

The echo of Silence

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ABSTRACT

We perceive the world around us through synapses, neurons, and cells. Nevertheless, some of us fall to the temptation of doubting their own senses, seeking comfort in technology and the “infallible” artificial intelligence. Others have reconciled the idea that they see the world through a peephole. Others do not even bother and instead they leave it all to the experts. Questions remain unanswered, creating the root of the question of the current paper: How do we define silence? How do we capture in words and shapes the complete absence of sound? Our senses fail to detect silence. However, they do prove able to describe the world that surrounds them. This is because, around the (apparent) absence of sounds, we witness events that require our attention and stimulate our thoughts. Through afterimages and aftermaths, we form our opinions on all things. There is no need to see the Higgs boson. We need only observe the effects of the actions of the energy derived from its existence. In the physical world, everything enlarges upon the field of human cognition, which constantly searches for ways to decode guarded secrets that define our own existence. It is thus worth to think about the labyrinths of comprehension in order to touch the essence of silence, carefully pondering the echo of its aftermath.

KEYWORDS. silence; echo; absence of sound; pause; noise; scream.

Introduction

We live in a chaos of natural and human noise, in bustling cities that are characterized by boisterous sounds and multilingual soundscapes. The spectacle of people verbally jousting in stadiums, cafes, and television channels is common. This happens even in the halls of parliaments, where we would expect the decency of democratic discourse to prevail. The loud disagreements and quarrels prevail even in school settings, be it in classes or in playtime. We have learnt to express our opinions loudly, using rude gestures and body language and we

teach our children to do so as well.

The perspective of those who defiantly remain silent creates, at the very least, mistrust (**Figure 1**). Silent are usually those who do not know how to express themselves, those who -being aware of their ignorance of the subject at hand- choose to hermetically close their mouth as well as those who remain temporarily silent or those who wait to hear the opinions of others before they weigh in.

Nowadays, when our discourse has degraded to all sorts of vulgarity, falsehood, swear and cursing, silence has something to say. In times that we are

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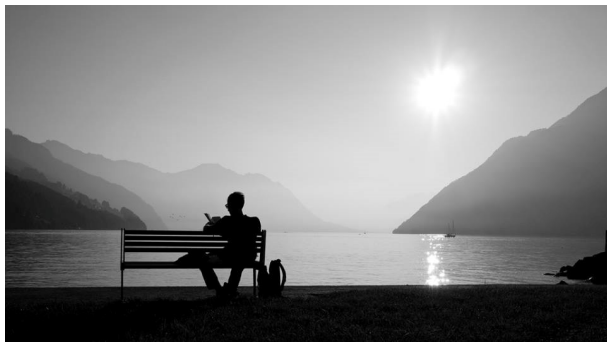


Figure 1. Introverts are treated as suspicious

consumed in unending sycophancy, ironic comments, slander and shameless gossip, we can gain unimaginable powers from our delicate and still purposeful silence.

Our ancestors had comprehend it before we even perceived it. They used to say: *“Ἡ γάρ τῆς γλῶττης ἀκολασία πολλοῖς λύπην καὶ αἰσχύνην φέρει”* (*The pointless use of language shall bring sadness and regret*) and *“Ἡ γλῶττα πολλῶν ἐστὶ κακῶν αἰτία”* (*Language is the source of hardship*) [1].

The merit of silence

Plato taught his young students that it is greater to hush than to babble (*“Νέοις τό σιγᾶν κρεῖττόν ἐστὶ τοῦ λαλεῖν”*) and even that they could overcome anger by thinking logically before answering (*“Νίκησον ὀργὴν τῷ λογίζεσθαι καλῶς”*) [2].

Rudyard Kipling approaches the same in a similar way in his famous poem *If*:

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too.* [3]

If we accept as an indisputable fact, that Art serves freedom in every form of expression, we should lean to come bravely closer and listen to what silence has to say.

In her poetry book with the title *“Δημόσιος καιρός”*, [Communal Time] Kiki Dimoula [4] addresses to human curiosity, which she calls “savage” and notes that *“silently the words are loved/so that you don’t hear them”*. This is an implicit, yet obvious, reference to the value of being soft-spoken.

Intellectuals and people of letters have expressed



Figure 2. The Silence of God at Auschwitz

views on the subject of silence in a surprisingly similar way. In his masterpiece *“The Brothers Karamazov”*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky timely highlights that *“much unhappiness has come into the world because of bewilderment and things left unsaid.”* [5]

In his autobiographic work *Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο* (*Report to Greco*), Nikos Kazantzakis, after a tour (which he refers to as a “pilgrimage”) of Greece, he inspires us to fall silent and listen for the screaming: *“Every Greek landscape is so drenched in happiness and unhappiness with a universal impact, so full of human struggle, that it becomes a stern lesson and you cannot escape it. It becomes a screaming, and you have a duty to listen”* [6].

