

"Some Words In Praise of Non-Verbal Intelligence" paper given 22 Sept 09 - Postgraduate Week Conference, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong  
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Abstract: In the academy, words are our stock in trade. We use them as our means of evaluation, explanation, presentation. But there are a number of other forms of intelligence, non-verbal in nature, some of which we share with other species. There is a long history of people dealing with these forms of intelligence, and, in our current evaluation-obsessed climate, we ignore these historical examples, and the non-verbal forms of intelligence themselves, at our peril. As Charles Seeger riposted to Ludwig Wittgenstein: "That which may not be spoken of may have already been sung, painted or danced for centuries."

Dear Friends:

It is with some embarrassment that I speak to you today, since my topic is non-verbal intelligence. However, given that inherent contradiction, I wish to address myself to the other forms of intelligence that we continually use, but which, in the academy, we often downgrade in importance. There is the old cliché that "talking about music is like dancing about architecture," however, I've had so many post-modern dancer friends who have done just that, and very successfully too, that I feel very few qualms in using one medium - language as a tool - to discuss a whole family of others.

Many years ago, the Hindu legends tell us, Lord Dakshinamurthi, who is Shiva in his south-facing aspect - he sits in his mighty Himalaya, and surveys all of India spread out before him - in his role as a teacher, he needed to impart wisdom to the newly emerged humans. The Rishis, the first teachers, came to Lord Dakshinamurthi, and asked for this wisdom. Lord Dakshinamurthi sat before them, and said not a word - and the Rishis were enlightened - the Vedas, the ancient sacred Indian texts, were then fully formed inside them.

This is one of the oldest legends about teaching with silence, the power of silence, and the non-necessity, or maybe inadequacy, of language communicating even quite complex ideas. And from my perhaps slightly critical viewpoint, it seems to me that it's also about human fallibility. The Rishis received perfect wisdom, but their inability to transcribe that wisdom into a less perfect medium - words - resulted in millennia of theological disputation and worse. Or maybe we are too harsh on the ancient teachers. Maybe they did the best they could with the bad tools - language - they had. The old saying - "Words fail me," may have a particular poignancy here.

(Of course, this legend also has the common theme of an earlier time with perfect knowledge and conditions that we humans can only approximate. A later Greek echo of this is Plato's archetypes. A more contemporary materialist would say that we make our own knowledge and we are totally responsible for what we ourselves do. In which case, I would say that my lament over the inadequacy of language and verbal logic is even more keen. With no gods to help us, we muddle through with our shoddy tools. Makin' do, as they say in the bush.)

The theme of teaching through silence is one that continues throughout history. In the 5th century BC, so the 9th century AD legend goes, Lord Gautama addressed the assembled throng by holding up a single white flower, and speaking not a word. Only one disciple, Mahā Kāśyapa, "got it," and smiled, and Lord Gautama smiled back, entrusting the form of teaching to Mahā Kāśyapa that concentrated on direct experience rather than rational argument and the like. At a slightly later time in Greece, according to Jung, in the Eleusinian mysteries, a mown ear of grain was silently shown, as a kind of

wordless sermon.

In medieval England, the 14th century "Cloud of Unknowing" was another text which dealt with the need to find an alternative to language to gain understanding. In their terms, they were looking for the knowledge of God, but even in a contemporary secular world, the idea of seeking understanding beyond the limits of language is still a very powerful one. One of the lovely contradictions in the book is the prayer, "God, I beg you to rid me of God!" Only by getting rid of all conceptions of God, all images, all religious (and irreligious) brain-chatter can the mind be made quiet enough for divine wisdom to flow in. Or if you don't like the concept of "divine" wisdom, then just say: energy, light, and inspiration.

This tradition of the silent mind continues throughout what James Joyce called "all Christian minstrelsy." The 15th century English composer and luthier Thomas Mace (an extraordinary instrument inventor, apparently) is reputed to have said that the purpose of music was to "sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine experience." This quote became a motto in the 1950s for composer colleagues Lou Harrison and John Cage, about whom more later.

