

The New Criterion

Books

April 2008

The sound of silence

by [Anthony Daniels](#)

On *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise* by Stuart Sim.

A friend of mine recently asked an Italian writer who had moved from Italy to the West Coast of Scotland why he had made this rather unusual move. “In Italy,” he replied, “silence is very expensive. In Scotland, it is very cheap.”

Not everyone, by any means, is willing or able to live in a wilderness, however beautiful and romantic, in order to escape noise; yet for those who are sensitive to it, noise is one of the torments of modern life. Short of staying at home in a cork-lined room, it is difficult to avoid it; and while some of it is the price we have to pay for a materially abundant life, much of it is not, but seems to be generated for its own sake.

How difficult it is to find the balm of silence in the modern world was borne in on me the other day in a provincial English city. I was a little early for an appointment and, having work to do, sought a silent place in which to do it. I might as well have sought the end of the rainbow. After trying several cafes in search of silence, I decided to go into a bookshop, one of a chain that has a near monopoly.

A bookshop, one might have supposed, would of all places be silent, but one would have been mistaken. Utterly tuneless rock music, its words intoned by an angry young monomaniac, gave to the head the throb of a hangover without the preceding drunkenness, and seeped through its several floors like poison gas: there was no escaping it except through the exit, where even the traffic noise seemed like heavenly quiet.

By chance, my eyes had alighted on a book in the shop entitled *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise*, by Stuart Sim.^[1] I was in the mood for it, bought it, and fled the store. At that moment, noise seemed to me the very worst problem besetting modern man. I had not noticed that the author was a professor of something called “Critical Theory,” but in any case I was in an ecumenical mood, ready to embrace as my brother anyone who, in the words of the blurb, “mounts a strong argument for silence.”

By chance also, I had read that morning in the train to the town a most extraordinary article in *The Guardian*, which gave not merely an X-ray, but an MRI of modern man’s soul. The headlines of the article were as follows: “Latest fashion item for clubbers—earplugs. Competition launched to create fashionable design. 90% show signs of damage to hearing after a night out.”

I recalled as I read it the time that another newspaper had sent me to report on a “concert” by a rock group known for the vulgarity of its language and its closeness to the then Prime Minister, Anthony

Blair. The group's PR representative met me, and his first act was to hand me some earplugs. I thought then, and still think now, that it is a very strange kind of musical act that curries favor with critics by obliterating it with earplugs.

The article started:

Brightly coloured designer earplugs should be as familiar a sight on the dance-floor as water bottles, a charity said yesterday after research suggested that 9 out of 10 young people show early signs of hearing damage after a night out.

It continued:

The charity [the Royal National Institute for the Deaf] concedes that most young people are reluctant to wear earplugs because of their "medicinal" appearance and because they think they will block out the music. The plugs are worn by just 3% of young people on nights out. But the charity hopes to help change their image by launching a competition to find a fashionable, modern spin on them.

A spokesman for the RNID went on to say:

We think young people should be able to make informed choices about the exposure to loud noise. If you use condoms, sun cream or wear a bike helmet when you cycle, why not wear earplugs to protect your ears from the risk of permanent damage?

I do not think it necessary to expatiate on the extraordinary mental contortions in evidence in this article, contortions that are characteristic of our age. They point to a problem that Professor Sim avoids altogether in his book, for he is what one might call a supply-side sociologist. For him, noise is consumed only because it is produced. There is no element of demand whatsoever.

Before I continue, let me say that I was in wholehearted agreement with much of this book, and its anguished defense of silence as a prerequisite for thought, contemplation, creativity, and perhaps even the development of character and individuality (as against individualism, quite another matter). The author is a philosopher, fond of quoting the famous final sentence of the *Tractatus*, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," that implies the existence of a noumenal world by comparison with which our language is but an insect-like buzz or chirrup. Professor Sim is not a crude anti-religionist. And if he is (to my taste) a little over-impressed by the significance of the silences of the likes of John Cage and Harold Pinter, he never himself descends into the portentous meaninglessness of some of the philosophers whom he admires. On the contrary, he writes with admirable lucidity, often about matters of some subtlety.

He is, of course, concerned only with the kind of improving silence of which he wishes there were more. He mentions solitary confinement as an example of malignant silence (though, in my experience as a prison doctor I have known more than a few prisoners beg for it, to get away from both the noise of prison and the crudity of its social relations). Many men and rather fewer women, I think, will agree with his praise of silence in the midst of an argument as a means of defusing, or at least limiting, what is said.

But there is one important weakness in his book, and that is that he fails to recognize an increased desire for noise on the part of the population, much of which now feels distinctly uneasy in its absence, that is to say when left alone with its own thoughts. Whether this new intolerance of silence developed spontaneously, that is to say the supply of electronically generated noise arose as a response to a popular demand for it, or whether, on the contrary, the commercial supply of such noise created the demand for it is now irrelevant. The fact is that the demand is now autonomous and real, as witnessed by the number of young people who cannot, or at least say that they cannot, concentrate in the absence of music (always of a low kind) poured into their ears, and a screen

flickering on the horizon of their peripheral vision. They react to the absence of such stimulation as one might react to a sudden silence in a jungle, that is to say, with fear and foreboding.

I am prepared to concede that the relation between the supply and demand for noise is a dialectical one, and that commercial companies are only too delighted to stimulate a demand that will require constant and lucrative satisfaction. Nevertheless, you cannot succeed in a marketplace unless you satisfy customers, and the fact is that no one forces young people into nightclubs from which they will emerge with either deafness or tinnitus. If there were a strong demand for the kind of quiet pub that both Professor Sim and I long for, namely the one in which it is possible to nurse a few drinks while settling the problems of the universe with others of like mind (or rather with what is far more important in the long run, the like taste), such pubs would flourish. They don't, because the demand is not sufficient.

Being politically radical if culturally conservative, he finds it more congenial to blame the noisiness of our society on commercial enterprises than on those who, for example, patronize noisy establishments or drive their cars with music played so loud that it is best measured on the Richter scale rather than in mere decibels. He wants to keep at bay the deeply subversive thought that man is not as good as he should be, and that this applies just as much to the common man as to the chief executives of cynically exploitative companies.

Some readers less partial than I to the blessings of silence, and with a less Usher-like horror of extraneous noise, might have welcomed, or rather demanded, more empirical evidence for the deleterious effects of noise; for while I am wholeheartedly on Professor Sim's side in this matter, it is nevertheless natural in everyone to suppose that the promotion of his own taste is essential to the cultural well-being of society.

I reached the office in which I had my appointment. I was still a little early, and looked forward to reading Professor Sim in silence. It was not to be: the reception area had a huge plasma television screen in one corner, and a radio amplifier in another: two competing streams of constant drivel.

"How can you stand it here all day?" I asked the receptionist.

She didn't mind it, she said; I suppose each stream of drivel rendered the other unintelligible.

"Could you turn them off?" I asked.

"I'm not allowed to," she said. "Besides, I don't even know where the controls are, so I don't know how to."

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise*, by Stuart Sim; Edinburgh University Press, 224 pages, \$25. [Go back to the text.](#)

Anthony Daniels's most recent book is *In Praise of Prejudice* (Encounter Books).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 26 April 2008, on page 63

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/the-sound-of-silence-3817>