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Book review

Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond

by Hillel Schwartz

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Zone Books, 2011, 928 pp., £21.02
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ON 29TH FEBRUARY 2012, the London Sound Seminar series hosted a talk by Dr. Hillel Schwartz, a paper entitled, *The Noise of Almost Nothing* alongside the UK launch of Schwartz's book, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond*. An indispensable text for those researching noise through a Western oriented cultural history, and which forms the subject of this review.

'Noise is an oscillation of creation and loss', says Hillel Schwartz in *Making Noise*.¹ An oscillation that is present throughout history but that is increasingly appreciated through critical terrain thanks to the technological developments that enable the study of the barely audible. When John Cage suggested that silence is just sound or noise that we are not paying attention to, he emphatically unburied hidden (not-heard) 'unwanted sounds' from the avant-garde agenda. Schwartz's book pursues such realisations as they occur. In *Making Noise*, under the direction of his ear-opening knowledge, noise ceases to be framed through a restrictive geometry of appreciation; instead the study of noise becomes porous, and readers are encouraged to pay attention to all the noises that are more commonly heard, but not-listened-to, which have so far

been understood as ‘unwanted’ distractions, and investigates the untold history of such distractions. Sirens, loudspeakers, urban sonics, Echo and Narcissus, are all explored through Schwartz’s historical and literary ear-mind.

This lengthy book (over 900 pages) is imbued with noise. Four sections that go from a loud bang to the bell of a boxing ring as a way to structure its chapters: *Bang (A Beginning)*; *Round One: Everywhere*; *Round Two: Everywhen, Everyone* and *Round Three: Everynow*. From the flow of ‘unheard’ information a sense of reverberation accompanies the reader along the different terrains explored in an unusual chapter format to effectively point out where noise has affected areas that span from economics to arts, fiction, medicine and to sociology. The so-called unwanted noise is described through the framework of the ‘parasite’—bugging and thus perverting and infecting a history of sound. In this book Schwartz reclaims, for the unwanted, a proper place within historical, social and literary contexts. Particularly arresting is Schwartz’s reading of unwanted sound in literature. He demonstrates its function as essential to the understanding of the craft; most pertinently in the space of the Gothic novel. Schwartz suggests that without the *creaks*, and the references to so much almost inaudible noise, together with the mis-heard noises that litter this genre, it may never have gripped readers with such terror and such conviction.

There is an abundance and richness of vocabulary in Schwartz’s book – a specific intention. The author encourages the reader to read aloud; thus inducing an involvement in his/her own performance of overhearing (an excess of hearing), and eavesdropping on the secret sounds that have been hidden from us (even though we have always sensed that ‘walls had ears’). Importantly, Schwartz’s reading is an auscultation of all the noises ‘missed’ in time by a culture committed to getting rid of the unsolicited. This extraordinary research develops in the reader an ear-mind that allows noise ‘to be domicile’ in history. For example, the way Schwartz attaches shifts in critical receptions of sound to specific developments in technologies of sound. This is his description of the impact of the historic moment that witnessed (heard) the invention of the stethoscope:

Here was the clinching moment in the history that I have been tracking, the history of the notion and experience of the ubiquity of noise. With the arrival of the stethoscope, noise that had been impinging from every other direction was found to be domiciled in, and revelatory of, man’s innermost parts.²

Insightful cultural history hinges on readings such as this of the stethoscope, grounding the ambiguity of the not-heard in the materiality of listening. It is an instance of the effort Schwartz undertakes to locate both sound and the history of its production in difficult to hear places.

Making Noise is a gift to those interested in the cultural history of sound, and to practitioners of the sonic arts.³ Poets will also find here a source for thinking about the poetic trace and the poetic event, tracked down to its social resonance. Understanding noise is to comprehend the time events take to happen. Throughout this book noise transgresses the frequencies of the acoustic and is represented as a new anatomy of sound and/or noise, no longer bound to acoustic experience alone but to a new spectrum of possibilities.

Due to the length of the book, the author has created a link for all references and bibliography to be accessed online:http://www.zonebooks.org/titles/SCHW_MAK.html

Notes

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- ¹ Hillel Schwartz. *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang & Beyond*, (New York: Zone Books, 2011), p.205.
 - ² Hillel Schwartz, p. 22.
 - ³ For those interested in noise, Schwartz' book reads in dialogue with other recent important interventions in the field: see Joseph Nechvatal, *Immersion Into Noise* (University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, 2011); Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear* (Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2009); and Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).