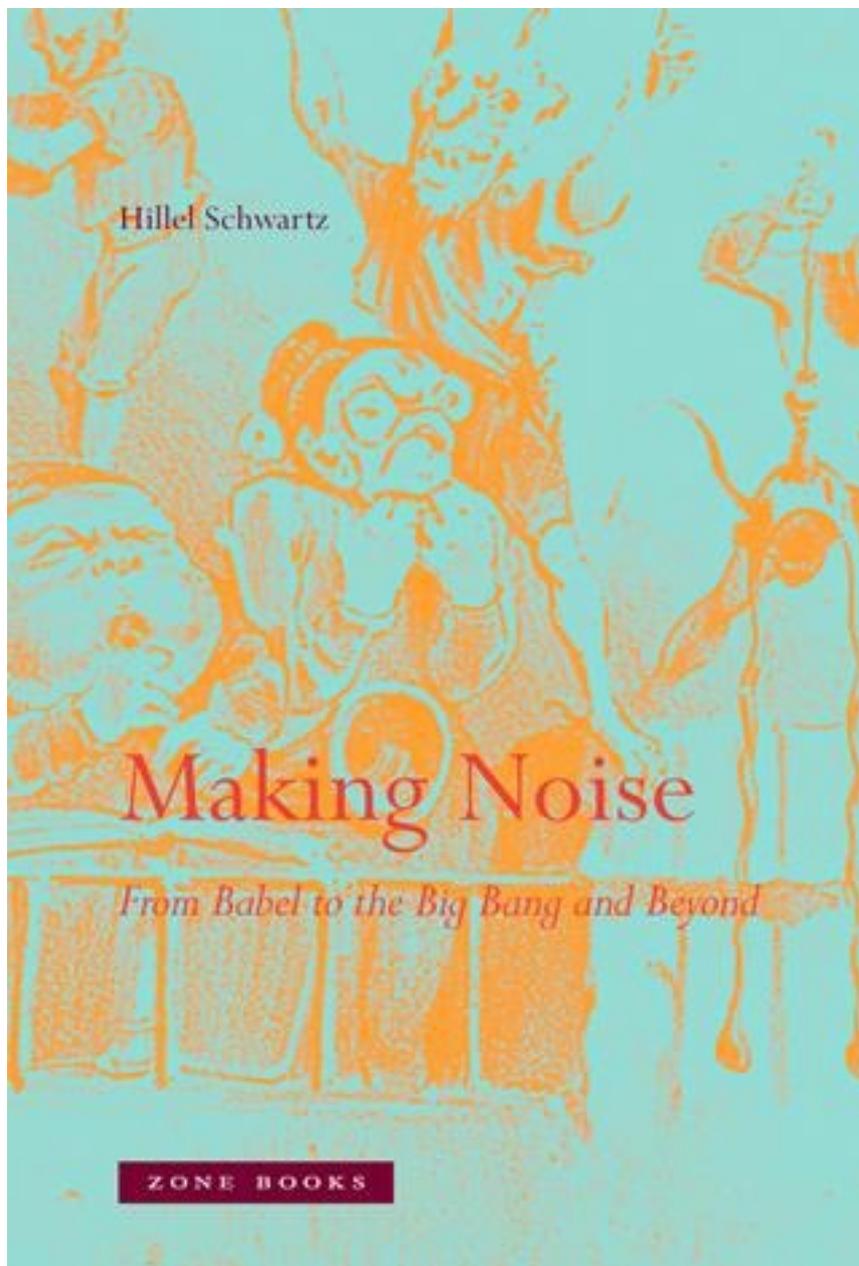


Book Review

Making Noise From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond by Hillel Schwartz

By Robin Parmar



Hillel Schwartz's *Making Noise* (2011, Zone Books) takes its place in the growing library of literature on acoustic pandemonium, the hubbub of the masses, the eternal cacophony of nature, the din of industry and military, the cry of the distressed, that certain ringing in the ears... noise, in short. Or *From Babel to the Big Bang & Beyond*, as the subtitle has it. This topic is popular at the moment, judging by the proliferation of conferences and publications. If it does nothing else, this volume convinces that noise has always been a hot topic, from the very birth of the universe, through the gestation of human culture, right on down the line to the (near) present.

It is the book's physical aspect that first impresses: a massive tome of 912 pages augmented by a further 349 pages of notes available from the Zone Books website. This bounty is the result of a remarkable amount of research; the author thanks "librarians, curators, and archivists" from no fewer than "245 institutions and associations" (p. 14). Despite this, one of the main criticisms one might level at Schwartz is how much he leaves unsaid, how circumspect he is about grappling with the nature of noise, its ontology and phenomenology. *Making Noise* frames its subject so as to exclude important approaches and examinations. This point will be expanded upon later, after an examination of the diverse contents of the text.

