form of attention capitalism.

II. THE RIGHT TO THE FREEDOM OF ATTENTION.

The company Muzak specialized in "functional background music" aimed at enhancing citizens' behaviors desired by the company's subscribers. By the late 1940s, Muzak had over 7,000 subscribers in 200 cities, including banks, retail stores, public transportation, and an expanding market in factories.⁶ Muzak supported its claims of efficiency by conducting studies that showed the effectiveness of its products. They found that their music could combat fatigue and boredom among workers, improve customers' willingness to linger in shops and spend money, and even make commuters more susceptible to commercials.⁷

Despite its success, the monetization of public soundscapes through built sonic environments was not without public resistance. In 1949, a legal fight began over the public soundscape at Grand Central Terminal, New York, after the management started using Muzak's products to manage and monetize the soundscape.⁸ In the same year, in Washington D.C., Capital Transit's recently radio-equipped busses, that played Muzak's *Music as You Ride* program, consisting of a mixture of music and commercials, sparked a heated debate.⁹ Citizens protested against the proliferation of transitcasting, i.e. the broadcasting of radio in public transport to a "captive audience" of specific segments near selling points,¹⁰ and advocated for the right to "an unannoyed journey"¹¹, and for the "freedom of attention."¹² In 1952, despite multiple hearings and lawsuits, the citizens lost their case as the Supreme Court ruled that transitcasting was "not inconsistent with public convenience, comfort and safety."¹³

It was amidst this debate over Muzak and the freedom of attention, that Cage began his explorations of silence. In a public talk, he suggested that he would compose a new piece, *Silent Prayer*, and sell it to Muzak Co. *Silent Prayer* would be 3 to 4½ minutes uninterrupted silence—"the standard length of canned music"—with an ending that would "approach imperceptibility."¹⁴ In 1952, the same year that the court ruled against the freedom of attention as a basic right, Cage composed his now infamous silent piece, *4'33"*, in which the instrumentalist(s) play nothing for the entire duration of the piece.

III. SUBJECT FORMATION IN UBIQUITOUS LISTENING

As some have noted, Cage's *Silent Prayer* could serve as a "four-and-a-half-minute respite from forced listening",¹⁵ as a "brief intermission in the pervasiveness of Muzak's background music,¹⁶ as a strategy of silencing Muzak.¹⁷ In that sense it could be seen as a form of commodification of silence, where silence is packaged and sold as a commodity, just like Muzak's functional background music. However, Cage's approach to silence is different from Muzak's in that it is not aimed at manipulating behavior or attention. In its purposelessness it rather exposes the biopolitical governmentality of Muzak, highlighting how the company sought to shape individual and collective behavior through the control of soundscapes. With Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, Hannah Pivo argues that Muzak's calculated and strategic attempts to affect the cognitive functioning of listeners asserts the power of the corporation over the individual through strategies of bio-power.

In particular, Muzak aimed to control the worker's psychic experience of time through its use of segmented time slots in which 15 minutes of Muzak was followed by 15 minutes of silence to add a temporal structure in the otherwise monotonous time of the modern workplace.¹⁸ As both Muzak and *Silent Prayer* "sell silence", Pivo suggests that Cage's proposed open-ended silence (approaching imperceptibility) challenges "the rigid temporal boundaries undergirding Muzak and the modern industrialized economy it serves".¹⁹ In addition the financial transaction proposed by Cage exposes Muzak's inherent capitalist allegiances, while the four-and-a-half-minute duration of *Silent Prayer*, being the standard length of music on the twelve-inch discs used by Muzak, is a reference to the technologies of reproduction that allowed Muzak to create their persuasive environments.²⁰

I wish to expand on Pivo's analysis by further exploring the interplay of attention and intention involved in the intricate relation between foreground and background with regards to Muzak. Muzak's products were intended to remain *below* the threshold of common attention.²¹ To ensure this backgrounded quality, Muzak recorded its own tracks in which a variety of genres were arranged in the same manner: smooth layers of strings were added, while vocals and sudden surprises were omitted.²² Mimicking Paul Virilio's description of the doubling of perception in late modern technologies²³, we could say that in Muzak's products—as well as in many our contemporary products—there is a "doubling of attention" because the music is directed at the recipient's attentional background, in order to redirect the recipient's attention at something else, for instance the work procedures at the factory or the products at the retail store.

