

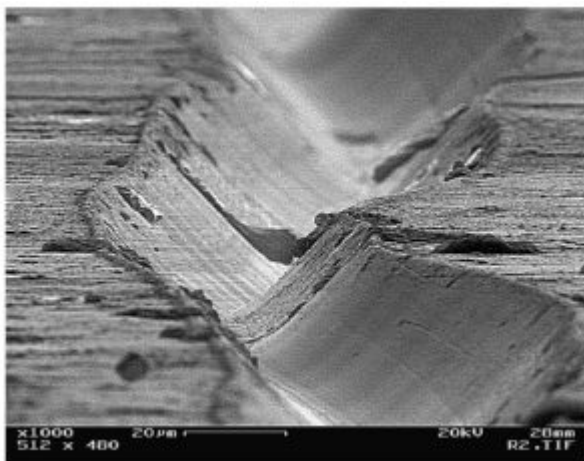
## SEQUENCE FIVE

# ABOUT SILENCE

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SILENCE

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We can learn to work and speak when we are

afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. The fact that we are here and that I speak not these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

(Audre Lorde 1980: 44)

I grew up in Dublin, the youngest of six children in a house full of noise. My mother says I did not speak until I was three years old as I was able (through various gestures) to convince my siblings to do my bidding. I learnt to get my needs met and was fortunate to navigate a boisterous family that taught me many of life's enduring lessons. Eking out a space of my own in which to play was one such early requirement. I often hid under the bed with the blankets pulled down so I could escape the chaos and shut out the world, but never completely. There was always the background sound of my family.

Ever since then I have been drawn in opposing directions towards silence and noise, needing both at different times and in equal measure. The ideal working space for me is to be reading or writing on a train with the sound of my fellow passengers for company. The nondescript ambient sound, that I choose not to pay attention to, is comforting and allows me to keep focus. This is not a unique preference and I know others seek out this type of silence in noise. For example, a website called Coffitivity brings the sound of the coffee shop directly to your computer or portable device, so that you can plug in and feel like you have 'enough noise to work' in.[1] This operates in a similar manner to actually being in a coffee shop, or on public transport. There is the impression of being surrounded by other people, but the real benefit is that these virtual coffee shop patrons are never going to interfere with your time, or space. For many, there is a productive interplay between noise and thought. A certain form of silence therefore, can be found in unexpected places, and noise can be put into a silent space in order to make it a more productive environment.[2]

In June 2013, I created a radio show, *Smithereens - Silence*, for Radioactive International, an online alternative free radio station. This was the second programme I made for the station. I had produced occasional radio shows for community and pirate radio stations many years before and subsequently worked in nightclubs as a DJ until studying for a degree in sound design at the National Film School in Ireland. *Smithereens - Silence* is, in many ways, informed by my subsequent career in location and post-production sound for film and television, as it is by my love of radio. Radio allows an opportunity for many forms of sound art to coalesce in one space. *Smithereens - Silence* was 'aired' as a 'live' show and now is available to stream as a podcast.[3]

This radio programme sought to represent silence through narrative, metaphor and aesthetic devices to tease out what it means to listen, hear, be silent and be silenced. There are numerous issues that arise from attempting to make a sound-based radio show on the theme of silence. Silence requires particular acoustic properties in order to be understood as silence, as Susan Sontag notes of language and silence:

Language is demoted to the status of an event: something takes place in time, a voice, speaking which points to the “before” and to what comes “after” an utterance = silence. Silence, then, is both the precondition of speech, and the result or aim of properly directed speech.[4]

There can be no speech without silence, and no silence without speech. A radio programme about silence must necessarily deal with sound, speech or voice and language.

Here, I want to reflect on how a radio programme can be made about silence when, as a medium, it is all about representing sound. I tease out why I needed to make such a programme and what the benefits of such a show are. To begin to consider these issues it is first worth considering what silence is and how it has been previously represented in the audio-visual arts, alongside how it is considered in political, philosophical and spiritual terms.

## 1. Silence in the Arts

A return to the oft-cited work and writings of the music composer John Cage is required for such a discussion. In Cage’s book *Silence*, he raises the following questions beyond the issue of speech:

Is there such a thing as silence? Even if I get away from people, do I still have to listen to something? Say I’m off in the woods, do I have to listen to a stream babbling? Is there always something to hear, never any peace and quiet?[5]

Through experiment Cage draws the conclusion that, due to the acoustic properties of our soundscape, it is impossible to experience silence. Silence is commonly defined as the absence of sound and this is often broken down into two distinct categories: 'absolute' silence and 'relative' silence. In an attempt to seek out absolute silence Cage entered an anechoic chamber, a treated room used for acoustic experimentation that allows for no sound reflections or leakage from exterior spaces. There he was surprised to find out that he could hear the sound of his own heartbeat and of the blood rushing through his veins. Cage's conclusion confirms that as humans (with a normal hearing range) we can only ever experience a relative silence.[6]

Silence is both the desired and unattainable moment in many art works. Cage, influenced by the artistic work of Marcel Duchamp, amongst others, developed his piece 4'33" (1952) with the intention of turning a concert audience's attention to relative silence and the musicality of our everyday lives.[7] 4'33" is most often performed in concert halls: it begins when the conductor taps her/his baton, and then clears her/his throat as the audiences settle down to listen to themselves within a given space over three movements. This is an unusual and uncomfortable listening experience for many audiences. Speaking of the discomfort of listening to silence in our everyday lives, David Sonnenschein suggests that our fear of doing so is commonly held and based upon an anxiety for our own mortality.[8] This fear of silence can lead to a proliferation of sound and music in society, with the prevalent example of muzak in shopping centres and public spaces.[9]

However, silence can suggest much more than death, endings and emptiness. In a lecture at *The School of Sound* in 1998, Walter Murch argued:

The ultimate metaphoric sound is silence. If you can get the film to a place with no sound where there should be sound, the audience will crowd that silence with sounds and feelings of their own making, and they will, individually, answer the question of, 'Why is it quiet?' If the slope to silence is at the right angle, you will get the audience to a strange and wonderful place where the film becomes their own creation in a way that

is deeper than any other.[10]

This creative use of silence, of course, is not unique to cinema, sound art and music. In a discussion at *The School of Sound* in 2003 the radio producer Piers Plowright, challenging a claim made by Murch in 1998 (Murch had suggested that silence was a 'unique characteristic of cinema'[11]), gave a historical overview of how silence has been employed by radio.[12] However, what is distinctive about this use of silence is that although radio has used silence within its programme material, this has been in a limited form, or, as Sean Cubitt put it, 'Radio silence, we know, is finite'.[13] The curtailment of silence on radio is due to the fear of 'dead air'[14], so much so that there are automated systems operating at most radio stations that start up when silence occurs. Therefore, in 2004, when BBC Radio 3 was broadcasting its own symphony orchestra's performance of John Cage's 4'33", live from the Barbican Arts Centre, the channel had to override its own system so that music and sound would not cut in to fill this perceived silence as dead air.[15]

In many ways music is defined by its silences (pauses, breaks, rests). Cage's experiments with silence pushed out these musical boundaries in ways that drew attention to silence more than any previous composer's work. There are also other artists, besides musicians and composers, who are drawn to define what silence is and who seek to discover the creative potential of silence. The writer, broadcaster and poet Seán Street posits that, 'Memory and association are prompted by sound, and flower in silence'.[16] Street outlines a range of connections between radio and poetry and the important role of sound and silence in shaping work. Slavoj Žižek posits an alternative argument. Drawing from a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective he contends that it is from noise not silence that creativity stems:

The primordial fact is not Silence (waiting to be broken by the divine Word) but Noise, the confused murmur of the Real in which there is not yet any distinction between a figure and its background. The first creative act is therefore to *create silence* – it is not that silence is broken, but that silence itself breaks, interrupts the continuous murmur of the Real, thus opening up a space in words can be spoken.[17]

I will return later to this discussion of noise in relation to silence, but it is important to point out at this point that both silence and noise have been considered spaces of creativity.

## 2. Silence, Spirituality and the Political

Author Sara Maitland has dedicated her time to seeking out silence. To that end she spent a winter on the Isle of Skye, Scotland, away from her familiar surroundings. This practice is documented in her autobiographical work from 2008, *A Book of Silence*. For Maitland her concept of what silence is has changed through this investigation. She suggests:

For me personally the exact meaning of silence has grown and shifted as I practice it more, but it remains fairly literal: it is words and speech particularly that break up silence. In addition I find human noises less silent than natural phenomena like wind and water. However, as time passes I increasingly realise there is an interior dimension to silence, a sort of stillness of heart and mind which is not a void but a rich space.[18]

Maitland considers human noises and voices more distracting or 'less silent' than other sounds. This connects with Sontag and Jacques Derrida's ideas around speech, in some ways this can be explained by our interest in human activity and our ability to hone in on human conversation and actions. As pack animals we are socialised in communal ways, and so, for Maitland, there is a silence in the wind and water but not in words and voices she hears. Maitland evokes what Cage had noted, that the absence of sound is what is most fruitful in silence. Colum Kenny, drawing from the work of Maitland and many others, sets out to investigate the spiritual component of silence, proposing that 'Silence is a balm. For many, the enjoyment of silence is a precondition of spiritual and mental health. Indeed the cessation of noise may bring simple physical relief'.[19]

While Maitland, in her quest, found comfort and peace in silence and made a clear distinction between human and non-human sounds, Jacques Rancière offers an example of environmental sound that is full of voice, quoting the French historian Jules Michelet from his work *History of the French Revolution*, where Michelet wrote about the revolutionary

Joseph Chaliel:

He is the voice of the deep dark mud of its streets, silent since the beginning of time. Through him the ancient, dismal darkness, the damp and filthy houses begin to speak; and hunger and fasts; and abandoned children and the women dishonoured; and all those heaped-up, sacrificed generations.[20]

Chaliel's voice comes from his environment, which is made up of the non-human 'mud of its streets' and 'damp and filthy houses' as well as the human, 'children and the women dishonoured' and 'sacrificed generations'. He is at one with his urban place and he brings this space to life as the true revolutionary voice. The oppressed people and inanimate objects gain voices because of his political standing. Yet, we do not have a particular human voice attributed to Chaliel. So, here, we have two conflicting definitions of what silence is, or could be. For Rancière, the human and non-human aspects come together to offer a unique voicing, whereas most other commentators consider the non-human to lack a voice, remaining silent, at least to language.

Silence can be experienced both in positive and negative terms, depending on the person and her or his experience. Maitland gave strong accounts of her own personal *jouissance* with silence, but also documents the torture others experience when in peril or isolated in the wild. She puts forward her own desires to be silent but raises the question, '[i]s the silence in the hearing or the speaking?'.[21] Teasing out issues of communication, in particular transmission and reception theory, Maitland outlines the difference between being silent and being silenced:

A different sort of ambiguity lies in what, using the radio as an analogy, I have come to call the transmitter/receptor problem. The result - silence - is identical whether you turn off the radio in your house or the broadcasting company stops transmitting. Even if both transmitter and receptor are working, static (fouls up en route between the two) can render the communication meaningless: the speaker has in effect been silenced. If I don't speak, there is nothing for you to hear; but if you are deaf then I can speak (orally) as loud as I want and you still won't hear. We use the same word 'silence' to describe all



three of these forms of interference. If I cut your tongue out you are silenced (at the transmission point); if I throw you into a dungeon you may shout and yell, but you are still silenced (no one hears you, the reception is not available); if I make your speaking worthless, 'inaudible', meaningless, if I create static or interference, as it were, around your speech, you are also silenced.[22]

