

Words, Music, & Silence

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Void of War: sounds of silence during repatriation and remembrance ceremonies.

Reflecting on a tour of the Western Front trenches in 1916 the writer Reginald Farrer suggested that it was in fact wrong to regard the 'huge, haunted solitude' of the modern battlefield as empty. 'It is more' he argued, 'full of emptiness... an emptiness that is not really empty at all.' Contemporary artists, poets, and composers seized upon the concept of a crowded emptiness, of gaps, pauses and silences that were in fact crammed with resonance, populated with overwhelming memory.

This short paper reflects on the phenomenology of aural emptiness and its manifestation during remembrance and repatriation ceremonies. It focusses on a short film by Kate Davies 'The Separation Line' which is a montage of 14 repatriation events held at Royal Wootton Bassett between 2007 and 2011. The film lasts precisely 9 minutes and 50 seconds, which is the temporal length of the town's High Street, lined on either side by mourners maintaining an unsteady silence.

In 1916, in a year marked by vast losses of life on the Somme and in Verdun, the writer Reginald Farrer toured the devastated landscape of the old front line in Picardy. People advised him not to bother. It was described to him as an empty battlefield devoid of life, a dystopian waste accompanied only by the sound of carrion bird and voracious insects. Yet to Farrer it seemed far from empty. It is wrong (he later wrote) to regard the 'huge, haunted solitude' of the modern battlescape as empty. 'It is, 'he argued 'more full of emptiness... an emptiness that is not really empty at all.' For Farrer, as for a great many artists, it was a crowded emptiness crammed full with the concentrated essence of loss and absence and silence.

Let me share three contemporary artists who have taken this notion of a crowded emptiness, three sound artists who have grasped the power of silence, or perhaps more pertinently, the power of soundlessness to convey something of the immensity of loss - and the intensity of power.

The first is Jonty Semper in his work with the visual arts commissioning agency Locus+; the second is the Belgian artist, Francis Alys; and the third (who I will focus on in a little more depth) is an English film-maker, Katie Davies.

Jonty Semper records and captures the moments of remembrance at London's annual armistice ceremonies. Every November the BBC transmits two minutes of silence to the nation and commonwealth. On live television this is achieved gracefully, if a little unimaginatively. Live radio is a little more problematic. Indeed, the absence of music or chatter on live radio is known as 'dead air'. *Kenotaphion* is a double album of such absences. Semper created it after locating and anthologising all the existing archive recordings of the two minute silences from the ceremonies at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. [Here is](#) an extract of the track list, dating back to 1929.



There is actually very little silence in the recordings; there is shuffling, coughing, the sound of movement, the chime of Big Ben, before the rituals re-commence. Many of the early newsreel recordings actually had a voiceover by way of commentary. After the

soundlessness there follows the reassuring sound of marching, the beat of a metronomic bass drum as the living pay homage. 'I had not thought death had undone so many' wrote T.S.Eliot of thousands flowing across London Bridge. To many it seemed like uniformed ghosts were processing past the blank slab of Portland Stone, a monument to those buried elsewhere. Standing mute in the centre of British governmental authority, the stone looked down dispassionately as the surrogate dead marched past. Of his project to capture soundlessness, Semper said, "This is raw history."

My second sound artist is Francis Alys. I can only momentarily touch on his remarkable installation film 'Guards'. Although a highly visual spectacle, which clearly required painstaking organisation and negotiation, the film is a 29-minute-long installation with thunderous surround sound.

Alys' temporal work is always deceptively simple. For one night in 2005 he let loose a fox in the august halls and corridors of the National Portrait Gallery. Recorded on their CCTV cameras, the artwork speaks of power and disruption; the famous violated by the feral.

Guards was equally simple. With the full co-operation of the British army, the artist passed on instructions to a troop of 64 Coldstream Guards. They were told to take one of many pre-planned routes through the City of London which lay eerily empty, and near silent one Sunday morning in July 2004.



Ambling casually with their rifles held loosely, as soon as one soldier met another they present arms, fall in, and march together until they met another wandering soldier or group. In this manner two guardsmen meet up with two more, they become four, who merge with a phalanx of six more, until eventually two squares of red coalesce as they march past the mute facades of the Empire's finance houses.



For a few minutes the entire troop of 64 is in perfect formation, 8 x 8 in lockstep, their steps perfectly synchronised. Through emptied avenues and silent streets, they march with rhythmic resolve, their boots crunching out the beat as they head towards the nearest river bridge and then - in a sublime, disquieting change of tempo - they reduce to a slow march. This lasts for 30 seconds in absolute silence; then as they cross the bridge and leave the jurisdiction of the Square Mile they disperse, melting away from military mass to individual agents.



Tightly edited, brilliantly choreographed, at times as much a soundscape as a surreal ceremonial spectacle, *Guards* is considered along with a trio of videos addressing the sonic latency of the capital city as a continuation of Alÿs's post-Cagean interests in sound.



My third artist is Katie Davies.

Her practice-led research explores how society, territory, and political debate are controlled. In her short films she aims to realize the sensation of border as 'an experience of artifice and human division'. She has filmed all over the world.

In 2008 she worked with the UN Armistice Commission and US Forces to film the Korean border from within the Korean Demilitarised Zone. In 2009 she documented the journey and experience of British citizenship ceremonies.



However, the research which she and I shared a common interest (and joint publications) emanates from Wootton Bassett, now of course with its 'Royal' prefix. From early 2007 until late 2011, 167 repatriation ceremonies saw the bodies of 345 service personnel pass through the small Wiltshire town. Davies made multiple visits to the ceremonies, resulting in *The Separation Line*.