The structure of the book is straightforward enough: an introduction followed by three sections that trace and retrace lines of inquiry. The introduction, "BANG (a beginning)" goes back to the first Babylonian texts for descriptions of a society already born into noise. Compared with this are the anti-noise campaigns of the Western European world, the geographic and cultural domain to which the book is largely restricted. The emphasis here is on "largely", since Schwartz's book contains multitudes; no one statement about it could be all encompassing.

"Round One: Everywhere" includes discussions of the waterfall; hieroglyphics; diminuendo and fame; Babel; Echo; Bedlam; the sounds of the city; hell, witchcraft, and demonology; laughter; flatulence; song, language, and speaking in tongues; sexual desire; parrots and cockatoos; the Gothic, Victor the wolf boy and Frankenstein's monster; incarceration and Bentham's Panopticon; auscultation and medicine; tinnitus and other disorders; applause; Babbage and street sound; steam whistles; and finally, silence. Besides a number of

classical references, most of the resources are drawn from sixteenth through eighteenth century texts, getting as far as 1852 at the terminus of this section's 210 pages.

This précis demonstrates the butterfly style of the book. The author flits from topic to topic through association and a general chronological through line, returning frequently to sources of the sweetest nectar, sometimes dwelling for dozens of pages on a given subject, at other times alighting only for a brief aside. On the surface this might seem similar to the approach taken by David Toop, in the series of books that began with *Ocean of Sound* (2001). But where Toop's choices are linked through a deeply felt subjectivity, hinging on memory and personal experience, Schwartz holds his subject at one remove. He smoothly segues from topic to topic, but the sequence itself is largely free of inherent resonances.

The 300 pages of "Round Two: Everywhen, Everyone" cover the years 1802 to 1914, more or less. Major topics include synaesthesia via Poe and Baudelaire; tunnelling and the underground; the nocturnal; artillery and warfare; Florence Nightingale; city noise (a constant refrain throughout the volume); the quiet of cemeteries, Japan, narcotics, and Lincoln's funeral train; working hours and the Sabbath debate; church and other bells; Helen Keller and Alexander Graham Bell; Doppler, Michelson and aether; Helmholtz; standard time; the telephone; tinnitus (again); information loss; alarms (another touchstone); the brain; a "general history of ears"; afflictions of workers; hearing tests; thunder, lightning, and atmospheric; electricity, telegraph, and the wireless; waves and vibrations; optical sound; the pavement as gramophone; advertising and its encroachment on the countryside; the private rooms of Virginia Woolf and Joseph Pulitzer; Sabine and auditorium acoustics; phenomenology; car horns; Morse against steam whistles; and the "Anti-Noisite" campaign in NYC.

At this point, after 550 pages of sometimes repetitive descriptions and associative diversions, the reader might well wonder if Schwartz has a thesis, or is merely recapitulating everything that he has read about sound. He forestalls this criticism early on, writing "I do not aspire here to a history of sound, which would be a history of all living things and then some" (p. 23). But this denial flies in the face of many extended passages in which a serial stream of descriptors – "scream", "cry", "din", "sigh", "groan" – threaten to turn the book into a thesaurus. "Allow me to interrupt", the author requests on page 351. We might ask why he finds it necessary to interrupt only himself? Is it, in order to actually

make a point in the incessant stream of historical references and quotations? Even Schwartz recognises that to insert a moment of analysis disturbs the otherwise laminar flow of facts.

This is not to say that the descriptions themselves are devoid of delights – quite the contrary. Every reader will have his or her favourite passages. Consider two nautical sections: The first is an explanation of how listeners on the US destroyer Maddox misinterpreted what they heard in the Tonkin Gulf off Vietnam. The second is an auditory description of the sinking of the Titanic. Both are fascinating. Certain readers will also take pleasure in the book's style, in which Schwartz toys with typography, portmanteau words, neologisms, sudden changes in tone and person, and so on. Though no doubt certain other readers will be annoyed by such idiosyncratic tendencies.

"Round Three: Everyhow" begins with a seventeenth century explorer off 'The Great Barrier Reef', before jumping to the twentieth century to consider the Boer War; Egyptology; Freud; WWI, aerial bombardment, and shell-shock; Vorticism, Futurism, and Dadaism; two minute silence; the cult of Meher Baba; loudspeakers and static; noise and zoning regulations; sound intensity and the decibel; Adorno and politics; Shannon & Weaver, information theory, and cybernetics; bats and echolocation; sonar; sounds of the deep ocean including fish, prawn, and whales; the amniotic environment and ultrasound; crying babies; the primal scream; communicating with plants and aliens; drugs; noisy children and children's books; WWII; "negative noise"; the atomic bomb; Big Bang theory and background noise; music, including John Cage; white and pink noise; chaos and stochastic resonance; 1/f noise; fractals; Jacques Attali; stock exchanges; nonsense and information. Also reprised are some of Schwartz's favourite topics: shell-shock, sirens, city life, atmospheric, and noise abatement.

