

It's Harder than You Might Think to Appreciate Silence

In a clamouring world of ever growing noise, a meditative film makes the case for less noise pollution

Sandrine Ceurstemont, NewScientist | 15 June 2016



In Pursuit of Silence, a film by Patrick Shen

If you live in a modern city, finding a quiet spot is a challenge. The buzz of traffic, planes, sirens and the racket of construction are probably the backing track of your daily life. And you'll get no respite by sitting at your computer even with headphones on: browsing the internet, you'll be interrupted by ads on autoplay or telltale beeps announcing a new message.

Most people seem to adapt to the cacophony, but are we paying a price?

In Pursuit of Silence, a documentary film directed by Patrick Shen making its UK premiere last week at Sheffield Doc/Fest, explores our relationship with silence and the impact of noise on our lives.

It begins boldly with 4 minutes of "silence" as an ode to John Cage's seminal piece of "silent" music, which featured an orchestra turning pages and clearing throats, but not actually playing. Luckily the beautifully shot, calm scenes aren't boring to watch and, accompanied by some of the quiet sounds at these locations, they challenge the idea that anywhere is completely silent.

Even if there were no humans, the environment wouldn't be quiet. On land, in the air and in the sea, the natural world is awash with sound. But some types of sound can be disruptive.

No talking

The film follows Greg Hindy, a young man who has taken a vow of silence and is trying to get away from distracting sources of noise embedded in electronics and entertainment. “My intuition was that it was a good thing to do,” he writes, showing his words to the camera.

His instinct may be correct. A few years ago, the World Health Organization declared that excessive loud and unpleasant sounds pose a health risk in western Europe. Biologically, noise is meant to alert us to danger and when we hear sounds, our levels of stress hormones and blood pressure rise. Chronic noise exposure can have a long-term impact on health, for example, by disrupting sleep, and at its most extreme it can kill, typically by contributing to heart attacks.

Noise can harm us in more subtle ways, too. In the film, bioacoustician Kurt Fristrup from Colorado State University in Fort Collins mentions the gradual onset of hearing loss that many people may not notice.

We may also be losing the ability to hear distant sounds, which our ancestors would have been able to pick up when living in the relative silence of nature.

Sound in mind?

Then there is the effect of sound on our minds. Music can alter mood, and even relieve anxiety, but intrusive sounds can affect our ability to make sense of what we’re hearing. And the increasing level of noise in hospitals is thought by some to lead to medical errors.

In a widely publicised 1975 study, Arline Bronzaft, an environmental psychologist, found that pupils in classrooms close to railway tracks fell a year behind in their reading scores – which prompted officials to add padding to the tracks and soundproof school ceilings.

In Pursuit of Silence touches on other potential solutions to the rising tide of noise. A foundation called Quiet Mark in Hove, UK, for example, works with manufacturers to create quieter technology.

And airlines are setting noise targets. Virgin Atlantic, for instance, wants to reduce plane noise by 75 per cent over the next four years. Car designers are also aiming to create quieter models.

Appreciate the silence

In Japan, a more offbeat solution is to attend forest therapy sessions to de-stress.

Ultimately, modern culture may be hindering a peaceful lifestyle, as people spend most of their spare moments getting a stimulating hit from the digital world.

A tea ceremony featured in the film illustrates Japan’s cultural appreciation of silence, while in the West, more importance is often placed on being loud and expressing yourself.

The documentary is engaging and thought-provoking throughout. Its meditative style, however, might take some getting used to; we are so accustomed to the adrenaline rush of an action film to keep us entertained that reconnecting with our quiet side can be hard work.

Copied 6/16/2016 from:

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2093862-its-harder-than-you-might-think-to-appreciate-silence/>
(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added by aiREFORM)