

SILENCE

In a way we could say of silence that it stays somewhere between being and nothingness as when we wait, eager to hear.

That's perhaps why silence has been so infrequently visited by philosophical reflection. I suppose philosophers had always been more interested in what is said than in what is silenced. In this they oppose psychoanalysts who are more interested in what you silence than in what you say.

Anyway, I don't think silence is opposed to speech. Noise is the real negation of silence. That is because, whereas silence mingles with language, as with music, it never can do it with noise.

Silence is never a part of noise whereas it can be, intrinsically, a part of language, and music. In those two cases, silence is inseparable of its counterpart / counterpoint.

There are, nevertheless, different kinds of silence we must distinguish. Or, saying it otherwise, there are different ways of saying silence, in Latin, at least. The Romans used two words to referring to silence *tacere* and *silere*

Tacere (in Portuguese "calar-se"), to shut up, to go quiet, is an act of interruption with all the negative connotations the term implies. You cut off something that was being said.

Silere, the word where silence comes from, may refer to a state of affairs that you even may enjoy very positively. Silence has a quiet connotation and can be positively enjoyed. We even say, in Portuguese, when a silence happens in the middle of a conversation that "an angel has passed by".

To my knowledge, the first philosopher who wrote extensively about silence was Max Picard, a German phenomenologist close to the so-called Christian existentialism whose most prominent figure, Gabriel Marcel, wrote the preface to the French edition.

The book – *Die Welt des Schweigens* – was first published in German in 1948 and the American edition – *The World of Silence* – in 1952.

In Picard's opinion, silence is not a sudden interruption or deprivation of speech, like in the *tacere*, but, on the contrary, it is a basic phenomenon from where everything else comes..

Silence is a kind of primordial background from where the world detaches itself.

Picard is a theist, a believer, and this is the silence of God, which is himself silence. Picard's God is the place in silence where the word is articulated, the original word and the word of the origin

It doesn't seem to me that we can think like this anymore simply because that's not what we experience predominantly today. Our basic contemporary experience is not silence but noise, a perpetual and omnipresent sonority. Silence, instead, is something you must seek, or build.

Silence can only be, nowadays, not a primordial ontological given, but a construction permanently menaced by its own fragility. The fragility of silence, like that of goodness according to Martha Nussbaum, that's the only way we can think about it today.

When Picard writes, "the basic phenomena (among them silence) bring us in return to the beginning of things", he is referring to a situation that doesn't exist anymore.

Today, the absence of silence is the actual materiality of things. Even technology is a kind of machine annihilating silence.

And that's an interesting modality of silence: silence as a technical breakdown. The machine is only silent when it breaks down. Or, in other words, silence is a failure, a technical malfunction¹.

Picard thinks silence according to the *Genesis*: God's word coming out of silence. But in our view human silence can only come out of language / speech. As a suspension of the word, or even as a part of language, silence makes sense, has meaning, like in the psychoanalytical context.

But also, no discourse is possible without silence, so you can hear it. "Silence is listening" writes Picard and he is right on that, I think.

But, precisely, the difficulty of listening is a major characteristic of our societies because noise is what is pervasive in public space (publicity, Öffentlichkeit).

In the "lonely crowd" society, noise is a kind of anesthetic against loneliness. Silence is a symptom of absence, whereas, according to Picard, silence is a sign of God's presence. That's why he is so completely surpassed.

Today's omnipresent technology, specially the media technology, is constantly fighting against silence. To the media, mainly radio and TV, silence is tedious, boring. It doesn't catch attention, which is their main commodity.

The audiovisual technology that produces noise does it even the information because an overflow of information

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Something that is also completely changed today is the connection between image and silence.

When Plato wrote his dialogue *Gorgias*, about rhetoric, he used his opposition method to distinguish rhetoric from other arts saying that rhetoric, operating through speech, is different from other arts like painting that operate in silence.

But even this is unthinkable today. Our images are shrill, noisy. Compare, for instance, a film like *2001, a Space Odyssey*, which is a film about silence and music, with our contemporary *Star Wars*.

There is almost no image without noise anymore.

In a society of pervasive electronic mediation, noise has the permanence of a flow, a flux. Tod Gitlin wrote about it in a recent book: *Media Unlimited: how the torrent of images and sounds overwhelms our lives*².

If noise is a flux, silence is only a fragment; the scarce remain of a day.

I won't speak about religion because I think it is too much complicated. I only wish to notice that religion and silence used to be together. The process of modern secularization presided over a simultaneous withdrawal of religion and of silence from the public space. Even though some pretend we are seeing a return of a reenchantment of the

¹ R. Scollon, "the machine stops: silence in the metaphor of malfunction" in D. Tannen & M. Saviile-Troike (Eds.) *Perspectives on Silence*. Ablex Pub. Co., 1985.

² Metropolitan Books, 2002. Cf. also Jeffrey Scheuer, *The sound bite society : television and the American mind*. New York : Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999.

world but that doesn't seem to be very quiet.

From the philosophical point of view, after Max Picard, there is another attempt to address the silence question that I think is worth attention.

B. P. Dauenhauer published *Silence: the phenomenon and its ontological significance*³, a book that deserves, in my opinion, some attention.

There, he stresses the active dimension of silence. From his point of view, he stresses what he calls the "active performance" of silence.

We have already recalled the platonic reference to silence as an operative means of performing an art like painting or sculpture as opposed to those arts, like rhetoric, that operate through speech.

For Dauenhauer, silence is an "active performance in the sense that it is the reverse companion to speech itself. There is no silence without a word pronounced and interrupted like in the Latin *tacere*.

An assertion is only possible because you insert successive silences in the speech flow so you can distinguish significant elements from one another. Like in writing, when we separate words with a blank and punctuation marks.

³ Indiana University Press, 1980.