

Silent night

Description

Silence is close to noise in its effects. In his study of a Paris housing estate, the sociologist Jean-François Augoyard reports the experiences of people inside an elevator: "Dramatic evocations are set in gear on the basis of noises." • Noises invoke haunted castles, but "the most dramatic images arise with the halt of the noise, at the point where one no longer knows whether one is moving or if one is stuck." •



Deer Shelter at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2006, by James Turrell: "a calm space for quiet contemplation"

Silences bounded either side by noise are even more potent than silences alone, as are noises interspersed with silence. Silences have boundaries, which contribute substantially to their character. For film theorist Michel Chion, the impression of silence in a film requires preparation. It is the result of the contrast to a previous very loud moment: "Silence is never a neutral emptiness." •

The composer John Cage reinforces the point that "there is no such thing as silence," often paraphrased as "silence is not nothing." • Absence is noisy and ambiguous. After all, it is a trivial truth that there are more things that can be off screen at any moment than in the frame.

Eavesdroppers picking up on someone's conversation on a mobile phone have to infer from only half of the conversation what the other party is saying, which is to say, to discriminate from a range of possible remarks. Mobile phone conversations are experienced vicariously as so many bounded silences.

Think of silence not as nothing but as so much white noise containing every possible signal. Here silence is a bit like space: full of potential, given character by what bounds it, and is elusive in isolation.

All is calm, yet all is bright.

References

- Augoyard, Jean-François. 2007. *Step by Step: Everyday Walks in a French Urban Housing Project*. Trans. D. A. Curtis. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. First published in French in 1979.
- Cage, John. 1968. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. London: Marion Boyars.

- Chion, Michel. 1994. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Trans. C. Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press.

Category

1. Voice and text

Tags

1. John Cage
2. music
3. noise
4. sound
5. space

Date Created

December 24, 2010

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark