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In a Silent Way

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In a Silent Way

Exploring Background Sounds in Biographical Video Interviews

Francesco Bachis

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments. Every film studio has a library of 'sound effects' recorded on film. With a film phonograph it is now possible to control the amplitude and frequency of anyone of these sounds and to give to it rhythms within or beyond the reach of the imagination. Given four film phonographs, we can compose and perform a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heartbeat, and landslide.
(Cage 1961:3)

Introduction

- ¹ In the Italian movie *Le Vacanze Intelligenti* ('*The Smart Holidays*')¹, the Roman greengrocers Remo and Augusta (interpreted by Alberto Sordi and Anna Longhi) are convinced by their three sons to make a tour that includes museums, churches, theaters, and modern art exhibitions in Italy. The two parents appear to struggle in understanding what their children have chosen to show. Notably, Remo and Augusta are puzzled by modern art and avant-garde music. One sequence shows the couple attending a contemporary music concert in Florence. The first piece is a typical performance of atonal music. Augusta interprets this part as the orchestra tuning its instruments. Right after that, the conductor starts a stopwatch, and the entire orchestra puts down its instruments and falls silent. Remo asks his neighbor aloud

when the concert begins, arousing a piqued reaction from the audience, who invite him to keep quiet because the score reads ‘tacet’. After an extensive moment of silence, during which the camera focuses on the attentive audience, Remo turns to his wife and says, ‘[the concert] must have already started.’ Another long silence precedes the director’s gesture, which stops the clock, bringing thunderous applause from the audience (Sordi 1978: 1:52:16-1:55-17).

- 2 This sequence is a clear reference to the famous avant-garde and experimental work 4’33. It is a suite ‘for any instrument or combination of instruments’, written in 1952 by the American composer John Cage (1965)². The score instructs the performer(s) not to play their instrument(s) during the entire duration of the piece. The purpose of this work is to force the audience to listen to the background noise generated during the musical performance. Usually, during a classical music concert, the audience does not hear this ‘noise’, which we conventionally call ‘silence’. By focusing our attention on a regimented set of sounds, we must listen to the music in ‘a silent way.’ Cage invites us to listen to the sound environment that forms the background of this setting: ‘My piece, 4’33’” they said in a Richard Kostelanetz interview, ‘becomes in performance the sounds of the environment’ (Kostelanetz 2003: 187).
- 3 Silence has long been recognized as a communicative resource in anthropology (i.e., Basso 1970; Williams 1993; Seljamaa and Siim 2016), but it has rarely been studied as an aural field composed of multiple layers of sound. Raymond Murray Schafer’s (1977) concept of soundscape, while powerful, also retains a visual bias (see Geisler 2013) that this article seeks to counter by foregrounding the embodied and negotiated nature of background noise. In this regard, a helpful toolbox is provided by sensory ethnography that, encouraging extended attention beyond the visual preeminence of ethnographic representation (Pink 2006; 2015; Stoller 1989), is helpful to repair the ‘gross under-representation’ of the ‘other senses’ in ethnography (Herzfeld 2001: 251).
- 4 Drawing from John Cage’s radical and impertinent redefinition of silence (Cage 1961: 8) and from the insights of sensory ethnography, this article investigates how background noise emerges as a meaningful component of three biographical interviews. In fact, the ethnographic interview is often portrayed as a space of controlled silence. The interviewer reduces the external noise to allow the informant’s voice to emerge clearly (Skinner 2012; Spradley 1979). However, silence is never total, and the aural context of ethnographic encounters remains understudied. The aim of the article is to demonstrate that overlapping the sound analysis of ‘silence’ with verbal content can improve the interpretation of the meanings that emerge from the interview. The argument is developed through an analysis of video-recorded life histories of old miners in southwest Sardinia (Italy), focusing on how ambient and bodily sounds counterpoint, sustain, or disrupt the flow of narration.

Beyond Sighting in Ethnographic Practice

- 5 If we just scroll through the anthropological toolbox, the sense of sight appears absolutely preeminent: ‘participant observation’, ‘native point of view’, ‘vision of the world’, ‘the view from afar’ are all expressions that refer to sight. This prestige is undoubtedly due to the ‘visual’ foundation of Western knowledge, evident even in the

opening lines of one of the texts that, for centuries, influenced the development of what has been considered ‘knowledge’ in Europe: Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

- 6 ‘All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things’ (Aristotle 2005: 1).
- 7 If seeing seems an all-encompassing activity in ethnography, instead, hearing is confined to particular parts of field practice: we listen to voices, people speaking, music, and songs. You look, you observe, everything else. Although ethnography traditionally presents itself as a writing practice, its epistemology remains deeply grounded in sight: ethnographic authority is constructed through the primacy of observation (Grimshaw 2001: 15-31) and the systematic use of visual metaphors that ‘make visible’ the Other (Clifford 1988; Howes 1991; 2014). Observation and representation are inseparable from visibility (Fabian 1983), and, from this point of view, anthropology appears as a specific sub-declination of a ‘scopic regime of modernity’ (Jay 1988), a historically specific system that organizes how seeing works, what counts as visible, how vision relates to truth, and how subjects and objects are positioned (see also Jay 1994).
- 8 Sensory ethnography has shed some light on this problem, but it need not become yet another sub-specialization of anthropological knowledge. Instead, the sensory ethnography could support ‘an anthropology that is attuned at once to both empirical and phenomenological concern’ (Herzfeld 2001: 251–53; see also Bendix and Brenneis 2005: 8).
- 9 While it is unthinkable to have an ethnographic description that does not provide a sense of the context, it is common not to provide a sound description of the setting in which the event described occurs. Even when, in Steven Feld’s perspective (1982), the sound becomes an autonomous cultural system, it is the soundscape that becomes the center of listening and attention. It is the ‘organized sound’ that mirrors and shapes the social structure (Feld 1984), and the ‘listening position’ focuses on significant sounds rather than on the embodied context of life’s unfolding. As has been noted (Geisler 2013), it is not surprising that, since the work of Raymond Murray Schaffer (1977), this ‘naïve’ naturalism advocates an attention to the ‘naturalness’ of the soundscape, conceived as a balance between signals and noises that allows the former to be audible and places the latter in the backdrop. To listen to a soundscape, one must ‘be silent,’ that is, reduce troubling elements from a (allegedly) natural soundscape that is culturally and socially involved and therefore interesting to the ethnographer. This manner of listening to the sound ‘in a silent way’ is itself a construction of silence, pushing into the background sounds we must not hear. It is precisely on this background noise—so forcefully pushed back, yet, as Cage reminds us, not ontologically different from the signal we listen to—that I wish to focus on. What I want to propose here as a starting point, is a careful reflection on the multiplicity of ‘silences’—or background noises—which nourish the field. To do this, we must first clarify what we mean by silence in fieldwork.

Silence in Fieldwork

- 10 The ethnographic experience is constantly in contact with silence: moments of incomprehension due to the limit of experience (Rosaldo 1989), instances of the anthropologist's reflection (Crapanzano 1980; Rabinow 1977), boredom and waiting when 'nothing happens' as an intrinsic condition of the ethnographic method (Janeja and Bandak 2018). Much attention has been devoted to silence as a response to violence and suffering (Das 2007), or as a pivotal moment of what Édouard Glissant (1990) outlined as the 'poetics of relations', namely practices that limit ethnographic access to knowledge (i.e., Simpson 2014). But silence as such does not appear to have been the subject of ethnographic investigation. Maybe because, on the field as in other places, it does not exist. The anthropologist is constantly immersed in the sound context in which he finds himself and in that produced by his presence. Silence, this silence, in the field, however, means and plays different roles depending on the context.
- 11 Mere observation, without participation, implies 'silence'. The ethnographer often 'remains silent' and observes, listens, 'feels' with all his senses the reality in which he dives and which he contributes to producing and changing with his own presence. Another kind of silence is 'induced' by the behavioral codes of the society we investigate and must learn to know: we must remain silent when the other subjects are silent. And therefore, the ability to recognize when there is silence is an integral part of the ethnographer's ability to place himself within a social and cultural setting. Moreover, the ethnographer can produce silence in his interlocutors and in himself. The activation of a technical tool for documenting a voice or an event often produces a break in ordinary time (which is also, undoubtedly, the time of voices, dialogues, sounds), and generates 'silence' (Feld and Brenneis 2004). David MacDougall argues that visual ethnography has, among others, precisely this purpose: 'allows us to [...] see how words fit into [...] events, along with the postures, gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions, and *silences* that accompany them' (MacDougall 2006: 269). Finally, the ethnographer produces silences of embarrassment, lack of answers, silences that signal the absence of a voice within a dialogue and its consequent exclusion, sometimes due to a lack of caution, sometimes due to excessive caution, or to the decision not to pose certain questions.
- 12 But has silence, as a forgotten background element and necessary counterpart of a significant signal, ever received adequate attention? In short, do we stop to listen to the sound context—the 'Cagean silence'—in which our ethnographic experience happens? I am referring to those sounds we 'must' ignore and push back into the unheard and unlistened, so we can keep attention on other sounds that draw our awareness as researchers. Precisely to the extent that we manage to ignore the most obvious sounds of the cultural context in which we work, we acclimatize ourselves auditorily, taming our ears to the sounds and voices that interest us most.
- 13 But what happens if the 'silence' we have learned to put in the background emerges and becomes understandable and significant? In this article, I show how a detailed analysis of 'silence' during ethnographic interviews can help reconfigure the meanings produced within the interview itself.

A Memory Full of Silence: Exploring Background Sounds in Biographical Video Interviews

- 14 For centuries, Sardinia has been involved in mining activities. Since the 19th century, a mining rush has continued, reaching its peak in the 20th century before slowly declining. By the early 1990s, the main ore fields closed. Since then, ongoing efforts have been made to convert the abandoned mines into tourist attractions and heritage sites (see Atzeni 2013; 2017). Within this process, between 2008 and 2009, I was part of a project aimed at collecting video interviews with former miners in southwest Sardinia to study the relationship between memory, mining, and heritage-making (see Bachis 2017a; 2025)³. By adopting an ‘internal’ posture (Palumbo 2009), I filmed 29 biographical interviews with former miners discussing work, social relations, identity, struggles and strikes, but also on the ‘future’ of mining heritage in Sardinia (see Bachis 2017a; 2025).
- 15 A few years later, while rewatching the interviews, I began to notice background noise emerging. A closer listen revealed not only (what I thought) the background noise, but also the sounds of the miner’s body. We fixed a ‘lavalier’ microphone to the collar of each miner’s shirt to record their voices. Evidently, the microphone recorded many small sounds made by the miners during the conversation. Without wanting it, the microphone had documented the bodies that remind and tell. What I primarily did was listen to them and analyze them using signal amplification. In this way, they became significant to my listening. Drawing from this analysis, I expanded the scope of listening to include the ‘silences’ that emerge across all the biographical interviews. I converted my curiosity about those unwanted sounds into a posture that transformed the ‘sounded silences’ into semantically significant elements. In this way, they became a backdrop for conscious, meaningful sound experiences and a means of organizing them. They became ‘embodied’ signals (Tiragallo 2007). Yet these sounds had always affected my interpretation beyond my awareness of their existence.
- 16 Eric Laurier, Angus Whyte, and Kathy Buckner argued that background noise ‘is [...] a mighty broad brush stroke over the pre-reflectively audible and orientational phenomena of social and spatial life’ (Laurier, Whyte, Buckner 2001: 220). To listen in a silent way in the context of the biographical interview, the explicit elements of audio disorder (i.e., other voices, traffic noise, television noise, etc.) must break off. Furthermore, we should negotiate with the informant, which sounds should be put in the background and which should not. The embodiment of silence produces a mutual construction of what noise is and what is not. This ‘negotiation’ of silence and noise is a culturally based practice that partially depends on subjective factors. Consequently, even if the ethnographer does not reflect on it, they embody the background and sounds just as all other cultural attitudes do.
- 17 The setting of each interview I did shaped the aural setting in distinct ways. The research design sought quiet locations for setting the interviews. However, miners often chose spaces that were meaningful to them, such as gardens, living rooms, or union headquarters. The settings produced distinctive soundscapes that interacted with memory and narrative performance. I argue that silence in the interview was also the result of shared cultural expectations, embodied habitus, and the ritualized nature of the recording process.

- 18 Building on this argument, I propose to reverse the relationship between what we think of as significant sounds and the ‘silence’ we put in the background. I attempt to separate the verbal elements from selected moments of silence in the videos⁴, entrusting them entirely to the written word. The editing of the three videos presented below is not chronological, in order to isolate auditory breaks from the normal flow of verbal elements and highlight their key features. This selection of ‘silences’ leads us into an immersive experience of the bodies and houses of three elderly miners as they perform their life histories.

Mining Embodiment: Raffaele’s Breath Among the Birds

- 19 Raffaele is an 81-year-old miner⁵ who worked in the metal mines of southwest Sardinia between 1945 and 1961. He was employed primarily in small-scale mines and even briefly emigrated to Liguria (Northern Italy). Raffaele started as a loader⁶, then moved to timbers⁷, and eventually worked as a driller⁸. I must point out that his father worked in the coal mines of Carbonia⁹ and in a small metal mine. Raffaele’s older brother also worked in the mines before emigrating to France as a miner. Despite coming from a family of miners, Raffaele’s first work experiences were in subaltern jobs as a shepherd and a peasant in his village (where he comes from and lives) on the outskirts of the leading mining centers.

- 20 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/11175>

Video-Link: <https://vimeo.com/1202064616?>

Interview with Raffaele, Siliqua (Sardinia, Italy), 5 September 2008. Produced by Visual Ethnography Lab, University of Cagliari.

- 21 His house is a typical self-built house from southern Sardinia. I arrive at mid-morning on a hot September day. The house stands on the outskirts of the village, so we will not have much traffic noise. Nevertheless, now and then, the roaring of an auto passing-by invade our dialogue. Raffaele asks us to sit in the backyard, under some trees surrounding his house, partly because of the heat. Although we are aware that the footage may contain noise, we accept your proposal. The entire dialogue takes place in a constant chirping of the birds that populate his lush garden. They represent a constant background to Raffaele’s life story, particularly evocative when he recalls his childhood in the countryside, when he was engaged from an early age in the subaltern jobs of a goat herder and a shepherd of lambs. For Raffaele, the birds are not a disturbing noise but the sound of his life (in Schafferian words, his intimate domestic ‘Keynote’), suspended between the countryside of his childhood and the mine. That disturbing noise is part of a sound dimension connected to memory. Like other miners who come from pastoral and farming villages, mining is just a part of his life. Mining is also a way to earn money to build a house (See Bachis 2018). In fact, after leaving the mine, he worked as a caretaker at the school until he retired and continued to frequent the countryside. After describing his childhood jobs, he talks about his first experiences in the mine and his fears.

‘[The first time I entered the mine] I was a little scared... I didn’t know it ... I mean, I heard a little bit from my brother and my father about what it was like... [...]. [At the mine] there was the main shaft, there was the cage, it was the elevator... For five or six days, my heart felt

*like it was going to come out... When I went down five or six hundred meters underground... It was not easy to work because of the heat... Only in your underwear, that's it... Then, maybe, I got used to it... I felt the emotion when the power went out, maybe... If the shaft flooded and there was the emergency exit, the stairs that went up...'*¹⁰

- 22 His breathing becomes shorter and more rapid. The silent sections of his interview allow his body to 'speak,' revealing the traces the mine has left there. Raffaele, like many other miners, has developed silicosis, a chronic lung disease that affects many metal-bearing miners. The sounds of a hammer in the distance intersperse his story. At this point, he begins a meticulous description of his work. In this part of the interview, the silence accompanies the timbering explanation (aimed at preventing the collapse of the tunnels' roofs) and the importance of miners' safety.

'When I was a timberman helper... In Coal mine, they timber with chestnut [wood], while in metal [mines] they timber with eucalyptus [wood]... In [the] Coal [mine], the work was bad... Five or six hundred meters of empty space [below us] and they timber with steel arches and with wood... And I was scared... It was all Coal there... There were the workers who removed [the steel timber] with a chain... They pulled the beams, and little by little the mountain gave way...'

In Orba¹¹, we did beastly work... There was the mortuasa¹²'

- 23 Raffaele jumps up and decides to explain 'mortuasa' using a stone.

'There is a winze¹³, and I must cut the rock. Here [he points to the base], I had to make a wider cut, ten centimeters, and on [he points to the top] one centimeter. And I prepared the wood to size. And the worker who made the raise kept going like this until the boss said, 'Stop here, we have to dig a tunnel.' The one I found difficult was in S'Ortu Becciu¹⁴, but I don't remember the date...'

- 24 Raffaele stops to tell and pant, looking down. He continues his story and then sits down, still panting. Here comes the moment of waiting. There is a short pause while we prepare the questions. He then asks his wife, off-camera, if she remembers the date of the transfer to S'Ortu Becciu. The wait for an answer produces a silence in which the sound of his body emerges. His breathing becomes increasingly urgent. Raffaele is tired, and we suspend the interview.

Having an Iron Constitution: Claudio's Body Between Mountain and Mine

- 25 Claudio is the second miner interviewed. He is a 92-year-old miner who worked as a drawer¹⁵ and a truck driver between 1955 and 1975 at San Giovanni, the main lead and zinc mine in the Iglesiente metal-bearing district in southwest Sardinia.

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Video-Link: <https://vimeo.com/1202064614?>

Interview with Claudio, Siliqua (Sardinia, Italy), 8 August 2008. Produced by Visual Ethnography Lab, University of Cagliari.

- 27 He starts the interview talking about his work as a goat herder in the mountains. He intersperses this phase with many pauses. Constant references to health characterize the entire narrative of his life. The tedious times of the countryside, the stories of wild boar hunting, construct an epic of a past that is by no means portrayed as a 'golden age.' The resource scarcity of his childhood, as well as hunger and economic hardship,

are emphasizes. 'My father was the owner of the goats, but he was hungrier than the goatherd¹⁶.' It is health that allows Claudio to overcome difficulties and reach his venerable age. The hunting stories soon give way to his colonial experience (he was in Libya during the Italian occupation), which he focuses on before describing his work in the mines.

'The first few days in the mine, I was in and out [of the mine]. For about a month... I loaded the wagons and unloaded them outside. There were two of us [for this work]. [...] But then they took me to minus 300. The biggest problem breathing in the mine was the smoke, the smoke from the mines. It was three shifts, and there was always smoke from the mines.'

- 28 Claudio describes his work in the mine (and its dangers) in contrast to his experience as a shepherd. On one side are the time and space of health and 'nature'; on the other, those of technology and danger. Wheezy breathing and bodily sounds, directly related to his physical condition shaped by the mining work, punctuate the entire interview. He coughs periodically, and his mouth constantly fills the sound spectrum with small noises. The sonic elements that emerge during these silences are of two types: environmental and corporeal, but it's above all the sounds of the body that dominate the sound spectrum. His body 'speaks' in the silences, also due to the quietness of the neighborhood and the near-absence of domestic sound markers. His shortness of breath, due primarily to his age, constantly reminds me of the precariousness of life in the mine. He coughs and counterpoints his pauses with small affirmative interjections: 'Eh...'; 'Eh, yes...'.¹⁶

- 29 Claudio also suffers from silicosis, but a milder form than Raffaele's. The whole story alternates constantly between reflections on the risks of mining and the fortune of being healthy. The sounds of his body become a constant counterpoint, reminding us of the precariousness of his life.

'The doctor visited me and asked, 'Do you really want to go into the mine?' 'Of course,' I replied. 'Too bad,' he said. Because I was healthy, I had nothing. Anyway, the best thing is the health I've had. I've never been ill. I worked in the mine for 20 years and even contracted a mild case of silicosis, even though I got a small allowance. But a pension... with my health... It's not worth it. Mining work is hard. Three hundred meters below sea level. You have trouble breathing... San Giovanni Mine, Pertusola¹⁷.'

- 30 Claudio coughs heavily, the sound distorts, and he bursts out in one of his usual interjections: 'eh, yeah...' He resumes his labored breathing. His day-old beard rubs against the collar of his shirt and the microphone capsule. The sounds of his mouth and breathing fill the silence.
- 31 The mine has left marks on Claudio's body and become a soundtrack of his remembrance. Once 'unbound' from the meaningful word, his panting, the noises he makes from his mouth, and his shortness of breath produce a counterpoint that constantly underpins his narrative. Having reached a considerable age (Claudio would die a few years later, on the threshold of one hundred), he looks back to his earlier life. His insistence on narrating his life in the open air contrasts with the sounds of the body that reveal the precariousness of life in the mine. The mine resonates in his body, but its lethal force is countered by his 'health,' conceived as both 'natural' and 'cultural' (the result of his earlier work in the mountains).

The Embodiment of the Strike: The Emotional Struggle of Sebastiano

- 32 In the last video, we see Sebastiano, a 69-year-old miner from a mining family, who worked as a driller at a metal mine between 1954 and 1986¹⁸. I met him at the local retirees' union headquarters, where he has been working since, he left the mine.
- 33 The miners' struggles occupy a significant part of his narrative. Sebastiano describes the strikes as a fight carried on by '*all the Sardinian people*', during which the '*solidarity of all of Sardinia*' was felt. The story of his life proceeds linearly, following a pattern common among miners. Suddenly, Sebastiano focuses on a specific episode: the prefect's intervention following the hospitalization of two miners who had begun a hunger strike during an occupation of the pits. Pauses and silences counterpointed the entire episode.
- 34 The sound elements that emerge during these silences are of two types: from the setting and from the body. The clock hanging on the wall produces, every ten seconds, a sort of rhythmic scan in the background noise, which becomes quite evident when the silences become more frequent and longer. The room's reverberation amplifies this sound, creating an almost epic atmosphere. The roll acts as a sort of counterpoint to the sounds of the body.
- 35 Sebastiano sniffs and swallows. The sharp noise of the sweater rubbing on the desk echoes the jerking movements. All this makes his emotion clear, loudly. I turn off the camcorder for the first time.

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Video-Link: <https://vimeo.com/1202064617?>

Interview with Sebastiano, Gonnese (Sardinia, Italy), 26 February 2009. Produced by Visual Ethnography Lab, University of Cagliari.

- 37 The scene resumes with a few seconds of silence, during which Sebastiano is sniffing. He restarts the story of the hunger strike. The sentences are short and interspersed with 'silences'. He inhales sharply and snuffles. The dull creaking of the swivel chair begins to be heard and, more intensely, the movement of the arms on the desk.
- 38 Sebastiano continues the story of the two miners and their hunger strike. The two workers were brought out of the mine and admitted to the local Hospital. In the Hospital, when they were supposed to feed them, they refused the food. '*And they said: they said 'no, we don't eat... because even our comrades in the mine don't eat*¹⁹.' Sebastiano is silent for fifteen seconds. It is one of the longest pauses of the interview, one of those that would produce *error vacui* and seem to demand a question from me. The roll of the clock repeats twice, filling the silence at the end of the sentence and halfway through the pause. We hear the dry, short crackle of the chin on the collar of the pullover, with two clicks, one longer and one shorter, a dry exhalation, and then, on the roll of the clock, the mouth opening, revealing the dryness of the mouth. Sebastiano sniffs, a first and a second time. The mouth opens once again, and we can hear Sebastiano swallowing. He inhales through his mouth, towards the microphone, and stops halfway, producing a light click of the tongue on the roof of his mouth and his teeth. He takes a breath, then continues the story.

- 39 'That was the trigger that made the authorities... worried'. At the end of the sentence, Sebastiano lets a few seconds of 'silence'. His chin rubs the microphone, he breathes shallowly through his nose, and the sound of the handkerchief he uses to dry his eyes almost distorts the sound. He restarts the tale with a description of the visit and meeting with the prefect of Cagliari during the occupation. Another short pause anticipates a more stentorian, almost declamatory tone of voice, supported by body sounds that act as a counterpoint to the story, with the rolling of the clock.
- 40 After he tells the end of the negotiations with the government, he interrupts his narration for a few seconds: the sound of the chin rubbing against the collar of the shirt and the noise of swallowing anticipates the sentence, pronounced with a direct gaze towards the interviewer: '[we had] the Sardinian flag, eh...'. A long breath precedes the second part of the sentence: 'And we gave it to our internal commission²⁰'. Sebastiano sniffs at him and holds his breath, exhaling slowly. The swallowing fills the sound field, overlapping with the rolling of the wall clock. He takes a breath and continues the story: 'We had this meeting... it was two in the morning'. Sounds in counterpoint fill the silence: the rubbing of fingers on the beard, the sniffing of Sebastiano, and the rolling of the clock: 'The trade unionists explained [the agreement] to us... and we, at four, five in the morning...'. A long swallow anticipates the verb that closes the sentence: 'We went out [of the pit]'. The following pause is filled with the rolling of the clock, leaving time for one more sentence: 'We finished that well-known struggle.' Small interruptions counterpoint Sebastiano's visible emotion. 'We put the [Sardinian] flag on a high... pole... to signify that that...'. He swallows deeply. His voice almost breaks with emotion: '[that] was a victory for all the Sardinians'. Here follows one of the most extended pauses in the tell of the strike. It opens with a roll of the clock, followed by Sebastiano's fingers rubbing his one-day beard, a smacking of the mouth that reveals a dry mouth and a long swallow. My question interrupts the pause: 'But... with this agreement the unions can return to...'. Sebastiano signals to wait. He takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes his eyes. The rubbing of cotton on the skin and the scratching of the microphone capsule on the sweater fill the 'silence'. He continues ignoring my question. 'We finished at four, five in the morning... We, early in the morning, around half past six, seven... We, all together, the [workers of] Pertusola group, we were there walking to Iglesias²¹.'
- 41 A long pause, tinged with hesitation, precedes the next phase: the story of the worker's march in the mining city. The rolling of the clock forms the backdrop to a long swallow by Sebastiano.
- 42 At this point, Sebastiano takes the second-longest pause of the entire narrative, marked by a strong emotional charge emerging from this prolonged 'silence'. The rolling of the clock serves as a backdrop to micro-breaths, rhythmic and very close together, which precede the sniffing. Opening his mouth produces a deeper, lower noise. Against the backdrop of the second roll of the clock, a strong inhalation emerges first through the nose and then through the mouth, followed by a swallow and the rubbing of the tongue against the teeth and the cheeks. The mouth closes, producing a dull sound. Its opening is already the beginning of another story, of another time, of another way of being in the mine: 'It was... I mean... After this victory, we began to see the first positive results.'

Conclusion

- 43 Immersion in the ‘silences’ of the interviews allowed us to experience how silence in ethnographic encounters is not an absence but a layered acoustic presence. The interplay of environmental and corporeal sounds shapes the production of memory and meaning. Background noise, often relegated to the margins of analysis, functions as part of the narrative infrastructure. By attending to the sonic elements of the interviews with Raffaele, Tore, and Sebastiano, we gain access to dimensions of experience—emotion, embodiment, relationality—that remain muted in purely textual analysis.
- 44 In Raffaele's interview, the choice of location initially appears as a potential methodological risk. From a technical perspective, placing the camera in the backyard introduces significant noise disturbance. Raffaele chose that setting because he felt comfortable surrounded by the sounds of nature. This, in turn, facilitated his remembrance. The birds helped reframe his mining history as part of a broader journey in which his childhood played a fundamental role.
- 45 In contrast, in Claudio's story, the choice of a more conventional setting—the interviewee's living room—allows the sound of his body to emerge more fully. ‘Nature’ is entrusted to verbal narration, with constant reference to his ‘iron health’. The mining experience emerges as a persistent sign of existential precariousness, from his labored breathing, which contrasts with the story of the difficulties (but also the healthfulness) of his childhood life outdoors.
- 46 The ‘neutral’ setting (a trade union hall) of Sebastiano's story allows the full emotional charge of his narrative to emerge sonically in the moments of silence. The emotion and difficulty in continuing the story of the struggles and the hunger strike resonate with a dense constellation of bodily sounds. The constant ambient sounds (including the ticking of the clock) provide an unintentional, epic backdrop that reinforces the emotional depth of his narrative.
- 47 Reversing the hierarchy between meaningful sound and background noise challenges the methodological assumptions of traditional interview. It aligns ethnographic listening with Cage's provocation to attend to the sounds we usually ignore. As the miners' stories and bodies demonstrate, understanding biographical interviews as multisensory events requires a shift in methodological attention from speech alone to the full sonic environment in which narration unfolds. Background noise is not simply a disturbance but a component of meaning-making processes. It reveals how memories are embodied, how emotions surface, and how cultural expectations shape the production of silence. Returning to Cage's 4'33", the video interview can be reimagined as a performance in which silence becomes audible, and the environment participates in the co-construction of knowledge. This approach can enrich the ethnographic understandings of life histories and open new directions for sensory anthropology.

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Film

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NOTES

1. This is the third part of the package film *Dove vai in vacanza?* ('Where are you going on holiday?') by Mauro Bolognini, Luciano Salce, and Alberto Sordi (1978).
2. Between the vast literature about John Cage, see Cage and Charles 1981; Kostelanetz 2003; Silverman 2010.
3. I conducted the interviews in collaboration with M. Altea and T. Parodi. The project was funded by The Geo-mining Historical and Environmental Park of Sardinia.
4. The 'silences' were duly 'amplified' through equalization software and light compression.
5. Age refers to the date of the interview. All names used are pseudonyms.
6. 'In metal and nonmetal mining, one who shovels ore or rock, caved or blasted from the working face in a mine, into cars or onto a conveyor belt from which cars are loaded at some point removed from the working place' (US Bureau of Mining 2003, *ad vocem*).
7. 'One who cuts, frames, and/or puts in place any of the timbers used in a shaft, slope, mine, or tunnel' (US Bureau of Mining 2003, *ad vocem*).
8. 'A person who has acquired enough knowledge and skill to operate and assume the responsibility of operating a drill machine' (US Bureau of Mining 2003, *ad vocem*).
9. Carbonia is a new town founded in southwest Sardinia to house coal miners during the fascist era.
10. Interview with Raffaele, by F. Bachis, M. Altea, and T. Parodi. Siliqua, 5 September 2008.
11. Small lead and zinc mine in southwest Sardinia.
12. A crack in the rock in which to place the timber for the roof and sides.
13. 'A vertical opening driven downward connecting two levels in a mine. When one is standing at the top of a completed connection the opening is referred to as a winze, while when standing at the bottom, the opening is a raise, or rise' (US Bureau of Mining 2003, *ad vocem*).
14. A lead mine in south-east Sardinia.

15. 'A man or boy who takes ore or rock from the working face to the shaft, or terminus of the horse or haulage road. One who pushes trams or drives a horse underground' (US Bureau of Mining 2003, *ad vocem*).
 16. Interview with Claudio, by F. Bachis and M. Altea, Siliqua, 8 August 2008.
 17. Pertusola was a British company that was one of the leading players in Sardinia's metal mines. See Rollandi 1985.
 18. For a more extensive discussion of Sebastiano's interview, see Bachis 2017b.
 19. Interview with Sebastiano, by F. Bachis and T. Parodi, Gonnese, 26 February 2009.
 20. A trade union commission directly elected by the workers.
 21. The central city of the metal mining basin is in southwestern Sardinia.
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ABSTRACTS

This article examines the ethnographic significance of silence and background noise in biographical video interviews with former miners in southwest Sardinia. Drawing on John Cage's conceptualization of silence, sensory ethnography, and anthropological theories of sound and embodiment, the analysis reconsiders the video interview as a multisensory field. The study argues that background noises—environmental and corporeal—constitute an essential dimension of narrative performance and ethnographic knowledge production. Through close listening to three life-history interviews collected with old miners between 2008 and 2009, the article explores how silence becomes a space of meaning and how the aural environment shapes memory work, emotional expression, and the co-production of ethnographic narratives.

Cet article examine la signification ethnographique du silence et des bruits de fond dans des entretiens vidéo biographiques menés auprès d'anciens mineurs du sud-ouest de la Sardaigne. S'appuyant sur la conceptualisation du silence proposée par John Cage, sur l'ethnographie sensorielle et sur les théories anthropologiques du son et de l'incarnation, cette analyse reconsidère l'entretien vidéo comme un champ multisensoriel. L'étude soutient que les bruits de fond — environnementaux et corporels — constituent une dimension essentielle de la performance narrative et de la production de savoir ethnographique. À travers une écoute attentive de trois entretiens biographiques menés auprès d'anciens mineurs entre 2008 et 2009, l'article explore comment le silence devient un espace de sens et comment l'environnement sonore façonne le travail de la mémoire, l'expression émotionnelle et la coproduction de récits ethnographiques.

Este artículo examina la importancia etnográfica del silencio y el ruido de fondo en entrevistas biográficas en vídeo realizadas a antiguos mineros del suroeste de Cerdeña. Basándose en la conceptualización del silencio de John Cage, la etnografía sensorial y las teorías antropológicas sobre el sonido y la corporeidad, el análisis replantea la entrevista en vídeo como un campo multisensorial. El estudio sostiene que los ruidos de fondo —tanto ambientales como corporales— constituyen una dimensión esencial de la interpretación narrativa y de la producción de conocimiento etnográfico. A través de una escucha atenta de tres entrevistas sobre historias de vida realizadas a antiguos mineros entre 2008 y 2009, el artículo explora cómo el silencio se convierte en un espacio de significado y cómo el entorno auditivo da forma al trabajo de la memoria, a la expresión emocional y a la coproducción de narrativas etnográficas.

INDEX

Keywords: silence, soundscape, interview, John Cage, sensory Ethnography, mining, memories, Sardinia

Palabras claves: silencio, paisaje sonoro, entrevista, John Cage, etnografía sensorial, minería, recuerdos, Sardinia

Mots-clés: silence, paysage sonore, entretien, John Cage, ethnographie sensorielle, exploitation minière, souvenirs, Sardine

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