Harry Klynn, a gifted Greek actor and writer, also known in Greece as “the modern day Aristophanes”, had once said during an interview [7], in reference to a distinguished and famed Greek politician that *“He is such a good orator that he can talk to you for two hours to explain the value of silence”*.

A know question among theorists is why God remains silent. *“God’s silence - Nikos Dimou writes on his personal blog- is the basic pattern of all Existential Philosophy - and Theology - of the past century. God was silent during Auschwitz (Figure 2) and in Rwanda and silent in Cambodia and in Srebrenica. He let unspeakable atrocities to occur without giving us any sort of sign. God stays silent not only during the large and public tragedies, but during the small and private ones as well. The mother who mourns her child’s loss will get no answer”* [8, 9].

It is true that the world we live in is a valley of



Figure 3. Picasso breaks his silence by painting *Guernica*.

tears and sorrowing. Wherever you may turn your gaze, you can see pain, sadness, injustice, and death. In an inspired text [10], Nikolaos, Metropolitite of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki, bravely opines, *“every thought about the absence of God causes a sense of emptiness, deep disappointment, lack of purpose and direction, and inability to determine the deeper meaning of existence”*. At another point, he notes, *“The question isn’t whether God is present, but whether He appears before us and whether we see Him and each of us can sense Him”*.

Silence in Life and Art

Artists comprehend silence in their own personal way and exploit it brazenly, as it is the only thing that can motivate creation and be a reservoir of inspiration. Artists call us all to feel and respect their plan. Pablo Picasso breaks his silence during the Spanish Civil War by painting *Guernica*, the most moving and powerful anti-war painting in History, after the barbaric destruction of Basque’s holy city (Figure 3). Beethoven, sunken in silence, will construct exceptional musical syntheses, although isolated from his sonic environment. Yiannis Ritsos, the Greek poet, will write his *Eighteen Little Songs of the Bitter Homeland* (poems) while in exile at the soundless town of Partheni, Leros.

Luckily, it is not a necessary for us to go into exile

in order to experience solitude and thus benefit from calmness. We can instead visit the remote islands of our homeland Greece and experience a deep and reverent sense of peace and tranquility. For those who seek transcendent wisdom, silence of the desert represents the perfect getaway [11]. Moreover, all that said, we can look for and find silence by listening our own body.

For people who lost their hearing early in their lives, their remaining senses were tuned accordingly in order to make up for the loss of the other ones. After all, the loss of sense of hearing can function in a compensatory manner as in the case of Beethoven as previously discussed. For the deafblind activist Helen Keller, her disability had a practical effect. Through the Braille Method (for the blind) and the Tadoma Method (for the deafblind), Keller managed to interact with the environment. She travelled across the world, conducted university studies, wrote articles, published books, gave talks and today is probably the most well-known deafblind person in History [12].

A vascular episode, which affects the left hemisphere of the brain, leads to aphasia, as it disturbs Wernicke’s centre in the brain. Patients in intensive care units who are in coma or suppression unknowingly experience the same situation.

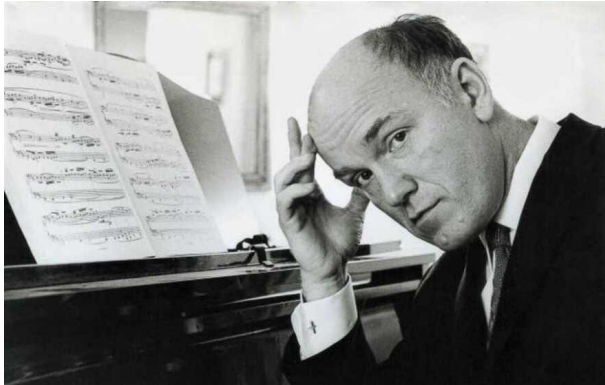


Figure 4. Sviatoslav Richter made good use of absence of sound in his performances

Saying this, we have trouble figuring out the inertia of death. Afterlife, like the philosophical “ἐπὶ ἐκεῖνα” (“hereafter”), that is the things beyond everyday knowledge, does not allow us to experience the stubborn silence of the great beyond. Dead tell no tales, they do not disclose the unsolved mysteries, they do not answer existential questions, nor do they enter in to self-reflection. They bravely imply, however, to all of us who hearken, the futility of earthly pursuits.

From Physiology, we know that Cheyne - Stokes respiration is characterized by progressively, deeper and sometimes-faster breathing followed by a gradual decrease (crescendo decrescendo) that result in temporary cessation of breathing (apnea). This is not always due to an underlying brain damage. This asymmetrical type of breathing is being manifested during normal conditions, such as in toddlers’ sleeping or in people that live in high altitudes [13].

Actually, we know that after an extra systole of cardiac muscle a compensatory pause follows, as the cardiac muscle is in an unirritable period. However, immediately after the cavities of heart have filled with blood, a strong contraction follows with increased stroke volume [13]. In other words, our bodies for a new start use these small pauses of breath or cardiac function with increased intensity and with effects that are more apparent.