And the quieting of the mind - the stopping of verbal chatter in it, lies at the heart of Zen Buddhist practice itself. By quieting the constant language in the brain, one gets at least a different perspective, if not a whole different direct experience. Here's a little thought, or maybe that should be "non-thought" experiment. Let's all be silent for 15 seconds. Beginning now. [Wait 15 seconds.] Now, how many of you experienced words going on in your heads during the past 15 seconds? [Wait for a response.] Now, let's try that again - 15 seconds - and try to not have words going on in your head. [Wait 15 seconds.] Tough, ain't it? Now finally, one more 15 second stretch. This time, try to listen, really attentively, to all the sounds you hear, without giving them verbal labels. [Wait 15 seconds] This is a form of Tibetan Buddhist "listening meditation."

This kind of direct experience also constitutes the essence of John Cage's idea of "letting sounds be themselves." This much maligned idea - especially harshly criticized by cultural theorist Douglas Kahn and his acolytes - is, despite their efforts, a very powerful one - if by it one understands it to be a Buddhist or Quaker kind of activity involving totally shutting off the mind's word machine, and experiencing sound without mental commentary. The late Tibetan Buddhist writer Lobsang Phuntsok Lhalungpa calls this state "becoming listening itself," and any music, art, drama, or dance program that doesn't attempt, at least once or twice in the course of an undergraduate education, to give this experience to its students is, in my view, doing them a radical disservice.

Quakers, of course, have been doing silent prayer for several centuries. Douglas Steere, a Quaker, describes it like this: "When I have finished these inward prayers, I quietly resign myself to complete listening: letting go in the intimacy of this friendly company and in the intimacy of the Great Friend who is always near." Notice - *complete* listening. (<http://www.pym.org/publish/pamphlets/qmw.htm>)

And here's a quote from Mahatma Ghandi that Greg Schiemer found: 'It has often occurred to me that a seeker after truth has to be silent. I know the wonderful efficacy of silence. I visited a Trappist monastery in South Africa. A beautiful place it was. Most of the inmates of that place were under a vow of silence. I inquired of the father the motive of it and he said that the motive was apparent. "We are frail human beings. We do not know very often what we say. If we want to listen to the still small voice that is always speaking within us, it will not be heard if we continually speak." I understood that precious lesson. I know the secret of silence.' (The Spirit of Hinduism, Mahatma Gandhi, Pankaj New Delhi 1980)

And it's not surprising to me that given her religious background, Lucretia Cage, John Cage's mother, found the first performance of his silent piece *4:33* to be not the Dadaist stunt that many have wrongly attributed it to be, but, more perceptively, to be "like a prayer."

Prayer as silence. It, too, is a common theme. Nineteenth century Romantic composers sometimes spoke of wordless melody as prayer, and think of Tibetan prayer flags, and Buddhist prayer wheels. All non-verbal, and in some cases silent forms of invocation, contemplation, etc.

But we are not here in a monastery, or even a meditation class in a secular Yoga centre - we're in a University, and one of the principle texts I know of which expresses the dominant aesthetic of these places is this particular early Christian text, written by a writer, St. John, who some think was steeped in neo-Platonism:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

OK, we (at least those of us who have studied this particular tradition) know that the "Logos," the "Word" he's referring to, is a metaphor for his particular teacher and master. But let's read that sentence, inadequately translated though it may be, literally - In the beginning was the WORD. The Universe begins with a word. The University begins with a word. And how do we treat this word - even those of us who pretend to secularity? The WORD was GOD. I mean, this isn't "idolatry," this is - pardon the neologism - verbalotry - elevating one kind of intelligence above all others, and worshiping it, and allowing it to rule all aspects of our intellectual life. And using it as a tool - one might unkindly, or perhaps accurately describe it as a bludgeon - with which to judge, measure, and evaluate all one's activities within that sphere.