Maitland draws political conclusions about the silencing of people, and goes on to give the extreme example of Stalinism to highlight how these forms of repression can be used to control a population.[23]

It is in a 'political' context, not Stalinist this time, but oppositional to capitalist state repression, that Paulo Freire frames his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He argues against being silent, and the need for true words to rally the people to the revolutionary cause. He stresses:

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.[24]

It is pertinent to note that Freire footnotes this comment, outlining the importance of a reflective meditative practice:

I obviously do not refer to the silence of profound meditation, in which men only apparently leave the world, withdrawing from it in order to consider it in its totality, and thus remaining within it. But this type of retreat is only authentic when the meditator is "bathed" in reality; not when the retreat signifies contempt for the world and flight from it, in a type of "historical schizophrenia".[25]

Freire reiterates this final point about 'contempt for the world' later in his book when he states, 'Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it'.[26] For

Freire, the silence needs to be challenged as it disempowers the people he is urging to action. While Freire sees silences as mostly negative, which is consistent with his desire to give voice to the oppressed, Derrida does not see silence as purely a silencing of people. For Derrida, silence is part of a speech continuum and it is impossible to consider it in isolation from language. He argues that a desire to remain silent is forever framed by language, speech and memory:

Even if I decide to be silent, even if I decide to promise nothing, not to commit myself to saying something that would confirm once again the destination *of* speech, and the destination *toward* speech, this silence remains a modality of speech: a memory of promise and a promise of a memory.[27]

It is within these oppositional discourses that *Smithereens – Silence* attempts to situate itself, problematising notions of silence whilst considering various artistic works that reference silence or employ it in productive or challenging ways. Sontag outlines that, ‘the ultimate weapon in the artist’s inconsistent war with his audience is to verge closer and closer to silence.’[28] *Smithereens – Silence* draws upon these works in order to represent the theme of silence across various media and the arts. The show is constructed around an enquiry into what it means to be silent and challenges the medium of radio, and in particular, Internet radio, to adequately portray this listening position.

### 3. Internet Radio

In a discussion about the potential for radio communication in his chapter “Radio: Broadcasting as Dissemination (and Dialogue),” John Durham Peters argues that, with earlier forms of radio broadcasting, the ‘remote audience was invited to become an imaginary participant in the world of the characters and of its fellow auditors’.[29] He stresses that the most successful radio announcers use ‘liveness’ in their performance to dispel a ‘nervousness about radio – its distance, deathliness, disembodiment, and dissemination,’[30] whereas, the Internet encases the body in the medium:

If success in communication was once the art of reaching across the intervening bodies to touch another's spirit, in the age of electronic media it has become the art of reaching across the intervening spirits to touch another's body. Not the ghost in the machine, but the body in the medium is the central dilemma of modern communications.[31]

For Durham Peters the potential for connection is the allure that brings us back to the Internet, time and again, both for our public and private selves. He argues that there are two frames or 'bodies' to consider in relation to all new technologies, those of 'democracy and eros'. Driving many users' experience of the Internet is the desire to engage in participatory democracy, but also to connect physically and/or sexually with one another. There are many examples of these types of sites on the Internet, which open up forums for various interest groups. The Internet can bring vast amounts of information at high speeds to increasing numbers of users in the majority and minority worlds.

How 'democracy and eros' have been silenced is a central theme in *Smithereens - Silence*. This radio programme taps into the potential of the Internet. Damian Sutton offers a more optimistic reading than Durham Peters of the Internet's potential. Drawing from the writings of Gilles Deleuze and his concept of the 'rhizome', he notes:

The Internet's technosociality is in its flows of information and the control of those flows; hence the politics of the hacker culture that grew up in those years of the Internet's boom... This was a politics of deterritorialisation, for which the cry was 'Information wants to be free', and in which it was realised that it was ideas, rather than objects, that would be the goods of commerce.[32]

With the Internet and new media a new potential for dissemination of material exists. Kate Lacey, in her work *Listening Publics*, outlines that:

To the extent that all new media are about 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin 1999), perhaps the most significant difference in relation to the constitution of listening publics has been the capacity to share files in private, public and hybrid spaces. It is already

more than a decade since Steve Jones (2000: 217) argued that in relation to music, 'recording sound matters less and less, and distributing it matters more and more'. The 'intensely social and collaborative' (Goggin 2011: 74) ways in which music and other audio/visual material is now shared and enjoyed via mobile and online media is at one level simply the latest expression of active and sociable listening practices channelled through successive new media.[33]

In many ways Radioactive International, the station that broadcast *Smithereens - Silence*, corresponds more closely to the structure that Lacey and Sutton outline. Launched in September 2012, after a twenty-year absence from the airwaves (it had previously operated as a pirate radio station in Dublin city-centre) the station took to the Internet to offer an alternative radio listening experience for fresh audiences and the new Irish diaspora, who have left post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.[34] There is a significant gap within public service and commercial broadcasting that Radioactive International attempts to fill. Funded only by donations, gigs and members' subscriptions, and advertised through Facebook, Twitter, and with stickers and t-shirts, there is a 'guerrilla-style' approach to the station that is far removed from commercial and public service broadcasting standards.



Figure 1: Radioactive International sticker at a pedestrian crossing, Prague, Czech Republic, June 2013.[35]

As the station's website states:

We are a free form radio station with no formats or playlists or genres that DJs have to adhere to. We have few rules, but the main rule is no fascists, racists, sexists, homophobes or religious presenters. The music and politics and art is mainly leftist and alternative and a motto of the station is we're not here to break the law with an illegal

radio station just to play bland pop music, that is available on many of the state and corporate stations.[36].

