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Disturbing the Sound of Silence:

Towards the Thick Vision of the Long Soviet Silence

This is the first paper I have written that seeks to connect explicitly my thoughts and research with the field of performance studies. It strikes me that silence – my subject matter here – has a far more nuanced and differentiated presence in the world of performance studies than in the broadly intersecting fields of memory and trauma studies, where I have had my tent set up for the past decade. I have come to silence by way of my research into the historical and psychic legacy of the seven decades of terror in the former Soviet Union. The more I threw myself into my research, the less certain I felt about things I thought I knew about trauma and memory. Perhaps, most critically, as this paper testifies, I have found myself increasingly unsure about the ways in which silence had been heard and imagined in much of the present day writing on memory and trauma. Within the Soviet context, I could, without forcing the issue in the slightest, discern a whole symphony of different silences beyond the paradigmatic traumatic or coercive kinds – *conscious* silence, *pragmatic* silence, *defiant* silence, *moral* silence and, of course, not to err on the side of the overly optimistic, *cowardly* and *opportunistic* silence. Through the prism of the Soviet experience I could clearly see that silence had multiple meanings, uses and registers in various historical and cultural contexts. The linguist and writer Ruth Wajnryb puts it beautifully in *The Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk* (2001), her book on the children of Holocaust survivors. Silence, Wajnryb writes, has many faces and meanings ‘as it fills the pauses and cracks and crannies of our discourse, of our relationships and of our lives’ (25).

In a recent essay in *Memory Studies*, Paul Connerton distinguishes seven types of forgetting – from repressive erasure through to forgetting as planned obsolescence or humiliated silence (2008: 59). He suggests that there could be many more kinds but his provisional taxonomy is, undoubtedly, an important and welcome step in breaking up the monolithic meanings of certain key words in trauma studies. An equally nuanced and differentiated view is necessary when we speak of being silent about, and in response to, the collectively shared experiences of terror. This paper seeks to begin this work of differentiated and attentive listening to silence by, on one hand, zeroing in on several historically specific, content and context-rich cultures of silence operating within the Soviet Union and, on the other hand, by tentatively reaching out to the knowledges garnered by performance studies in relation to questions of silence, performance, body and listening. I am not interested in

this paper in attempting to classify and catalogue. Much like in a sound check, as opposed to a performance, I am concerned here with testing out a range of registers and, essentially, sounding things out. When I speak about a particular kind of silence, I imagine myself plucking a string and listening for a while. This approach, rather some form of intellectual pouncing on the subject at hand, seems to me to be a fitting way to start.

Speaking about silence is, of course, one of those intellectual pursuits asking to be ridiculed. I find myself in this paper, for instance, talking at length about a song, or rather a sung poem, by one of the best Soviet bards, which mercilessly satirises the Soviet reincarnation of the old Russian dictum that ‘silence is gold’. In doing so, I am most likely committing a second-degree fallacy – talking about talking about silence. Writing about silences poses all manner of, what is euphemistically known as, challenges – in other words, we often do not know how to do it. Certainly in writing this paper I have felt at times as if I have been attempting to cut a cake with a chainsaw, but, on reflection, I still find this position preferable to claiming that silence is unknowable and unreachable or by being tone-deaf to its various registers.

Since my particular interest lies in the relationship between silence and social memory, I have found Jeffrey Olick’s (2007) insightful and enabling analysis of the relevance of the work of Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin to the study of social memory most helpful. Olick identifies ‘the ongoing addressivity and historicity of language’ as the central tenants of Bakhtin’s argument about the inherently dialogical nature of language (2007: 57). In Bakhtin’s view, the specificity of individual utterances is the product of a long historical development. While being context-specific, each utterance is also broadly responsive and shaped, whether explicitly or implicitly, by utterances that preceded it (Olick, 2007: 30). Olick makes particular use of Bakhtin’s concept of *genre* as historically accrued types of utterances that are formed in the present context but that also contain a memory of what came before them (59). Olick further extends Bakhtin’s vision of *genre* to denote ‘patterns of speaking structured as a set of conventions against which or within which those utterances are produced and read’ (59).