So in the beginning was the word, eh? To which I reply, "Oh, really?" And Ludwig Wittgenstein, improvising clarinetist as well as philosopher pointing out the limits of language, would then say, "About what one can not speak, one must remain silent," and "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Australian poet Chris Mann, by the way, made a piece once with samples of Wittgenstein's clarinet playing - obtained from Austrian Radio. The selection of pitches of the clarinet samples was determined by the movement of two black goldfish in a bowl. Which brings us to composer, philosopher, and musicologist Charles Seeger's quote, from *his* Tractatus, the "Tractatus Esthetico-Semioticus:" "That which may not be spoken of may have already been sung, painted or danced for centuries."

For these forms of intelligence, singing, visual form, movement, smell, are some of the most important forms of knowledge we have, and in the academy they are often cruelly undervalued, or else allowed to exist only with the most elaborate forms of verbal justification. But they're often incredibly powerful. I quote from my essay "Zurbrugg's Complaint: Or How an Artist Came to Criticize a Critic's Criticism of the Critics."

'For my part, verbal descriptions are an inferior mode of expression, their so-called precision being precisely what renders them so vague. But a smell, ahh, there's no mistaking what's "meant" by that. I had an epiphany a few weeks ago: two colleagues and I argued critical theory in a local coffeehouse for about two hours. Upon leaving the place, I passed a *pitosporum*, one of the most fragrant of Australian native trees. It was not yet in blossom, not for about four months yet, but its bark already gave off its distinctive, sweet intoxicating odor. I can assure you that that one moment of nasal experience was far more meaningful to me than all the words we had expended in the previous two hours. Emphatically I realized that for me words were indeed inferior.'

And there are lots of other examples I could quote. French composer Olivier Messiaen once told his composition students, hungry for the latest knowledge about elaborate contemporary music techniques: "Listen to the birds," and then said not another word for a considerable time. American experimental music composer Robert Erickson once referred to his musical ideas as forms of "non-verbal intelligence," and although he could write with great clarity about some of the timbral discoveries he made, often refused to talk about the "*prima materia*," the musical thoughts he had, in verbal language. And this statement by choreographer Merce Cunningham and his collaborator John Cage: "We are not, in these dances and music, saying something. We are simple-minded enough to believe that if we were saying something, we would use words. We are rather doing something. The meaning of what we do is determined by each one who sees and hears it."

Consider the kinethetics of movement. One of the most exciting developments for me in the early days of post-modern dance were the dancers who danced without music. Their rhythm, their patterns themselves constituted a kind of "silent music" - a pattern of phrases, energy, pushing, pulling, giving and taking, rising and falling which were, in their own terms, quite expressive. [30 second video of Eva Karczag Apartment Dance 1978] Or consider the rhythm of a line of pelicans flying low over the water - they alternate wing-flapping and soaring - often only a few centimeters above the water's surface - creating a most amazing pattern of energy and stasis -[freeze movement briefly] and this without sound, without the need for explication, explanation, analysis or justification of any kind. Kinesthetics is its own knowledge. (And parenthetically, one that the hipper members of the medical profession are now finally acknowledging, only 40-70 years after the pioneering of body workers such as Mabel Todd, F. M. Alexander, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Moshe Feldenkrais, Joan Skinner, and the like.)

And this is one of the problems with our position in the Academy. We - musicians, dancers, mimes, painters, video-makers, etc, and we can even include our colleagues the sound poets and compositional linguists here - those who use language as a toy, rather than as a tool - tilla lula lola lola tilla lula lola lula tilla lula lola lula juu kaa? - we have, at the basis of our art, despite all the verbal justification and metaphor that we might surround ourselves with, very powerful and profound forms of intelligence - sound, kinesthesia, colour, pattern, emotion, etc - that our more rational colleagues have very little clue about. And it is our failure of being able to defend our non-verbal intelligences against the overwhelming wall of verbal justification and demands that often contributes to our marginalized and tenuous positions within the Academy. I mean, try explaining to a cultural theorist, a sociologist, a politician, or a computer engineer that what makes you valuable to the university community is precisely that kind of intelligence which stands as an alternative to the mode of consciousness they've built their lives, careers, and senses of identity and self-worth around. Tough job, eh?