Radioactive International carries over its broad political ideology from its previous incarnation as a pirate broadcaster, but within the new medium the station is freed up from worrying about repeated raids by the Gardaí (Irish police force) for illegally broadcasting, to instead concentrate on producing and disseminating radio programmes. In many ways this is an innovative form of broadcasting, and as Sutton notes of the Internet, 'The connections are no longer made between the centre and a disparate community of isolated users, but across users and between each other, and the 'centre'.'[37] On Radioactive International, interest in programmes can grow over time, often being streamed by listeners months after the original airing of the show.

Unlike listening to the radio, the Internet and Internet radio allow for a different reflective space. The potential to listen to Internet radio, as well as to check your email, update your Facebook status, etc., changes the perceived traditional passive listening space of the radio to the more active and interactive multi-tasking space of the Internet.[38] The Internet allows for a further sense of connection than radio broadcasting, but also contains a built-in potential for distraction.

In addition to this potential for connectedness, producing a radio show for an online alternative free radio station means not having to concern oneself with the restrictions of public service and commercial broadcasting. Unlike working for the BBC, for example, there was no device I had to adjust to prevent the silence or dead air being filled with sound or music. There was no need to present a self, a personality, or assert an impossible cosy relationship with an unknown listenership. In opposition to the 'body' that Durham Peters sees as central in the Internet, I was concerned with keeping my self and my body out of the programme and the medium as much as possible. The show is certainly a personal one, it came about from thinking about this theme for some time, and was also the result of many conversations with my partner. But crucially for me, I did not want to fill the radio silence with the liveness of a presenter to dispel a deeper deathliness that we share.[39] Instead, I preferred to allow the silence to guide the show, and to say nothing.[40]

#### 4. The Show – *Smithereens-Silence*

There are numerous ways to structure a radio programme within a free form radio station. As mentioned previously the format is not constrained by commercial or public service pressures. At Radioactive International, there is no editorial process, no time limits for shows or expectations about what might be presented. I curated a fifty-five minute long, pre-recorded show that had the following running format/playlist –

(MUSIC) “Enjoy the Silence” – Susanna and the Magical Orchestra

(POETRY) “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing” – Seamus Heaney

(FILM) An extract from *Hunger* – Steve McQueen

(SOUND ART) “The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan” – No Artist

(FILM) An extract from *Mulholland Drive* – David Lynch

(MUSIC) Federico Garcia Lorca’s songs: “El Silencio” – Maria de los Angeles “Cuca” Esteves

(MUSIC) “Our Lips are Sealed” – The Go Go’s

(POETRY) “Cartographies of Silence” – Adrienne Rich (read by Niamh Thornton)

(FILM) An extract from *Silence* – Pat Collins

(MUSIC) “No Surprises” – Radiohead

(POETRY) “A Moment of Silence” – Emmanuel Ortiz

(MUSIC) “When I Go Deaf” – Low

(MUSIC) 4’33” – John Cage

The show is composed of silences and sounds from music, poetry, sound art and film. All of the pieces are either concerned with silence and silencing or are constructed through the use of silence. There is a narrative at play throughout: moving from the Troubles in Northern Ireland through to a queering of the silent space of the closet, the show returns to Ireland to consider the silence left behind as a consequence of emigration, a native (Irish) tongue that is marginal and translated, and also incorporates an international perspective on these themes. Music punctuates these sections with re-worked pop songs and original recordings focusing on voicing and deafness and what it means to hear and to be heard.

I wanted the show to hold its listeners. I did not want to drive them away through a lack of sound, although the show had to grapple with that tension throughout. As when tackling the discomfort and even faced with the potential evocation of death (*pace* Sonnenschein), those reflective moments structured into the show needed to be mindful of a radio 'listening' audience and a desire for sound. To create a space of silence meant a certain distantiation, in the Brechtian sense, and this was inevitable due to the theme of the programme.[41] However, it was clear that the radio format would struggle to represent this alienation fully, and I needed to limit some of these silences to pauses and punctuation. Below, I will consider each of these elements in turn.

Seamus Heaney's poem "Whatever you say, say nothing" clearly articulates the difficulty of voicing a political opinion in Northern Ireland. The line in this poem 'Religion is never mentioned here' is still resonant in 'Post-Peace Process' Northern Ireland. For personal reasons, the desire to make a radio show about silence was an important step in articulating a number of frustrations that lay bottled up for some years. With the knowledge that I would be leaving Northern Ireland after a nine-year period of residence, there was a sense of finally being able to voice my own silence. Derrida suggests that there is an intrinsic tension between trying not to speak on a specific subject and the very language such thoughts conjure up within us. Internalised language guides our thought processes and we are incapable of not speaking, even if this goes unvoiced. He states, 'Thus, at the moment when the question "How to avoid speaking?" arises, it is already too late. There was no longer any question of not speaking. Language has started without us, in us, and before us'.[42] I felt compelled to make a radio show on the theme of silence as soon as I knew I had the opportunity to leave and voice my silences. Coming from the South of Ireland and living in a Northern Irish Unionist rural town had its issues. In general, people don't speak of the 'big things' in Northern Ireland. This may appear to be normal in a society that is attempting to move on from the so-called 'Troubles', a term in itself that understates what it really refers to. This non-naming or mis-naming infected the everyday experience. An example of this would be the banal silence experienced whilst passing walkers on a coastal route, sharing a nod and a smile, but not words, as accent has the potential and power to give away an individual's place, political perspective or religious affiliation. This is a society still entrenched in a self-imposed silence.[43]



In addition to this, there had been an externally imposed silence on Northern Ireland. This was played out in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland through different forms of censorship. In the United Kingdom, in 1988, the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd announced that members of proscribed paramilitary groups would be banned from speaking live in news programmes.[44] This meant that broadcasters, through a bizarre circumvention of the law, were able to have actors—sometimes well-known actors, such as, Stephen Rea and Ian McElhinney—dub, with their rich vocal performances, leading figures of republicanism and loyalism, which it could be argued lent further weight to the proscribed paramilitary groups' causes. In the Republic of Ireland, Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act was introduced in 1971 and was further strengthened in 1977, which amounted to a complete broadcasting ban on proscribed organisations.[45] Having grown up in Dublin in the 1970s and 1980s, with access to BBC, UTV and RTÉ, I experienced both broadcasting bans in the form of dubbing and complete censorship.

Censorship and silencing of political discussion and debate in Northern Ireland continue today, well into the 'Post-Peace Process' phase. A self-imposed silence lingers, too. Derrida poses the question, 'Concerning that about which one cannot speak, isn't it best to remain silent?'[46] This sentiment has been embraced by Northern Irish culture, and it was one I wanted to unpack within the radio programme. However, this problem of silence is not unique to Northern Ireland, but is shared by other post conflict nations. Writing about the representation of Francoist Spain in the film *El espíritu de la colmena/ The Spirit of the Beehive* (Victor Erice, 1973), Xon De Ros describes the relationship between the visual and aural image in the film, noting:

It will tell of the inconsistency between this apparently quiet and peaceful landscape and the violent, repressive regime in one of the more sombre decades of its rule, in the aftermath of the Civil War. For us, as for the protagonist, landscape will reveal itself as a place of inscriptions, testifying to a silent piling up of thoughts, feelings and memories which defy words but still demand recognition.[47]

De Ros could be commenting here on the 'inscriptions' on the landscape and in the soundscape of present day Northern Ireland. One silence is poured on top of another.

On a personal level living in Northern Ireland had meant the adoption of silence as self-preservation. To be queer and from the South, to have a look and a sound that was not of 'here' entailed a certain complicity with self-silencing. What was in some ways and at certain times an attempt at self-preservation was at other moments an easier choice not to be heard. To protect my partner and our son from some of the bigotry and homophobia that could be both subtle and overt in different situations was to play into the hands of silence. Would it not be better to face the threat of violence than to lose your own voice? My own silence was deafening.

In the radio show I wanted to represent and challenge the silencing of the marginalised and, so, subaltern voices were included. A polyvocality was sought based on race, gender, sexual orientation and language. There were two songs chosen for *Smithereens - Silence*, which were lesser-known cover versions of pop songs "Enjoy the Silence" by Depeche Mode and "Our Lips are Sealed" by the Fun Boy Three. The primary reason for this choice was that although the original versions are better known and in many ways appropriate for this programme, there was potential for a gender imbalance in the show that I wanted to preempt by including female voices. Therefore, I sought out versions of these songs by Susanna and the Magical Orchestra over Depeche Mode, and The Go Go's instead of the Fun Boy Three. This counterbalanced Radiohead's song about dropping out of the rat race in "No Surprises", and Low's piece about the potential freedom of losing one's hearing in "When I Go Deaf".

There was limited collaboration throughout the technical realisation of this programme, but, as previously mentioned, the show stems in numerous ways from conversations I have had over many years with my partner. It was therefore fortuitous, when I found a gap in my research and could not obtain a recording of Adrienne Rich's poem "Cartographies of Silence", that I could then elicit the assistance of my partner, and record her reading it. This move ensured the queering of voices within the show in terms of theme, content, and voicing, making explicit the Irish lesbian content of 'the love that dare not speak its name'.<sup>[48]</sup>

Films were also a productive source for the radio programme. Film history teaches us that

cinema was never silent.[49] The sound of the audience, apparatus, and architecture is inscribed in the cinema-going experience. With the coming of the talkies, and the slow development in technology through to Dolby sound, there has been an increasing attention paid to the reproduction of sound and its playback. These technological improvements in noise reduction and spatialisation meant that audiences initially experienced these auditory enhancements during Blockbuster films at the cinema. These soundtracks were characterised as being both loud and dense. It took only a short time for sound-conscious directors and their crew to realise that the increased capacity of the soundtrack to reproduce high fidelity sound can be better utilised to empty out that sound, providing a space for silence in the soundtrack. The noise reduction technology built into sound systems is now tailored to represent this silence. Technological improvements to the playback of sound in the cinema allow for a more frequent use of silence within a filmmaker's sonic palette. Michel Chion goes further by stressing that with Dolby sound, we begin to listen to ourselves listening to the film. He notes:

Dolby cinema thus introduces a new expressive element: the silence of the loudspeakers, accompanied by its reflection, the attentive silence of the audience. Any silence makes us feel exposed, as if it were laying bare our own listening, but also as if we were in the presence of a giant ear, tuned to our own slightest noises. We are no longer merely listening to the film, we are as if it were being listened to by it as well.[50]

In this lecture, Chion makes specific reference to David Lynch's cinema, which I gesture towards in the radio show with an extract from *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001). Over my years of studying film sound I have adopted and adapted Chion's "Introduction to audiovisual analysis"[51] as a methodological approach, in order to listen to film soundtracks in their entirety decoupled from the image. This is not a complete method for analysis, but it offers a fruitful return on the investment involved in it. This practice of listening to film soundtracks then led me to use them separately in *Smithereens*. [52] I have used excerpts from three films, *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008), *Mulholland Drive* and *Silence* (Pat Collins, 2012) and allowed their soundtracks to generate silence, meaning and a sense of space and time within the radio programme.

These films are all concerned in some ways with being silenced or being silent in a space. *Hunger*, based on the sharp political moment of the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland in 1981; *Mulholland Drive*, the silence of not naming what has occurred when two women have sex; and *Silence*, the silencing of a language due to emigration. *Smithereens - Silence* questions the social and political: what does it mean to speak and live in Northern Ireland during the Troubles? What are the consequences of the ultimate silence of the Hunger Strikes? What are the LGBTQI experiences of homophobia and the invisibility and silence of the closet? What does it mean to lose a connection to a language, or for a history to be ignored? All of these silences are differently expressed but are clearly linked, as they are the result of controlling devices used to oppress various peoples, whether through imperialism, religious intolerance, or bigotry.