Like Alys' film, this is quite properly an installation, not merely a screening; it must be experienced spatially, haptically, and aurally. It is best experienced as a substantial video installation, back-projected onto a screen resting on the floor of a light-controlled interior space. A stereo soundtrack captures the left-to-right sound of the traffic and street noise, emitted from speakers on either side of the installed screen. Little is left to chance in this film. Its temporality and its sound design is exacting. The film lasts the duration of the

repatriation ceremony – the temporal length of the High Street - 9 minutes and 50 seconds - though it is in fact a montage of 14 different events. Tightly cropped, almost confrontational in its presentation of those who mourn, the film presents the ritual as repetition of this ceremony as a toll that increases as each dead soldier is returned.



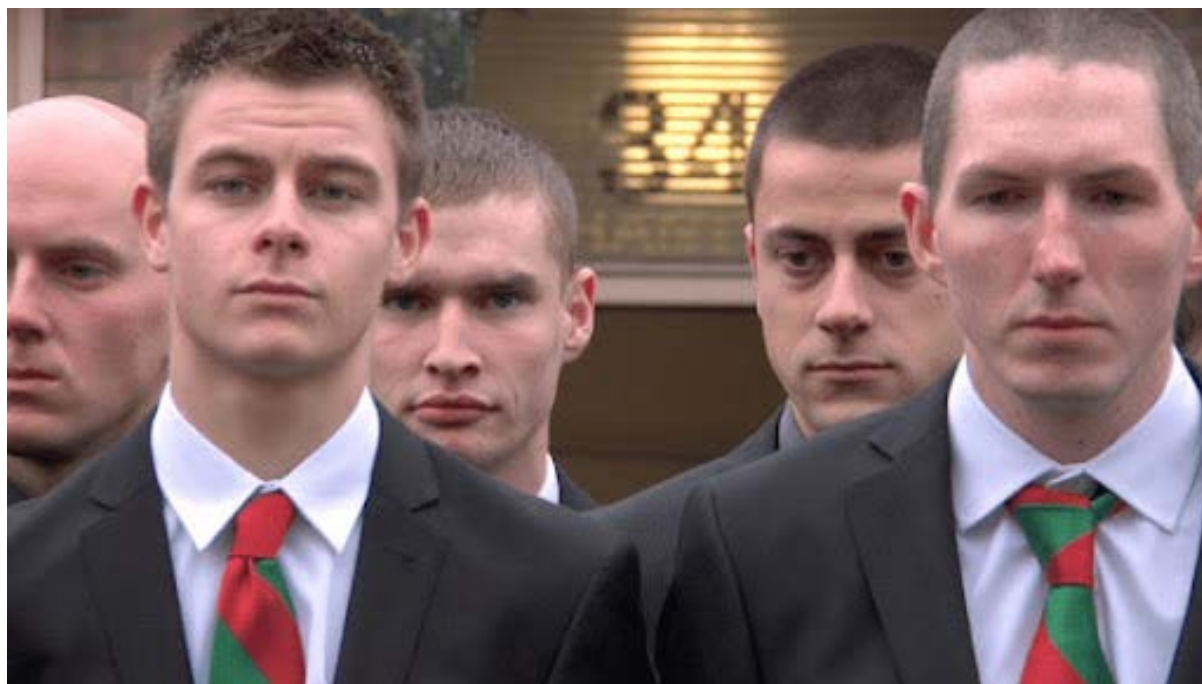
Shown in installation, viewers of the film inevitably stand in front of projected image, as a line face-to-face with the digital participants opposite. The audience become the other side of the street, both mirroring, yet markedly distant from those opposite, indeed separated by a gulf of experience from those uniformed and blazered soldiers who have travelled to pay their respects to their mates.

Thus, in a moment of vicarious and uncomfortable participation 'The Separation Line' projects its audience spatially and aurally into the midst of the repatriation ceremonies; the very positioning of the projection screen with its "street level" position requires the viewer to turn witness to this collective experience, an experience that brings a distant overseas war home by rendering it undeniably present. The viewers of the film have assumed a position of performer and participant, as part of an embodied sensuous performance.

Sound plays a significant part in the sensory experience created by Davies. As Semper noted at the Cenotaph, there is shuffling and nervous chatter; at Wooten Bassett there are

barks of command and the tolling of bells, but at the critical moment there is silence, and there is an unnerving blank.

To emphasize the scale of loss, the gravity of the moment, the ground rumbles with the measured tread of the hearse as it rolls past.



Davies had a choice to make here. But she denies the easy shot, the telling cut away, the long vista down the High Street. Having watched news photographers vying for the best angles (indeed distributing flowers to spectators to throw onto the passing hearse), she turned instead to sound, to absence, and to denial.

The film speaks for itself, even when it is silent. But it is worth knowing that Davies agonized over the editorial decision. In our research papers I quoted her reflection: “As they hear the hearse pass, the phenomenon of experience remains, precisely because the body as the spectacle of the ceremony has not been pacified or fetishized by my own authorial translation.”



Let me close by showing *The Separation line*, a work that is concerned with public memory, the formation of ceremonial space, and its relationship to public intimacy through the social body. Like much of Davies' work it deals with borders; visible and non-visible, tangible and intangible. It attempts to render visible the ceremonial borders experienced by its participants; it also reveals what unites us but also what irredeemably separates us. To paraphrase Eliot, death has undone not the dead, but the living.



Kate Davies

Conference link

<https://fass.open.ac.uk/events/literature-and-music-research-group-symposium-words-music-and-silence>

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