However, things may not be so simple as I seem to be depicting them. Brain scientist Aniruddh D. Patel in his recent "Music, Language, and the Brain" shows that music and language share certain processing structures in the brain. It may be that music is the substrate on which language grew, and not vice-versa. Or it may be that they evolved in parallel. In either case, I would think that we have a lot to learn from alternative modes of intelligence. And Kenneth Gaburo's many experimental works, where he applied rules and techniques from language to music and movement, and rules and techniques from music and movement to language, may be significantly prescient here.

Writers on sound art frequently complain about the emphasis of the visual over the sonic in their writings. That may or may not be true, but both the visual and the sonic are dominated by verbal intelligence. Although it would perhaps be disingenuous of me (naughty, too!) to ask if there was any art critic who would be willing to give up their verbal language, it is worth pointing out one of the obvious paradoxes that afflicts the visual arts: it's constructed the most elaborate set of verbal

metaphors and commentaries to deal with, legitimize, and sell what it's been doing. And although there is a degree of recognition of this as a problem - in a recent conference on arts education in Melbourne, one of the participants reported that at least in one art school that he knew, the faculty had agreed that they would once again look at the students' art works, even if they disliked the students "artistic statements" - (I guess they were tired of the visual works being treated as footnotes to the theory) - it seems to me that the hardest work to be done here is in the visual arts, peeling back the layers of commentary so that once again we can see, for example, Kandinsky's abstractions as expressions on the same level of intelligence as Einstein's contemporary equations.

And so the battle continues. I remember back in the early 70s, when I was a post-graduate student at the University of California, San Diego, the faculty waged a successful struggle to have their compositional work recognized as a legitimate form of research. Then, in the late 1970s, at La Trobe University, I and my colleagues in the now-closed-down Music Department waged a similar campaign, again with success. Now in the new ERA project, it seems that all of you are going to have to wage this battle again. I just wonder - how many times in one lifetime is one expected to wage this battle for legitimacy? Or is this, like Trotsky's "permanent revolution," an on-going, world without end, project?

(By the way, I don't want to seem to be totally anti-verbal. I've been assessing theses for the Media Arts and Sound Arts courses at RMIT for many years. They have a practice-based Masters program there, and at first, the coordinators of the course wanted the work distributed to the assessors with no verbal commentary whatsoever. I understood their logic, but I and my colleague Dr. Ros Bandt finally convinced them that the students should be required to do some writing - at least in the order of a few thousand words, so that the assessors would have some idea of the context from which the work originated, and the issues to which it addressed itself. While we wanted the work to have priority, we didn't want to be left totally without context.)

As an example of the tenuous condition of our disciplines in the Academy, one can in our case easily recall the recent opinions of hostile Vice-Chancellors, but instead, I'd like to quote from an email from a former private composition student of mine, James Hullick, a very talented young composer, writer and organizer, who wrote last week:

"I have studied at the VCA, La Trobe Uni, the Con and RMIT and I get the feeling that the sound part of all of those places will eventually be amputated or at least seriously bugged as was the case at La Trobe. Intellectuals in Melbourne will have to find alternate avenues outside the Academic institutions. I am though optimistic that the makers of ideas will be creative and pragmatic enough to be the makers of how those ideas are disseminated through society. As long as they can avoid the capitalist urge for unfettered greed, then they might just arrive at more robust and financially sustainable outcomes. It's in our hands."

One of the reasons that sound (as only one example of a non-verbal intelligence) feels threatened at all those places is because at its core, it's precisely the non-verbal values that are the most important, and again, those values are not respected, when not absolutely devalued, by the dominant verbal-critical aesthetic of the Academy.

So my plea to all of you youngsters - and I say that laughingly as a postdoctoral research fellow who is older than most of his colleagues on the teaching faculty - would be: Can't we be a little more militant - pretty please - or maybe a LOT more militant - in our defense of the non-verbal core values of our disciplines? As Henry Thoreau once said, "I do not make an exorbitant demand, surely."