On the pages below, silences are imagined within this framework as broadly dialogic, as possessing both *addressivity* and *historicity*, as responsive to silences that preceded them and as forming loosely defined genres. Inevitably, I engage not so much with silences as such but with the ways in which they have been practiced, heard and made meaningful in specific cultural and historical contexts. Of course, by attempting to historicise silence, I inevitably end up treating it as a form of language and presenting a kind of a “flat earth” model, in which silence is stripped of the powers and dimensions which it possesses precisely by virtue of not being reducible to an utterance. This is not lost on me, but this paper sets itself a task of getting the ball rolling, in other words, of starting the process, which, with some luck, will lead to all manner of work on ethnographies and ecologies of silence, and which will avoid this kind of a flattening effect with time.

The Context

In fact, those who returned home from years in camps or exile received no victim counseling, no psychoanalysis, no cures for post- traumatic stress syndrome. "Coming to terms with the past" was not an option. Silence was mandatory and repression was obligatory. Indeed, the thirty years between Khrushchev's secret speech and the start of glasnost might reasonably be described as a vast experiment in anti- therapy. (Applebaum, 2002)

So writes Anne Applebaum, a renowned author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gulag: A History* (2004). As a former Homo Sovieticus, I find this passage intensely jarring. Perhaps, this is precisely the intention – to throw into sharp relief the vast differences between the paradigmatic experiences of trauma in the western world and in the Soviet Union, to show how absurd the all too comfortable and familiar ideas of therapy or post-traumatic stress syndrome seem when applied to the Soviet experience. Forget about therapy, when dealing with the Soviet history, the very idea of the post-traumatic, as Applebaum knows all too well, becomes (to put it politely) a bit of a joke. Where precisely can we locate the “post” in the Soviet trauma? After the death of Stalin? After Khrushchev’s speech at the 20th Congress? But the Gulag was only closed in the 1980s three decades after the Stalin’s death and the denunciations of Stalin’s cult of personality were strictly partial and self-serving.

For decades the “former enemies”, even the ones officially rehabilitated by the regime, were systematically and deliberately ostracised and surrounded by red tape on all sides. The wall of public silence, brought down briefly during Khrushchev’s thaw, went up again and stayed up right through Brezhnev’s “stagnation”. The point is, as Jehanne Gheith notes:

[that] the Gulag was in many ways continuous with Soviet society. This means that it is harder to separate the trauma of the Gulag from the trauma of living in Soviet society (or even to decide if trauma is the right word for this living). (Gheith, 2007:161)

Yet I find Applebaum’s words jarring not only and not primarily because they point to the glaring absence in the Soviet historical continuum of any conditions conducive to individual or collective psychic repair, but because essentially they seem to come from another planet. I find that when it comes to the Soviet experience, our standard trauma staple – testimony, witnessing, transmission, healing, mourning, working through the loss – are on a rather shaky ground. Could it be, asks Catherine Merridale in her wonderful *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia*, ‘that notions of psychological trauma are genuinely irrelevant to Russian minds, as foreign as the imported machinery that seizes up and fails in a Siberian winter’ (2000: 21).

I have no desire to argue here that the body of ideas that surround the notion of trauma has no genuine relevance to the Soviet and post-Soviet experience. Clearly this is not the case. Yet I do think that some of the more widely held assumptions about trauma can appear very much like Merridale’s ‘imported machinery’ – excellent things for an altogether

different climate (2000: 25). In her ground-breaking article on silence and non-narrative memory in the Soviet labour camps, Gheith asks a question, which has been on my mind for a decade. Why is it that the Gulag, surely one of the pivotal traumas of the twentieth century, is only very rarely remembered in the western discourses on trauma? Gheith's answer is that we 'have become so used to "trauma" being defined in certain ways that we do not know how to interpret the catastrophic suffering of the Gulag: it does not look like anything we know' (Gheith, 2007: 162). And because it *does not look like anything we know*, it is made to seem invisible or, at best, relegated to the footnotes of the constantly growing literature on trauma and memory. This is an important point because of a tendency to inflict certain ideas about trauma and memory on the historical material or on people's stories. 'There are some kinds of writing about distress', writes Merridale, 'that build towards a kind of self-affirming condescension' (2000: 25). Perhaps, this is what Anne Applebaum's passage quoted earlier smelt of to me – *the self-affirming condescension* which makes us miss the point altogether when it comes to people's stories and experiences radically different to our own.