This is the most satisfying portion of the book, precisely because the myriad examples of noise are more often grounded in explicitly stated concepts. But this only highlights the lack of context provided in the previous two sections. In fact, it's often difficult to know why a particular sound is being referred to as "noise" in the first place. Is the sound loud? Is it painful? Is it psychologically annoying? Is it masking another sound? Is it interfering with a signal? A trip to the Zone website reveals that the book is categorised under the headings "cultural studies" and "history". So perhaps we shouldn't expect too much in the way of philosophy. Indeed, though Kant and Husserl get a look-in, Heidegger manages but a

single quote and Derrida only a back-handed mention. Not that this is necessary, mind you, but one can't help but imagine a more critical approach that delves deeper into the vast materials assembled here.

Perhaps others can mine the treasure trove of information Schwartz has assembled. This would have been an easier task were it not for several unfortunate editorial choices. First, the referencing system relies on footnotes, more than 1200 in number, but these occur sparsely. Each note integrates many individual references, making it impractical to pinpoint sources. Sometimes it is even impossible to correctly attribute a quotation. An example occurs on page 152, in an engaging summary of the "synaesthetic algebra of the Gothic". Here it is postulated that "The uncanny = sound + sight", "The eerie = sound + touch", "Terror = sound + touch + sight", and "Sublimity = sound + sight + touch + sound". This is a wonderful algebra! But is it the author's original work? The typography indicates otherwise, but there is no adjacent endnote to confirm the source. If we follow the text further on, we will come to an endnote that provides a reference for different material entirely.²

The second problem derives from the fact that the endnotes arrive as a PDF. We must either consume several trees in printing or view the file on a digital appliance. In either case, we must page through a hefty two-handed hard cover, while simultaneously keeping place in a second listing. A welcome alternative to this contortionist exercise would be a book with running footnotes, even if it required two bound volumes. We should also be given the option of an electronic version of the book *in toto*. This is the twenty-first century after all!

Not that you would know it from *Making Noise*, which largely ignores sonic practice in the last sixty years, John Cage and a few other musical references aside. R. Murray Schafer gets but a footnote and, amusing enough, a self-critical entry in the index that admits he is "insufficiently honoured in this book" (p. 903). His compatriot Barry Truax is missing in action, despite having previously made points repeated by Schwartz. Douglas Kahn appears only on a dust jacket blurb; expect no sign of Paul Hegarty either. Combine these omissions with the relegation of the references and a casual reader would be forgiven for thinking that Hillel Schwartz is the only person active in this field, the only contemporary researcher concerned with noise.

Or perhaps it is simply that he is old-fashioned. At the outset of the book one finds a “Note To Reader” that admonishes, “This book is meant to be read aloud” (p. 6).³ As a performative gesture this is sound (ahem) only if one can ignore the linguistic deconstructions of W. S. Burroughs (1981) and Gregory Whitehead (1985), among others not considered in this volume. But read this request in light of the conclusion to *Making Noise*, where the amalgam “soundmusicnoise” is described as being “bound up with bone and tissue” (p. 858). Given this prescription, what are we to make of the title itself? Does reading the current volume aloud make of the book only noise? The writerly nature of the text argues forcefully otherwise. Schwartz does not wish to invalidate his own work, of that we can be sure. Instead, his decidedly retrograde request is tantamount to re-inscribing the book in the body through orality. He seeks the authority of the voice, relying on the same “metaphysics of presence” that Derrida queried in his investigation of logocentrism (1997). It is not a surprise, therefore, to find that the comprehensive index has numerous entries for “reading aloud”, but no reference to the reader’s note itself (p. 901). Schwartz has elided his own impulse.

The book’s final paragraphs are anticlimactic. Though Schwartz previously described noise as “the noisiest of concepts, abundantly self-contradictory” he does not engage with that formulation (p. 858). Instead, he retreats to the gentle world of children’s stories, references birth and death as touchstones, and vouchsafes “hearing as first and last of the senses” (p. 859). Doubt and uncertainty dispelled, the essentialist project complete, we can fall asleep, a good rest certainly earned as gravity does its best, flipping the final pages over “as quiet as air” (p. 859).

The book is generally, but not entirely, typo free. It is set in a readable font and the binding is secure. Those that dislike the design on the slip cover will find it much more practical to remove it in any case. This edition is illustrated with 32 collages, which the author calls “soundplates”. There is no audio disk. Nonetheless, readers interested in the historical place of noise in society will find this a useful guide. The only sound you will hear is that of your own voice reading from this enjoyable but problematic work.

These are but five of the many noise concepts the current author will present in an upcoming article, expanded from a conference paper delivered at ISSTC 2012. In

fact, there are over twenty such formulations, this profusion only emphasising the need for specificity in any discussion of noise. [-]

Previous Zone Books examined by the author include endnotes in the usual manner, following each chapter. So it is apparently only the abundance of them that forced a policy change in this case. [-]

One can't help but wonder if this request is meant to include the 1220 endnotes! [-]

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Bio

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