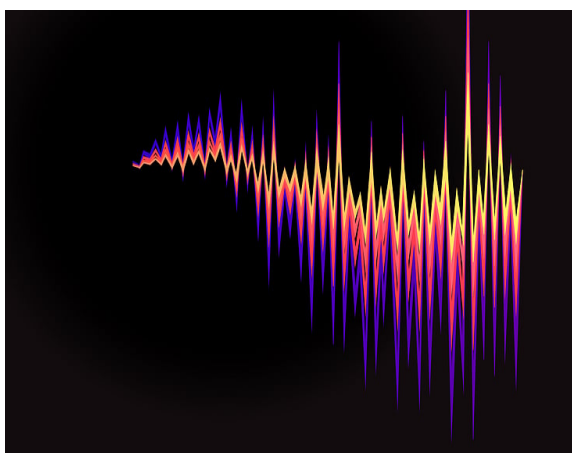


All Talk

By Theodore Dalrymple

Whenever I try to escape pop music relayed in public places at high volume—which is often, though considerably less often with success—the thought comes into my mind that the harnessing of electricity was a disaster, if not for humanity, at least for civilization if good taste be part of that much-derided entity.



Modern pop music is to the West what speeches by North Korea's greatest scientist, composer of operas, huntsman, industrial chemist, engineer, poet, agronomist, philosopher, economist, military strategist—in short, its present leader—are to North Korea, namely inescapable. If I were an absolute dictator, which fortunately for me among others I am not, I would forbid the public relay of such music under pain of death by deprivation of sleep.

Unnecessary noise should be regarded in the same way as cigarette smoke now is, a pollutant that infringes the rights of anyone subjected involuntarily to it. My sensitivity to cigarette smoke, incidentally, is now very acute: The other day, in the open street, there was a man sitting on a low wall smoking a cigarette a few yards from me, and I began to cough. This was not merely a psychosomatic reaction; I began to cough before I saw the source of what caused me to do so.

I must have grown up in a world that smelt like an ashtray, so great was the proportion of the population that smoked, but I did not notice it, any more than I noticed the air itself. Every curtain, every carpet, must have been saturated with such smoke, now stale, to say nothing of the fug created by cigarettes under current use. I remember the days when you could smoke on trains and airplanes. At the back of the cabin of the planes were the seats for smokers, not separated off from the rest of the fuselage, and if you were a nonsmoker such as I, you were often (so it seemed) allocated the row just in front of the first of the smokers' seats, such that you might as well have been in the midst of them. Cigarette smoke on flights was as inescapable as crying babies now seem to be.

There is in the matter of sensitivity to unpleasantness in the environment something akin to the law of marginal utility in economics, according to which a hundred dollars is of more use or importance to a poor man than it is to a multibillionaire. Thus, if one lives as far as one can in silence, the more disturbing even slight noise becomes. (By noise, I mean sound that one does not desire or plan to make or hear for oneself.) The older I get, the more like Roderick Usher, as in the fall of the house of said *Usher*, or like Marcel Proust, who lined his room with cork to escape noise, I become. I try to flee noise wherever I hear it.

Certain noises are more disturbing than others, at least to me. The sound of the human voice is hard to ignore and very distracting, and purely instrumental music less destructive of concentration than vocal. I was on a train in England yesterday for a couple of hours, and everyone around me was talking in a kind of relay, so that there was never a moment's peace. It was as if everyone in the carriage felt a duty to banish silence as something unhealthy, a miasma to be dispersed. No one lowered his voice so as not to be overheard; it seemed that everyone wanted to be overheard.

I could hardly read my book for longer than a few moments, and before long gave up, or in, and listened to what everyone else was saying. It is only then in doing something like this that you come to appreciate the sheer banality of most human communication, like some of the satirical dialogue in the plays of Ionesco. Most people seem more determined to say something, usually about themselves, than to converse, at least in the sense that true conversation implies a give-and-take about a subject with a logical connection between successive utterances. A great deal of what passes for conversation is actually two or more monologues.

I am not totally immune from the tendency myself. Sometimes I am determined to deliver an opinion about something even when the conversation has moved on to a completely different subject, and I am determined to bring it back to the one about which I have so urgent an opinion. I feel that the world would be the loser if I failed to say what I had in my mind, so important is it. Whatever the context, therefore, I say what I have to say, and say it.

I do not give, or even attend, many public lectures, but I have noticed that, whenever I do, there is always someone present who, during the question-and-answer session afterward, makes a speech that he is determined to deliver and was obviously prepared long before the lecture whether or not it be relevant to whatever the lecturer has said. Often the moderator has to recall him to the fact that he is supposed to be asking a question, at which point (depending on the forcefulness of the moderator's personality) he either continues as before or asks a brief and banal question that he could just as well have asked without all that he has previously said. Such a person is obviously a lecturer *manqué*: At some level in his mind, he thinks that he should really have been the one giving the lecture, not the lecturer, a poor creature by comparison with himself.

In front of me in the train was a man speaking intermittently

into his phone about his business affairs. Again, I have noticed that when people speak of their business affairs on a train, they never deal in less than millions, though the urgency of their communication with whoever is at the other end of the phone seems less than urgent and could well have waited until the end of the journey. Their part of the conversation is a performance for the sake of a captive audience in the train rather than a true communication.

Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark, wrote Francis Bacon 400 years ago. Today he would write that men fear silence as children fear to go in the dark. Patients in the prison in which I worked used sometimes to ask me whether I could stop them thinking: not stop them thinking about something in particular, but stop them thinking thoughts *as such*. They longed for oblivion.

First published in [Taki's Magazine](#)