Following Gorbachev's reforms in the mid-1980s, a pattern familiar to anyone interested in memory and trauma could be seen at work in the final years of the Soviet Union and in the first few years following its collapse. The lifting of the external mechanisms of silencing had resulted in what historian Irina Paperno called 'an overwhelming outpouring of memoirs, diaries, and other personal accounts of life under the Soviet regime' from the late 1980s onwards (2002: 577). The removal of repression, in other words, led to an explosion of talking. Yet in analysing this explosion, Paperno felt the need 'to suspend, as far as possible, explanatory categories that have been readily available in Western academia' (577). These included the concepts of collective memory and of "'mastering of the past'", but also, importantly for us here, the notions of testimony and trauma 'insofar as they imply the therapeutic nature of recollection and revelation' (577-78). While not denying the importance of trauma and testimony as categories of analysis, Paperno argued that they were not so much misleading but insufficient to make sense of the Soviet experience. [1] To begin making sense of this experience, we would need to start off by unpeeling certain ideas from each other: *healing* from *testimony*, and *trauma* or *pathology* from *silence*.

The Long Soviet Silence

In the Soviet Union, what Jeanne Gheith terms, 'a long silence' about the regime's large scale slaughter of its own people persisted for decades (2007: 161). Many societies have been plagued by silences, but in the Soviet Union 'remembering has been dangerous at least since the 1920s' (Khubova et al, 2005: 89). This *long silence* only ended in the 1980s and certainly not for everyone. Writing in 1990 just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian historians Daria Khubova, Andrei Ivankiev and Tonia Sharova spoke of the great difficulties they faced in collecting oral history. Even in Moscow people would get suspicious when asked to be interviewed and demand to see the historians' IDs.

We say, "Oh, there is no problem. Everything is OK, I am a student from the institute, I am not from the KGB." And they say, "Oh, but maybe you

have two documents! In this pocket and this pocket. One from the university, the other from the KGB...". (Khubova, 2005: 101)

At present, under the Putin-Medvedev government when the Soviet era is being actively rehabilitated, there is a real possibility of that era of one ID per pocket making a comeback. Certainly, the fear is back as well as the wide scale silencing of dissenting voices and histories. It is all on the news, impossible to miss.

Yet in order for *the long Soviet silence* not to be reduced to a metaphor or some kind of hollow symbol of the oppressive Soviet totalitarianism, we need to attend to its historical dimensions and to the different genres of silence operating within the Soviet context. The act of speaking in the Soviet Union always had the potential to end badly. For decades, one word, a joke, a complaint, a sentence said in passing or wildly misinterpreted, could become grounds for arrest, camps, exile or execution. In other words, what Catherine Merridale calls a 'lifetime's habit of silence' (2000: 22) was an externally imposed existential condition and, in no uncertain terms, a matter of life and death: countless Soviet citizens 'have used silence all their lives because it was their only practical option' (22). Of course, when silence is externally imposed, it does not mean that it will not become deeply internalised. The external coercion of the State mutates into cultural codes of silence and becomes a cultural 'given'. These cultural codes then become internalised as conscious or unconscious self-censorship. Silence becomes embodied, transmitted through family and normalised.

What is at issue here is the tendency to pathologise silence as a whole, to imagine it as deeply crippling and disabling both for individuals, families and societies at large. I would caution against such conclusions not because I would like to advocate the therapeutic qualities of silence within totalitarian regimes, but because these assumptions often lead to *the self-affirming condescension* with which we imagine the lives of people in various circumstances radically different to our own. Silence as a coping mechanism is very different, if not entirely extraneous, to silence as an outright psychic repression. Silence which is consciously chosen by parents to protect their children from the dire and tangible consequences of knowing something undesirable about family history, is not the same as silence which functions as, primarily, a reflection of deep fear or shame. Silence can also be a way of dissenting, 'a refusal to do what is expected' (Sim, 2007: 13). It can be the refusal, for example to denounce fellow writers, to write odes to Stalin and the Soviet regime, to praise the designated heroes and to vilify the designated enemies. 'Not to say something', writes Stuart Sim, 'becomes as meaningful as saying something when there is a conscious decision to refrain from communicating verbally' (13).

In a broader sense, the *long Soviet silence* and its many genres, while, undoubtedly, deeply damaging and repressive, did not automatically mean that Soviet people and society simply fermented in their trauma. What it meant amongst other things is that, as Gheith (2007) astutely points out, people developed non-narrative ways of coping. It also meant that memories of the suffering and hardships, which often could not be expressed through direct narrative, found their way out indirectly – through body, affect, performance, behaviour,

values, habits and, of course, in the artistic arena – through allusion, metaphor, parable and humour. The necessity to stay silent did not bury memories alive but, instead, created other kinds and spaces of articulation. At the same time, different genres within silence meant that it was appropriated for a variety of purposes – from sheer survival, to the cynical ladder-climbing or the full-voiced expression of dissent.

Silence, Trauma and Memory

This paper is held together by my belief that it is essential that we subject our models of memory and trauma to the questions posed by very different kinds of historical experience and legacy. When we do so, many ideas we may hold as self-evident become much less so. As someone whose research is concerned with questions of social memory, I have come to see that in the Soviet Union the majority of memories of traumatic events were not captured in narrative but remained a kind of raw psychic material channelled and performed through people's bodies, habits (conscious and unconscious), behaviours and attitudes. This affective, non-narrative memory existed at the intersections of memory, trauma and performance. In this context, silence should not be seen unequivocally as the burial ground of memory – the metaphoric place, where memories are extinguished, eroded or dissolved. On the contrary, silence could be a holding place for memories, or their hiding spot, and importantly, it could be a medium for their transmission alongside a more conventional medium of narrative.

Many trauma theorists have emphasised the seemingly irreconcilable opposition between trauma and narrative. James Berger, for instance, characterised trauma theory as a 'discourse of the unrepresentable, of the event or object that destabilizes language and demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with what went before' (1997: 573). In the oft-cited words of Cathy Caruth, the 'historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all (1991:187). Historian Eric Santner has criticised *narrative fetishism* – 'the construction and deployment of a narrative that is consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place' (1992:144). For Santner, narrative fetishism 'is the way an inability or refusal to mourn enplots traumatic events' (144).

Other theorists have posited the working-through of the past as a difficult act of passing through the gates of language from the unrepresentability of trauma to the reconstitution of one's shattered self through testimony and transmission (Herman 1992, Felman 1992, Laub, Wajnryb 2001). It may be fragmented, besieged, emerging painfully out of the ashes of a historical experience, but the possibility of narrative signals a breakthrough in the domain of the post-traumatic. And so silence, while perfectly understandable and symptomatic, is usually seen in semi-pathological terms. Conceived as a necessary and unavoidable step in dealing with trauma, the act of breaking silence becomes imbued with the powers to heal and transform.

We have, in other words, come to expect trauma to be shadowed by the notion of narrative in a variety of guises. When the language falls short or altogether fails, as frequently happens in the aftermath of traumatic events, we have come to see that, as Gabrielle Schwab writes,

it is the body that becomes the site of narration enacting in a corporeal cryptography the conflict between the encrypted lost self and the traumatized self. In telling this story, the body can speak as a cannibal from inside, devouring food or ejecting it violently. It can speak as the old self requiring to be touched like the child who is still whole, seeking a healing touch that can put the body back together. The body can abandon itself and speak the trauma of disrupted care; it can hurt itself to speak the pain; it can waste away to speak the wish to die.' (Schwab, 2006: 99)

This emphasis on narration, whether impossible, desirable or displaced onto the body, leaves little space for a nuanced discussion of silence. Yet surely the vision of embodied trauma has profound implications for our understanding of the relationship between trauma and silence. How does silence inhabit, transform and speak through our bodies? What is the relationship between speaking and not speaking, narrative and silence? And how does memory figure in all of this?

Schwab writes with great poignancy and insight about the way in which war stories she constantly heard as a child around a dinner table were 'curiously contained' (96). Instead of exposing and testifying to the pain and loss, 'the stories have grown over the wound like a second skin' (96). Narration, in other words, can act not as a talking cure but as an anaesthetic because as much as it can promote remembering it can also enable forgetting. 'It took me almost half a century', Schwab writes, 'to understand that the purpose of those stories was not to remember but to forget. They were supposed to cover up, to mute the pain and guilt and shame, to fill the void of terror' (97). As a child, Schwab saw that something was amiss in these stories and she felt deeply confused. Her trust in herself and the world were shaken. 'Words', it turned out, 'could be split into what they said and what they did not say' (97).