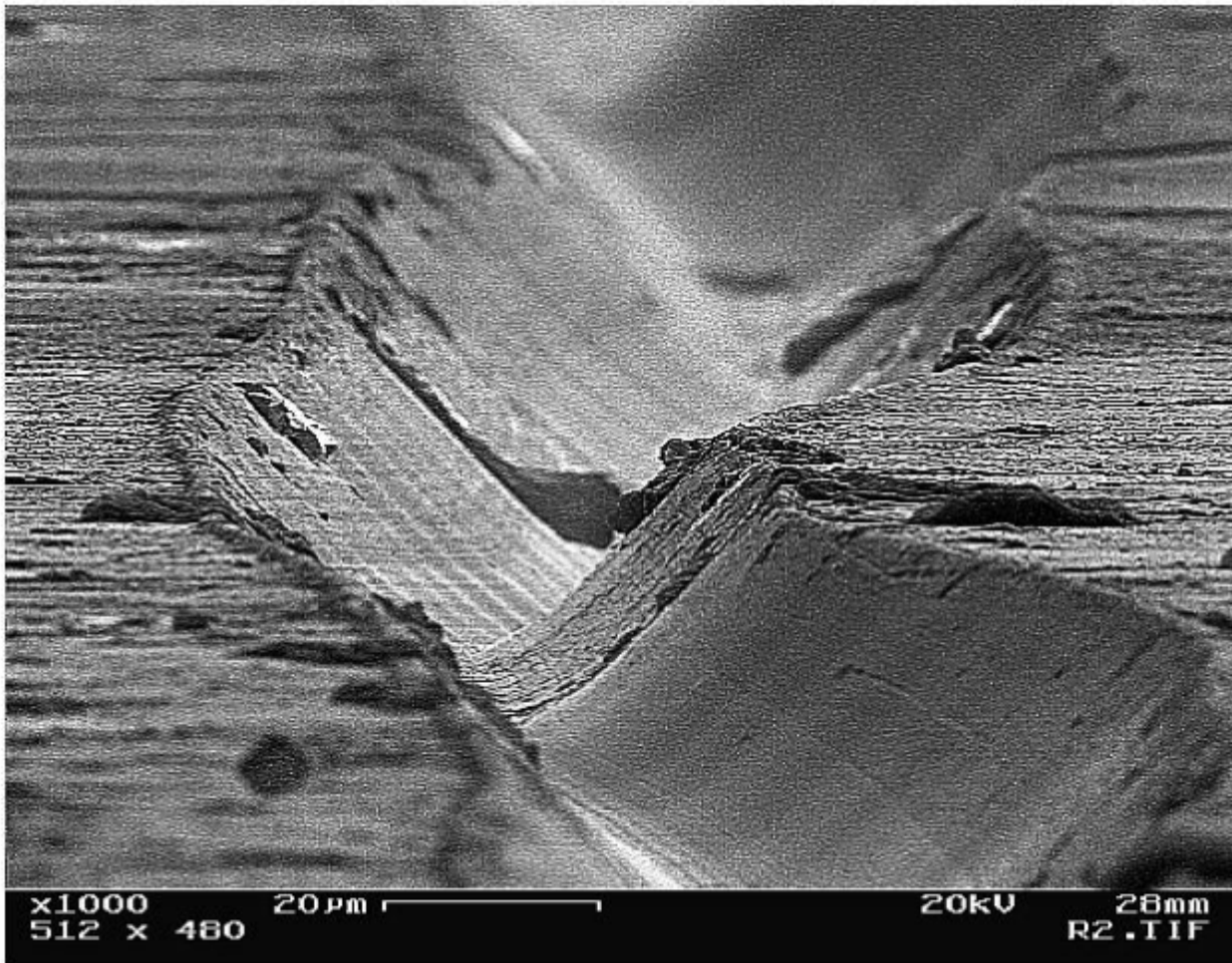


Figure 2: Groove of vinyl record magnified one thousand times.[53]

The image selected for the show on the Radioactive International website is an extreme close up shot, under an electron microscope, of the groove of a vinyl record, magnified one thousand times. I was struck by the visual valley and trench represented in the image and how this could also be related to the political. My inspiration for this came from a particular sequence in the radio programme. Coming directly after a scene from *Hunger* where Margaret Thatcher's entrenched voice is heard, ensuring the deaths of hunger strikers, the programme cuts to "The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan". This is a double-sided LP with the sound of a stylus in a groove - the crackle of sound, the very sound of anticipation when

listening to vinyl. There is nothing but this silence, or noise, on the record. The humour of representing Reagan's "Wit and Wisdom" with nothingness on this album also acts as a sonic relief after hearing Thatcher's words. The silence or noise of the track offers some space for reflection, but the sound of this crackle of vinyl is also an intrinsically interesting sound to listen to. Placing this piece after *Hunger* also consciously makes connections between Reagan and Thatcher's collaborations and shared foreign policies in the 1980s. A link is also forged to Richard Nixon's earlier appeal to the American public or 'silent majority' over Vietnam:

Let historians not record that when America was the most powerful nation in the world we passed on the other side of the road and allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism. And so tonight - to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans - I ask for your support.[54]

An additional association emerges between the Bush administration and what comes later in the radio show with Emmanuel Ortiz's poem "A Moment of Silence", a reflection on the effects of American imperialism which challenges the 'silent majority' to appreciate what it means to be marginalised within American society post 9/11. The Chicana/o connection from Ortiz's poem carries over to the Chicana/Latina 'silencio' dream world of *Mulholland Drive* as well as to the Hispanic "El Silencio" of Federico Garcia Lorca's Spanish songs. All of these pieces deal with the marginal, the queer and the disenfranchised and with how various peoples are silenced, thus offering an international perspective.

## 5. Conclusion

I propose then that silence and noise are two sides of the same coin, or, if within a sonic wheel, they meet at both ends. There is space for reflection and meditation in both of these acoustic spaces, and in the above example, using "The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan" to illustrate the emptiness of Reagan's politics, *Smithereens - Silence* also allows for a reconsideration of silence and noise. In his writings on acoustic ecology, R. Murray Schafer

suggests that, 'Noises are the sounds we have learned to ignore'.<sup>[55]</sup> Kate Lacey, in her work, stresses, 'noise is defined only in the ear of the beholder'.<sup>[56]</sup> I want to suggest that if we listen carefully we begin to hear sound in both silence *and* noise. To describe the sonic qualities of "The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan" could allow for the interchangeable use of the terms silence or noise, but a more precise engagement with the work's acoustic properties may also enable an accounting for the sound of the crackle, the warmth of the textures, the scratchy high frequencies associated with a needle on vinyl, and so on.

To my mind, "The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan" is the most effective part of the radio programme. It challenges the listener to keep listening, perhaps initially asking questions about whether there has been a technical error with the show. As the piece continues the listener has the opportunity to think back on what they have just heard from the *Hunger* extract. The Radioactive International webpage lists all of the tracks, so the listener can check the title and see the connection that is being made aurally between different fragments. Potentially, the listener can visually scan forward to see what is coming up within the programme and draw connections across and between tracks *before* hearing them played out. The crackle of vinyl allows for silence and noise to flood in, at one and at the same time, and at once filled with acoustic resonance and poetic meaning.

This programme sought to curate silence through narrative, metaphor and aesthetic devices, to tease out what it means to listen, hear, be silent and be silenced. To attempt to reflect upon silence and in turn challenge it required, as John Berger argues, 'To break the silence of events, to speak of experience however bitter or lacerating, to put into words, is to discover the hope that these words may be heard, and that when heard, the events will be judged'.<sup>[57]</sup> The conclusion I draw from producing this radio programme is that being silent and breaking the silence, are productive and challenging in both form and content. Silence should be a tactic, not a strategy, a choice in a given moment. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues, 'one keeps silence only when one can speak'.<sup>[58]</sup> The choice is key here, one that cannot be prescribed by another, but must be done in the moment, on a case-by-case basis. Michel Foucault argues against a confessional culture, 'the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is

not supposed to know.[59] It is not always pertinent to speak out, nor is it always the right time to do so. But it is important to keep in mind at what point a self-imposed silence becomes less a choice and more part of a controlling device with which we become complicit.

*Smithereens - Silence* attempted to address silence and silencing in a medium rarely considered for such questions and reflections. Listening is an act of contemplation, and listening to silence is to strip back all of the voices and environmental distractions in order to take a different form of action. Pierre Bourdieu in *The Logic of Practice* quotes Plato who defines action or practice as 'the inability to contemplate'.<sup>[60]</sup> However, countering Plato, *Smithereens - Silence* (as a form of creative practice) aims to facilitate reflection through these contradictions, urging the listener to both contemplate *and* to take action, or as Samuel Beckett put it, to at least offer 'a stain upon the silence'.<sup>[61]</sup> The power of silence and the various approaches to the theme offered here highlight the distinct strength in turning one's attention to that which is silent.

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#### NOTES

[1] Ambient sounds of the coffee shop online at: <http://coffitivity.com/>.

[2] David Hendy offers a Canadian study that illustrates that creativity is enhanced when students partake in creative writing in a busy coffee shop compared to other spaces, due to the background chatter in these places. In *Noise: A human history of sound &*

*listening* (London: Profile Books, 2014), 321.

[3] Radioactive International: Alternative Online Free Radio, *Smithereens – Silence*. Online at: <http://radioactiveinternational.org/smithereens-silence/>.

[4] Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence” in *Styles of Radical Will* ((London: Picador, 1969), 8.

[5] John Cage, *Silence* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 42.

[6] *ibid*, 51.

[7] Douglas Kahn notes that 1952 was also the year that Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* was first performed, suggesting: ‘If *Godot* was a play “where nothing happens twice,” then 4’33”, with its three movements, was a composition where nothing happens thrice’. Kahn, “John Cage: Silence and Silencing” *The Musical Quarterly*, volume 81, no.4 (Winter 1998) 590.

[8] David Sonnenschein, *Sound Design: The Expressive Power of Music, Voice and Sound Effects in Cinema* (California: Michael Wiese Productions, 2001), 125.

[9] Alan Yuhas, “The malls are alive with the sound of Muzak”, *The Guardian*, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2013. Online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/feb/13/malls-alive-sound-muzak>.

[10] Walter Murch, ‘Touch of Silence’ in Larry Sider, Diane Freeman & Jerry Sider (eds.), *Soundscape: The School of Sound Lectures 1998-2001* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 100.

[11] *ibid*, 95.

[12] Piers Plowright, “Silence is.....?” (Lecture) The School of Sound Symposium, London

South Bank Centre, 23rd April 2003

[13] Sean Cubitt, *Digital Aesthetics* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 104.

[14] There is an illustrative example of the crisis of radio producers when a Talk Radio DJ goes silent in *Talk Radio* (Oliver Stone, 1988).

[15] BBC Press Release: "BBC orchestra silenced at the Barbican and on Radio 3, John Cage Uncaged: A weekend of musical mayhem, Friday 16 - Sunday 18 January 2004, Barbican Centre". Online  
at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2004/01\\_january/12/john\\_cage.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2004/01_january/12/john_cage.shtml)

[16] Seán Street, *The Poetry of Radio: The colour of sound* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 47.

