

BEFORE ETERNAL SILENCE

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Every Song

Eardrums vibrate, emissions resurrecting your sensory organs’ neglected grammars. Faculties of hearing and touch each require recalibration for fluency in Morse: with touch, as a 1943 manual has it, “let the skill of the hand catch up with the speed of the brain ... it is good to spend time loosening-up the wrist.” With hearing, a concomitant reorientation. In an autobiography describing her role intercepting enemy radio transmissions in World War II, Anne Glyn-Jones amplified Morse’s sonorities. This self-portrait also echoed the tactility impressed on the reader by the 1943 manual. “I remember a moment of panic when I completely forgot what the symbol ‘dit dah’ meant, and while I struggled to remember, I watched with interest as my own hand reacted to the stimulus by writing - quite correctly - the letter A.” As far as the acoustic was concerned, “[s]oon every sound we heard seemed to be in Morse. The birds sang in Morse code.” Immersed in code-breaking, ear-splitting “assaults of sudden violent electric storms crashing on our headphones”, for sleep-deprived Glyn Jones, “[t]he pump pumped in Morse, the trees, swaying in the wind, sent out Morse messages in the creaking of the limbs”. According to James Gleick, Morse is a “meta-alphabet, an alphabet once removed” since, although haptic and sonic, its signs do not represent sounds according to the strictures of a conventional alphabet, rather the sounds represent signs – “[e]veryone understood that electricity served as a surrogate for sound, the sound of the human voice, waves in the air entering the telephone mouthpiece and converted into electrical waveforms.”

We Real Cool

Whenever every retort earns abuse, legible communication operates outside legitimacy. As Friedrich Kittler has it “[c]odes - by name and by matter - are what determine us today, and what we must articulate if only to avoid disappearing under them completely.” Codes, such as our Morse, betray paradoxes, one for this paragraph and one for the next. For this paragraph – the paradox is that while it is impossible to argue with McKenzie Wark that “imperial power brought with it attempts at universal standards, a universal time, Morse code and the vector of telegraphic communication,” it is equally unassailable that Morse can operate subversively, to decode or recode authority’s encoding. Lena Constante suffered eight years of solitary confinement in Rumanian jails (convicted in the Stalinist show trials). Horrendous hardships ensued, physical, mental,

emotional: “it was forbidden to cry, shout, laugh.” Constante devised strategies, one was the “silent escape” – the title of her book that denoted a descent into an interiority of a creativity committed to memory. Another strategy arose when she learned to “listen to the walls” – communicating with fellow prisoners through taps on the confines of her cell to engineer an exteriority. This wall tapping communication finds Constante deploying Morse as power’s inversion. Subverting control over vocalized utterance – sounding out loud to fellow inmates but inaudible to guards vigilantly scanning their vibrating eardrums (and to those captives who had not learned the code). Correspondingly, Commander Jeremiah Denton – an American POW in Vietnam who, when filmed by a Japanese TV crew, pretended to be blinded by the unaccustomed brilliance of their artificial lights, offers a parallel narrative. While his mouth answered submissively, though perhaps with a discernible trace of defiance, his eyes “blinked the word T-O-R-T-U-R-E in Morse code,” as the New York Times put it. For Denton and Constante, the code can be twisted backwards – that is Morse’s first paradox: it can transmit from above or from below. For Denton, the subversive decoding was only temporary, his cypher was decrypted by his captors and, in the Times’ report, “the commander was beaten all night.”

The Scent of Freedom

Theoretically, hidden enigmatic secret codes evade negative territorialisations or, failing, feel restrictions emanating everywhere - dominating opportunities, memories (there is an additional inherent communicative instability in Morse for “the untrained ear” relayed by Dean Buonomano: “[e]ach incoming tone just piles onto the last, making it impossible to discriminate between the sequences (she)” and the sequence (his) – which has just one more ‘dit’.) Yet, and this is the second paradox of Morse, the one that is the focus of this last paragraph, secret codes are inevitably made public – that is their crystalline fate. As Buonomano emphasizes, “[t]o the untrained ear, listening to a long Morse code message is much like listening to a foreign language: it is impossible to hear when one letter ends and the next begins” yet, just as with any language, fluency can be acquired, the ear trained and translation (decryption) is made possible. This ear training can be mobilised, as we have heard, from above as it can be from below, both the powerless and the powerful can become fluent: if the secret code is made public, as it must, in order to be a code proper,

if Denton’s Morse blinks are detected or Constante’s wall tapping is discovered, the consequence is the territorialisation addressed above – a restriction of utterance, a censoring. This censorship - thought-impeding, ultimately life-denying – is always what is at stake. This, individual perceptions of vocalic or lexical liberty notwithstanding. This, irrespective of the ostensible indecipherability of the code language, whatever its relation to the sonic and the haptic – whether that code is Polari, nushu, Rogues’ Cant, Lunfardo, Hobo signs, Língua do Pé, Kuşköy’s “bird language,” a rhyming slang, Núi Láí, Morse or tapping shoes. If “[c]yborg politics is the struggle for language against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly,” then we must blink, strike walls, tap shoes, do everything against censorship from above, in ever mutating grammars: dit dit dah dit / dit dah dit / dit / dit / dah dit dit / dah dah dah / dah dah: ..- .- . . -.. --- --: Freedom

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