In her work on the transmission of memory in the Holocaust survivor households Ruth Wajnryb talks about 'two kinds of conflicted energy' that shape the interaction between survivors and their children:

on the part of the survivor, it is the attempt to tell and the accompanying suppression of telling; on the part of the descendant, it is the wanting to know, and the accompanying fear of finding out. (2001: 32)

This is a far more nuanced reading of the dynamics between speaking, listening and silence that we have to come expect. 'I have learned', Wajnryb writes,

that silence is as complex as spoken language, as differentiated and as subtle. Sometimes it is self-imposed, sometimes, other-imposed. Sometimes it is driven by the urge to protect or salvage or cherish; other times, as a weapon of defense or control or denial. One thing that underscores all instances: it is rarely unproblematic. (2001: 51)

Silence in the Public Sphere

Yet in the public arena silence is most frequently associated with the denial of truth and the exercise of power, with oppression and marginalisation. This silence is heavy, oppressive, pregnant and, last but not least, deadly. For sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, whose recent book on conspiracies of silence was met with much acclaim, silence is 'the most public form of denial' (2006: 4). It is, he says, often a pain avoidance strategy when things are *too terrible for words*. Just as often, Zerubavel argues, conspiracies of silence are generated by fear and shame (5-16). For Zerubavel, the only way through silence is by breaking it, smashing it to pieces.

Silence in this vision is the barrier to truth and justice. Zerubavel's ideas seem borne out by a quick glance at our language. Dissenting voices are silenced... The silent majority nods in agreement... The conspiracy of silence... Smashing the wall of silence... The silence of the lambs.... In Australia, we have the great "Australian silence" about the scale and legacy of the colonial violence and dispossession, generated exactly by Zerubavel's troika of pain avoidance, fear and shame. In the public sphere, silence about trauma is seen as positive and legitimate primarily in relation to the public expressions of mourning. The widely observed tradition of a "Minute of Silence" is one example of this recognition of the relationship between silence and grief. According to David Getsy, the Moment of Silence

establishes a bracketed time in which private emotions appear as performed absence. This act of voicing loss through the cessation of voice itself serves not just as a powerful act for participants but also as a reminder of the resonance of silence as a metaphoric zone in which the personal is made public. (2008: 11)

However, outside of the contexts of mourning, silence in the public sphere is often regarded with considerable suspicion. There are, of course, voices that call for a more nuanced understanding of the politics of silence. Writing about the long aftermath of colonialism in Canada and Australia, Elizabeth Furniss wonders about how we may begin 'an ethnography of silence' and she suggests that we can start by distinguishing between 'deliberate silence', 'repressive silence' and 'traumatic silence' (2006: 187-191). In *Feminist Communication Theory* (2004) Lana Rakow and Laura Wackwitz argue that the time is ripe to stop taking at face value, clichés about silence as empty or oppressive. Instead, we must engage 'assumptions about silence equally with assumptions about voice in order to tease out what is needed for theoretical and political complexity' (2004: 95).

Genres of Silence – Some Preliminary Thoughts

In the field of linguistics, it has long been understood that, as Adam Jaworski writes, ‘silence and speech do not stand in total opposition to each other, but form a continuum of forms’ (1993: 34). In a chapter dedicated to silence in *The Language of Philosophy*, Russian philosopher Vladimir Bibihin writes that ‘language, one way or another, cannot be reduced to the selection of signs to correspond with things. It starts with the choice to speak or not to speak’ (2002: 33). [2] Silence within this context, as critic Mikhail Epstein notes, is not the end but the continuation of the conversation, ‘its extra-verbal articulation’ because ultimately the choice between speaking and not speaking ‘is a concealed act of speech’ (2005).

Epstein develops Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea that ‘silence is only possible about the human realm’ by distinguishing between *silence* and *quiet* (Bakhtin, 1979: 338):

We cannot say ‘the quiet about something’ ... the quiet has no theme and no author. Unlike silence, it is a condition of being, not an action enacted by a subject and corresponding to an object. (Epstein 2005)

‘Silence’, he continues, ‘is a form of consciousness, a method of its articulation, and it takes its rightful place alongside its other forms – to think about ... to speak about ... to ask about ... to write about ... to be silent about...’ (Epstein, 2005).

Bibihin’s ideas about silence in the Russian Soviet and post-Soviet contexts are uniquely pertinent to our discussion of trauma and memory. ‘There are events’, he writes, ‘the full engagement with which demands the refusal of naming and comprehension’ (2002: 34). This is a very different proposition to the one, which insists that traumatic events by their nature defy language. In this formulation the silences produced by traumatic events preclude the full engagement with them. Silence then is the barrier to the full engagement, the barbed wire around a traumatic core. Yet in Bibihin’s view, the opposite can be true as well. At times, silence can be not only a conscious choice, but also the only real way into the full engagement with certain kinds of histories and experiences.

Silence, as a choice not to speak, is embedded in the specific historical dimension of the Soviet reality. What I mean by this is that for seventy years, the Soviet regime used endless barrages of words in ways that profoundly devalued both them and, eventually, the very act of speaking. ‘Ideology’, writes Epstein, ‘is the language of spells and curses, linguistic sorcery’ (2005). In a totalitarian society such as the Soviet Union we can see it in the endless repetition of the same slogans and idioms as though they were spells and incantations, in the radical disjuncture between words and reality and in the ways in which words were used to transform or condemn whole categories of people and things. “Lenin”, “Stalin”, “proletariat”, “kulak”, “the patriotic duty”, “all workers unite”, “the enemy of the people”, “anti-Soviet activities”: these are words – incantations, not simply slogans repeated ad nauseam. [3]

Interestingly, in post-Soviet Russia the profound distrust of words is alive and well. I have found one of its most eloquent expressions in a recent monologue entitled 'The Quiet' by the much-loved satirist Mikhail Zhvanetsky (2005). Zvanetsky's monologues are a unique combination of the satirical and lyrical. They are written to be performed rather than read but they still sparkle on the page. In their intense musicality, in their deliberate use of rhythm, repetition and silence, they resemble long poems rather than stand up routines.

The Quiet

How it all panned out, who would have thought.

With this abundance of images – there is nothing to see. With this ubiquity of radio – there is nothing to listen to. With this quantity of newspapers – there is nothing to read. And thank God.

...

We travelled to this quiet through the whole TV-sewerage complex, catastrophes, the whaling of ambulances,

Through the screeching of brakes, shoot-outs, moaning in our beds and in hospitals.

Through the Parliament applause signaling the start of the next bloody crisis,

Through the endless war in Caucases, through the falling skyscrapers,

Through the pre-election dirt, through countless commentators,

Who make the unambiguous seem full of endless possible meanings

...

You cannot wash in the dirty water. You cannot eat what has been chewed.

I do not believe we have asked for any of it.

And even if we did, I will not look for another country. I will just wait.

I will turn everything off and just wait.

This idea of turning everything off, tuning out and just waiting for things to run their course is deeply familiar to most Soviet and post-Soviet people – it is what many critics and historians have labelled Russian (or Soviet) fatalism. It is just that Zhvanetsky is saying these things in 2005. We were right not to believe a single word in the 1970s, he says, and we are right not to believe a single word three decades later. The exponential growth of newspapers or radio stations means simply that the fungus has spread. The lying, cynical, dangerously meaningless streams of words now fill the pages not of one State owned newspaper but of fifty, one hundred or one thousand different publications. Smoke and mirrors, ladies and gentlemen.

And *thank God*. *Thank God* because, no matter what we think, Zhvanetsky tells us, the language in our public sphere will always remain 'the dirty water' in which we can never wash ourselves clean. It will always be the food we cannot eat because it 'has been chewed'. The explosion of talking in the late 1980s and 1990s, of debating ceaselessly and

screaming over the top of each other has, according to Zhvanetsky, turned into so much of the white noise.

Yet silence should not be seen as utopian. It is alive. It has very different dimensions and registers. It is a work-in-progress. Despite his profound respect for the cultural and psychic work performed by silence, philosopher Vladimir Bibihin noted that it was ‘difficult for not speaking to remain silence’ (2002: 34). In other words, not- speaking can easily become an act of evasion or, worse still, an expression of moral cowardice and complicity. A uniquely Soviet take on this idea has found a masterful and laconic expression in the work of Aleksander Galich (1983). The name of Galich is not particularly well known in the English speaking world partially because his “sung poetry”, embedded so deeply in the Soviet culture, history and language, is very difficult to translate. Still, in the 1960s and 1970s millions in the Soviet Union knew and loved his biting and defiant poem-songs, recorded on cassettes and passed from one person to another.