[17] Slavoj Žižek, "Burnt by the Sun" (ed) Žižek in *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (New York: Verso, 2006), 224.

[18] Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (London: Granta Books, 2008), 25.

[19] Colum Kenny, *The Power of Silence: Silent Communication in Daily Life* (London: Karnac, 2011), 44. Kenny's book is a comprehensive overview of silence from multiple perspectives, including the creative use of silence in the arts.

[20] Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the poetics of knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 47.

[21] Maitland, 2008: 26.

[22] *ibid*, 26.

[23] *ibid*, 26.

[24] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York & London: Continuum, [1970] 2007), 88.

[25] *Op cit.*, footnote 3: 88.

[26] *ibid*, 91.

[27] Jacques Derrida, "How to avoid speaking: denials", in Sanford Budick & Wolfgang Iser (eds.) *Languages of the Unsayable: The play of negativity in literature and literary theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 15.

[28] Sontag, 1969: 3.

[29] John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A history of the idea of communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 216.

[30] *ibid*, 1999: 219.

[31] *ibid*, 1999: 224-225.

[32] Damian Sutton "Virtual structures of the Internet", in Damian Sutton & David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze Reframed* (London: I.B Tauris, 2008), 32.

[33] Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The politics and experience of listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity, 2013), 49.

[34] Or as Catherine Mayer in "This is the House that Ireland Built", *Time* magazine described the 'post' status of the Celtic Tiger, "Ireland has metamorphosed from proud Celtic Tiger into (a) mangy rescue cat", 13<sup>th</sup> December 2010. Online at: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2034504,00.html>

[35] Personal photograph belonging to the author, Prague, 2013.

[36] Radioactive International. Online at: <http://radioactiveinternational.org/about/>

[37] Sutton, 2008: 35.

[38] I do not believe that audiences listen in a passive manner, but instead they often use the radio as a background soundscape for their lives, but many accounts of radio listenership start out from that premise, such as TUN3R: Give me radio or give me death. Online at: <http://tun3r.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/active-listening-vs-passive-listening.html>. Or, are challenged from that position by the likes of – Thomas Gigar, The Future of Radio: Become a Trusted Guide in Sound. Online at: <http://www.radioiloveit.com/radio-future-radio-trends/the-future-of-radio-a-trusted-guide-in-sound/>

[39] See Sonnenschein, 2001, 125; and Durham Peters, 1999, 224-225.

[40] Within the jingle I created for *Smithereens*, I do say three words, I repeat ‘Smithereens’ twice, saying it once in the opening and once in the closing. Coupled with ‘Smithereens’ I also say ‘Silence’ in the opening and ‘Silencio’ at the close of the show, but apart from that my own voice goes unheard.

[41] Bertold Brecht, “Interview with Luth Otto”, in ed. and tr. by John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 70-71.

[42] Derrida, 1989: 29.

[43] In 2011, a report in *The Belfast Telegraph* entitled “Revealed: Northern Ireland’s shocking dependence on sedatives” estimated 1.2 prescriptions for sedatives were issued to every person in the province, a baffling statistic, which implies a chronic level of addiction in a society coming through a period of trauma. Online at: <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/revealed-northern-irelands-shockin>

g-dependence-on-sedatives-28583696.html. This may go some way to explain the peculiar 'silence' that one experiences in Northern Ireland.

[44] Ed Moloney, "Closing Down the Airwaves: the story of the Broadcasting Ban" *The Media and Northern Ireland*, Bill Rolston (ed) (Basingstoke: Macmillan Academic, 1991). Online at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/moloney.htm>.

[45] Níall Meehan, "(Self) Censoring the Talks: How Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act affected RTE's coverage of the John Hume - Gerry Adams talks", 1993. Online at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/media/meehan/meehan93.htm>.

[46] Derrida, 1989: 53.

[47] Xon De Ros, "Innocence Lost: Sound and Silence in *El espíritu de la colmena*", *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 76:1, 36.

[48] This line refers to the poem, "Two Loves" by Lord Alfred Douglas, and was used against Oscar Wilde during his 'gross indecency trial'. Online at:

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/wilde/poemsofdouglas.htm>.

However, the notion of "not the love which dares not speak its name, but the love that never knows when to shut up", as suggested by Robertson Davies in his novel *The Cunning Man*, p392, does not yet come into play in a Northern Irish context. Artist Paul Walls was requested to remove a painting of two women kissing from the Royal Ulster Academy as it was deemed inappropriate for child audiences, see Claire Williamson, "'Inappropriate' painting of two women kissing removed from exhibit", *Belfast Telegraph*, 9th October 2013. Online at:

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/inappropriate-painting-of-two-women-kissing-removed-from-exhibit-29644992.html>.

[49] Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[50] Michel Chion, "The Silence of the Loudspeakers, or Why With Dolby Sound it is the

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[51] Michel Chion, “Introduction to audiovisual analysis” in *Audio-vision*, trans. Claudia Gorbman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 185-214.

[52] I also used this method in any earlier radio programme *Smithereens - Mermaids* which aired in November 2012. Online at: <http://radioactiveinternational.org/smithereens-mermaids-2/>.

[53] Record Grooves under an Electron Microscope. Online at: <http://www.synthgear.com/2010/audio-gear/record-grooves-electron-microscope/>.

[54] Richard Nixon’s address to the Nation on the war in Vietnam, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1969. Transcript online at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2303#axzz2hEqTN7wS>.

[55] R Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (New York: Destiny Books, 1993), 95.

[56] Lacey, 2013: 90.

[57] John Berger, “The Hour of Poetry” in *Selected Essays of John Berger*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Vintage, 2003), 452.

[58] Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London & New York: Routledge, [1945] 2005), 187.

[59] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1* (London: Vintage Books, 1978), 62.

[60] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 28.

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