In her analysis of music that exists in the background of the attentional field, Anahid Kassabian argues that this "ubiquitous music" is engaged in the production of distributed subjectivity via the modality of affect, i.e. the circuit of bodily responses that take place before conscious apprehension.²⁴ Muzak's programmed sonic environments were indeed focused on affect, as the company promised to improve the wellbeing and the psychological disposition of its people in the designated space, with the end goal of producing the kinds of citizens that are key to a capitalistic society: consumers, workers, and commuters, via what could be described as ubiquitous or ambient bio-governmentality.

In a summary of our analysis so far, we could say that the distributed subject formation of Muzak was created via the modality of affect, attention, and time. Hereby Muzak functioned as an

early form of attention economy that monetized citizens' collective patterns of attention. Where the typical discourses on attention economy understands attention as a *quantitative* and *individual* phenomenon,²⁵ we must understand attention in a different manner, if we want to grasp the ubiquitous governmentality of Muzak. Muzak is better understood within Citton's *ecology* of attention, which sees attention as being conditioned by the environment,²⁶ as a qualitative and collective phenomenon which participates in the co-construction of subjectivities.²⁷

IV. FOREFRONTING THE ATTENTIONAL BACKGROUND

While *Silent Prayer* "approached imperceptibility", Cage's later composition *4'33"* (1952) embraced it. The obvious substantial difference between the two is that *Silent Prayer* "silenced the sound of music intended to be environmental, while *4'33"* silenced music to hear the unintended, surrounding sounds, the noises", as Douglas Kahn concludes.²⁸ However, if we take into consideration that the attentional background was a battlefield in the public debates and lawsuits at the time where Cage composed *4'33"*, and that Cage's previous iteration of a silent piece was a response to Muzak, I argue that the background *4'33"* brings forth is not just the background of music in the concert hall. Rather it is *our* attentional background, not merely as musical listeners, but more broadly as subjects and citizens.²⁹ I wish to suggest that there is a political potential in the way the piece invites us to listen to our attentional background. Since Muzak's ubiquitous governmentality relied on its persuasive technologies being in the *background* of the field of attention, actively listening to that background would bring these technologies out of the withdrawn existence that enabled their influence. With *4'33"* Cage wanted to free music from the composer's likes and dislikes.³⁰ While this is clearly a negation of western art music and its composer- and work-centeredness, as many have concluded,³¹ the negation of intentionality may thus also encompass the covert intentionality of ubiquitous music and ambient governmentality in public spaces, such as Muzak, and thus serve as a way to de-colonize our sonic background.

Furthermore, *4'33"* has a political potential in the way it invites and teaches us to listen. According to Bernard Stiegler, language serves as a pre-configured milieu for individuation, which means that it produces subjectivity in the collective realm. Language can be appropriated by the subject in an act of individuation, which then trans-individuates language itself.³²

Following Stiegler's line of thought, a product such as Muzak cross-circuits transindividuation, as the music it sells is inherently an-aesthetic, not intended to be listened to or appropriated by the subject, thus hindering the process of individuation and transindividuation.³³ According to Stiegler the condition for creating circuits of transindividuation requires certain technical skills such as reading, writing, or listening. As *4'33''* re-inserts the technical skill of listening that Muzak is designed to disable, I wish to suggest that *4'33''* is what Jacob Lund calls "an artistic re-appropriation of a preconfigured media milieu"³⁴ that thus counters Muzak's cross-circuiting of transindividuation.

V. THE MICRO-POLITICS OF LISTENING

In summary I propose that Cage's aesthetics of silence is what Citton calls a "micro-politics of attention" that allows us to "reevaluate the relationships that connect us to one another and to our environment",³⁵ in contrast to the typical managerial ecology, which sees territory from above to strategically economize our resources and achieve a sustainable environment. Rather than arguing in favor of good urban sound design, as Murray R. Schafer did with the acoustic ecology that he developed under inspiration from *4'33''*,³⁶ Cage's silence is a way to reinstall the attentional background as something which is not yet determined, intended, or directed at us: "nature's manner of operation", as Cage calls these background sounds.³⁷ Yves Citton argues that the attention towards the ground—i.e. the resurgence through which everything around us reproduces itself—might be the antidote we need in a time where the freedom of attention is not a right, and where everything is extracted and presented to us with the end goal to produce us as consumers.³⁸ I therefore suggest that *4'33''* can be read as an aesthetic practice that is a micro-politics of attention. The micro-politics of listening includes both the exposure of the interplay of attention, intention, and subject formation at play in the attentional background as a battlefield, as well as the re-insertion of listening as a skill allowing the listeners to re-appropriate the cross-circuited media milieu and decolonize their sonic background.

Despite the historical distance, I propose that this micro-politics of listening is valuable in relation to our current situation, at a time when the increasing depletion of our attentional resources has turned silence into a commodity. While the products selling us silence might serve the individual well, they also preclude fruitful understandings of, and interventions in, the issues they address, precisely because they aim to turn down or mask the

problematic surroundings. In contrast, the Cagean silence offers a more efficacious model for understanding our current problems, as it enables us to discover the interplay of collective patterns of attention, intention, and subject formation between ourselves and the background that to some extent produces us.

- 1 As John Picker shows, the commodification of silence is not a new phenomenon, however, today it has increased to new levels. John Picker, "The Soundproof Study," in Jonathan Sterne (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 142.
- 2 See for instance, Thomas Davenport and John Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).
- 3 Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 5 Even though the title of the piece is determined by the performer, I have chosen to use the common title, '4'33"', with reference to the 1960 score: John Cage, '4'33"' (*Tacet Version*) *For Any Instrument or Combination of Instruments* (Edition Peters, 1960).
- 6 Herve Vanel, "John Cage's Muzak-Plus: The Fu(rni)ture of Music", *Representations*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Spring 2008): 94–128. Accessed Dec. 2009.
- 7 Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 128–130; Vanel, 97–98.
- 8 Matthew F. Jordan, "Canned Music and Captive Audiences. The Battle Over Public Soundspace at Grand Central Terminal and the Emergence of the New Sound", *The Communication Review*, 17 (2014) 286–310. DOI: 10.1080/10714421.2014.960734.
- 9 Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 130.
- 10 Gann, 130–135, and Alexander Russo, "An American Right to an 'Unannoyed Journey'? Transit Radio as a Contested Site of Public Space and Private Attention, 1949–1952." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television*, Vol. 29 Issue 1 (March 2009) 1–25. DOI 10.1080/01439680802704575.
- 11 Russo, 2.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 14 John Cage "A Composer's Confessions (1948)," in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *John Cage, Writer: Selected Texts* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 27–44: 43.
- 15 Gann, 133.
- 16 Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 180.
- 17 For the concept of *silencing*, see Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
- 18 Hannah Pivo, "Selling Silence, Controlling Chaos: John Cage's Interventions into Muzak," *Public Art Dialogue*, 9:1 (2016): 97. DOI: 10.1080/21502552.2019.1571842, 102.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 103.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 98.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 97.
- 22 Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsongs* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1994).
- 23 Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
- 24 Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity*, (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2013), xii.
- 25 Citton, x.
- 26 *Ibid.*, x.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 28 Kahn, 183.
- 29 For a description of '4'33"' as a piece that brings forth the attentional background, see Martin Seel, *The Aesthetics of Appearing* (2010), 96, and Sabine Sanio, *Alternativen zur werkästhetik. John Cage und Helmut Heissenbüttel* (Saarbrücken: Pfau, 1999).
- 30 Cage's own description in Richard Kostelanetz, "In his own words", *Perspectives on New Music*, Vol, 25, no.1–2 (1987): 97.
- 31 For instance, Nicholas Cook, *Music, Imagination & Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 10–11.
- 32 Bernard Stielger, "Teleologies of the Snail: The Errant Self Wired to a WiMax Network," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, vol. 2–3 (2009): 33–45. DOI: 10.1177/026327640910310.
- 33 As I have argued elsewhere the ironic appropriation of 'easy listening' in the 1990s does in fact appropriate the style of Muzak's functional background music, but this is a different context than the one debated in this article.
- 34 Jacob Lund, "Artistic Re-Appropriation and Reconfiguration of the Medium's Milieu," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 44–45 (2013): 115.
- 35 Citton, 106–109.
- 36 Murray R. Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1997), 5.
- 37 John Cage, *Silence* (New York: Marion Boyars, 2004), 9.
- 38 Yves Citton, "Automatizing Attention vs. A Public Right to Hear," keynote at *The Aesthetics of Attention*, annual conference of the Nordic Society of Aesthetics, 2021.