Gerald Stanton Smith, Galich’s brilliant translator into English, characterises these songs as ‘narrative ballads’ (Galich, 1983: 28). ‘Forgettable as a Soviet writer’, Smith writes, Galich ‘became immortal as a Russian satirist’ (50). Why? In this very insightful and lyrical passage Smith explains:

He digs down into the stuff of the daily grind, the grim and exhausting struggle to carve out even a half-decent existence in the face of the monstrous dismalness of a bureaucratic, secretive, dogmatic, obscurantist, and at the same time pathologically self-congratulatory system. He does this with an epigrammatic sureness of touch, and an ever-open eye for the human pathos that the struggle continually points up. (Galich, 1983: 29)

This *epigrammatic sureness of touch* is evident in one of Galich’s most celebrated songs, ‘Goldminer’s Waltz’, otherwise known as ‘Silence is Gold’:

For years we hardened our minds and hearts,
It was wiser to keep your eyes low,
Many times, many ways we played silent parts
But that silence meant yes, and not no!
The loudmouths and moaners who caused a fuss,
Not one of them’s lived to grow old...
It’s the say-nothings now who rule over us,
Because, you know, silence is gold. (Galich, 1983: 142)

And then later in a refrain,

Hold your tongue, you’ll make number one!
Hold your tongue, hold your tongue, hold your tongue! (Galich, 1983: 142)

Silence here again is a choice, a choice not to act. Silence is a criminal complicity, a cynical and soul destroying strategy of survival and self advancement. The army of petty and jealous actors only capable of playing *silent parts* – this is as damning and accurate an indictment of Brezhnev’s era as you are likely to encounter. The 1930s may have been the era of informers, but the late 1960s and 1970s, Galich tells us, were the times of *say-nothings*. They may have looked grey or beige but, make no mistake, these too were the Dark Times – a moral plague, an epidemic of silence.

As words on paper, the words of Galich may seem as your run-of-the-mill earnest song of protest written from within a totalitarian regime. Yet when performed by Galich, the ‘Waltz’ was pure savagery. Its rhymes were razor-sharp, its sentiments merciless, its build-up explosive and its attack on the Russian age-old wisdom of ‘silence is gold’ unforgettable. Galich was, of course, to pay the price for this and other songs. Thrown out of the Union of Writers, unable to find any work, destitute and harassed, he was forced into emigration in 1974 and died in Paris in 1977 as a result of an accident.

The fact that Galich chose ‘sung poetry’ (Galich, 1983: 31) as his creative medium is significant because it testifies to the rupture between the oral and the written word in the Soviet Union – another factor to consider in our analysis of silence and articulation. As Dmitriy Sporov writes, ‘[t]he devaluation of trust in the written word in the Soviet Union returned the society, in the astute expression of Anna Akhmatova, to the pre-Gutenberg system of communication’ (2005). Galich, who always thought of himself as a poet not a bard, has made a conscious decision ‘that the “pre- Gutenberg” genre of the song would afford his message the maximum impact and penetration’ (Galich, 1983: 31). In the Soviet Union the co-existence of silence as defiance and silence as connivance has created a third category of silence, particularly prevalent in certain circles of intelligentsia. Epstein calls it the double- silence – ‘the surrender to the Master’s ban of the free word and, simultaneously, the resistance of the Master’s expectation of the slavish word’ (2005). While it was not possible to speak freely, ‘it was possible to maintain free silence – not to say “yes”, not to join in the applause’ (2005).

What Performance Studies Knows about Silence

What can performance studies bring to this particular conversation about silence? For one, a highly developed understanding of silence as an aesthetic and critical practice. There is, after all, a long and proud history of silence in musical compositions, theatre, performance, dance, film and visual arts. Cage, Beckett, Cunningham, Bergman, Malevich, Duchamp have all unleashed the oppressive, liberating, transformative potential of silence in their work. Silence, in other words, is well and truly part of the artistic language. Its power and complexity are widely recognised and used.

Writing about the transformative power of silence in music compositions, Elissa Goodrich is able to discern ‘political silence, violent silence, moral silence, temporal silence’, ‘silence as stillness’ and ‘silence as embodying sorrow and grief’ in a small group of compositions she examines (2005). ‘Silence’, she writes, ‘is perhaps the most powerful

“tool” for a musician or composer’ (2005). ‘Musical silence’, writes Jennifer Judkins, ‘has been used more often as a compositional device in twentieth-century compositions than at any other time in the history of music’ (1997: 51). The characterisation of musical silence, she argues ‘is one of the most crucial musical decisions made during a performance’ (40). Judkins distinguishes between framing silence (pre- and post-performative and between movements) and internal silences as musical voids (grand pauses, fermatas, caesuras). In explicating internal silences, she draws parallels between music and visual arts. ‘Longer internal silences in music’, she argues, ‘often play much the same role as the “holes” in Henry Moore’s sculptures: at once pointing to what is missing and highlighting what is present’ (40- 41). Importantly, Judkins also points to musicians’ keenly-developed abilities of listening to silence:

In the process of testing the characteristics of each stage and hall prior to the concert, the musician is also discovering the nature of silence in that hall. The responsiveness to the instrument, the length of reverberation, the delicacy of a *pianissimo* – all demonstrate not only the quality of sound but also the quality of silence on that stage. (43)

At the same time, ‘the use of silence as a dramaturgical convention in the modern theatre’ originating from Anton Chekhov and arguably culminating in Beckett is extensively documented (Lutterbie, 1988: 468). Theater is the place, writes Joseph Roach, ‘where deep silences can either follow significant revelations or create the emotional space in which revelation can enter’ (2001: 307). Known as *liturgical silences*, these moments in theatre ‘carry over from devotional practices to secular performance events’ (308). Drawing on John Cage’s famous silent compositions and on the work of well known American feminist performance artist Deb Margolin, Gwendolyn Arker argues that silence, ‘while seemingly passive and defined in opposition to speech, undermines its own ontology through performance and reverses the roles of activity and passivity between she who acts and she who listens’ (2008: 123). Arker, who has had many interesting conversations with Margolin about her views on silence in performance art, includes the following statement from Margolin, which I find particularly arresting:

I’ve been thinking about this nonstop for years. You know, the issue of silence, I talk so much, but really, when I go onstage, and the lights come up, that’s what I mean. There’s not one thing I say that doesn’t slide like an egg off a brick wall. And of course, I enjoy the egg, and I enjoy the sliding, and I enjoy the hurling, and I enjoy the crack of the thing. But honestly [...] if I were less awkward and less shy, I would just stand there. I would make that interesting. (Margolin in Arker, 2008: 129)

I am undoubtedly just scratching the surface here but it is obvious that there exists a great wealth of insights about silence in performance studies and in various crossover and interdisciplinary ventures. The study of music and anthropology, for instance, has led Steven Feld to develop the notion of ‘acoustic ecology’ (1990). This inspired notion is further extended in the work of anthropologist Philip Peek, who argues most convincingly

for the critical importance of scholars in various fields learning to ‘hear’ societies and to appreciate ‘how fundamental not just human speech but aurality in general is to human existence’ (1994: 475). After all, As Peek points out, ‘because our experience of the world is multisensory, so must be our study of that experience’ (489). It seems almost all too evident to suggest that our study of human experience must include the complex and varied roles silence, or rather, different genres of silence, play in our society as well as in societies and contexts radically different to our own. This is where, I am certain, performance studies is bound to prove indispensable.

Endnotes

[1] Paperno found that many of the personal accounts of repressions and camps had not just been driven by the urge to document, honour or master the past. Another urge was at play in them as well – to fill ‘the vacuousness of the post-Soviet present’ and to start ‘a new utopian project: to inhabit the future.’ (2002: 610) ‘With the collapse of the Soviet regime’, Paperno explained, ‘the promised boundless future of the communist utopia has folded down: another future is being built – a future past, a history of yesterday that will be written tomorrow’ (610).

[2] All translations from Russian are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

[3] This tendency towards linguistic sorcery of varying crudeness exists, of course, in all societies not simply in dictatorships. We can see it, for instance, in our very own Kevin’s Rudd’s much-satirised repetition of the expression “workingfamilies”.

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Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:
http://web.archive.org/web/*/performanceparadigm.net

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