Music has mimicked nature and has added its silences in the form of musical pauses -yet another element in its long list of virtues. In symphonic works, in times when some instruments fall silent,



Figure 5. Those that watched the launch of Apollo 11 witnessed a unique event.

other instruments shall highlight their own sound timbre. During the big pause, the composer shall cut off every musical sound, giving the audiophiles the chance to enjoy the harmonies from the last chord of the symphonic orchestra still present in their ears. Sviatoslav Richter, the famed pianist, had the unique ability to utilize the pause of the orchestra’s instruments during a piano concert, before the beginning of the improvisational cadenza (**Figure 4**).

In Alfred Hitchcock’s movies, especially those of his American creative period, almost exclusively Bernard Hermann had taken the music lining up. It is believed that even the slightest details of Hermann’s music contributed to the culmination of agony and the climaxing of anticipation as desired by the master of suspense. In the movie *North by Northwest* the director and the composer decided that in the film’s top scene no music was to be heard. [14].

Pantomime traces its origin to the period of Roman Empire and has maintained over the centuries the uniqueness of its on-stage presence, conditions, and setting, either as a special theatrical genre or as a part of the thespians’ profession. All across the globe, *Silent theatre* has found fertile ground, while great artists in this genre have managed to elevate it to new heights.

In *Silent films*, recorded sound and any form of audible dialogue is of course absent. The genre bloomed up to the end of the 1920s. Great actors, such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold



Figure 6. A Hebrew proverb defines five steps of knowledge.

Lloyd were emblematic in this genre, which gave us unforgettable moments of sheer entertainment. The impact of silent dramatization continues to move audiences in cinema, the so-called “seventh art”, even today.

The Sound of Silence, as an idea, inspires Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel to write their musical score and sing in Mike Nichols’ landmark movie *The Graduate*, at the end of the 1960s. Actually, from Ingmar Bergman’s *The Silence* (1963) to Finos Film’s *Maria of Silence* (1972), cinema has done nothing else but flirting with silence.

Art shows interest in anything that attracts the psyche of man or pulls at our heartstrings. The artistic world observes speechlessly the various approaches on that. Films have been shot, musical compositions have been recorded and books have been written.

It is clear that in authors’ creative vein flows blood saturated with metaphysical searches, autobiographical recollections, and nostalgic shivers of childhood, historical reports, and allegorical mind games, spiritual and moral forces that found their way in writing. Writing on paper is truly a remedy. Silence and -mainly- its echo plays a leading role in this process. [15-18].

Everyday experiences

In a music concert, the audience knows well and

everyone has an understanding: During the show, they all ought to stay silent. To the musical rainbow that unfolds, they have to demonstrate this unique agreement of silence. In some performances, cough pastilles are provided.

A few days ago, in a metro station, some moronic faced youths boarded while listening to trap music at max volume from their earphones. The verses sounded deafening, harsh, vulgar, and provocative. Yet, none of their fellow passengers in the train car reacted.

This experience of silent harmony, shared never before until this unique event, was lived by those who stood to watch the launch of Apollo 11 (Figure 5) on a summer day of 1969. Everyone was left speechless before the wonder of technology, which at that very hour was sending man to the Moon.

A few years ago, in the eve of the authentic marathon, the organizers had scheduled a meet and greet in a big hotel in Athens. Among the speakers were big names of the world of sports to address their greetings. The renowned pasta party would follow, giving athletes energy for the next day. It was the idea of one of the directors to put one of the Kenyan runners up on the stand. The runner indeed rose from his seat, got on the stand and remained silent for five minutes, awkwardly facing the audience with a shy and reluctant smile. The next day, however, he chose to let his actions speak for him by

being the first athlete to cross the finish line.

In the end of the First World War, the minute of silence was introduced and today is a period of silent contemplation in the memory of a tragic historical event or as a gesture of respect, particularly in mourning. Silence is considered the greatest form of sympathy to the grieving. In the case of the recent death of Queen Elisabeth II, the silence lasted two whole minutes across Great Britain.

Silence is also essential for the illegal operations of the world of organized crime. *Omerta* is exactly that: The code of silence, loyalty and solidarity among Mafia members in the face of authority. Its violation is punishable by death. With this code of silence, comes the Sicilian proverb: *"He, who does not listen, does not see and does not speak, lives for 100 years"*.

In the period of Pythagoras of Samos, the dominant view was that *"you should either remain silent or only say something superior to silence"*. After all, the code of silence, meaning voluntarily withholding of essential information useful to an organization, is a known code in secret societies or brotherhoods as a necessary precondition for their members' devotion.

The *Me Too* movement fights to overcome the code of silence regarding suppression. The present deputy minister of labor Maria Syreggela expressed her opinion with these words: *"The culture of silence finally wanes, as there are sympathetic ears to listen to the traumatic experiences of women, as well as theorists to support and advise women on how to escape abusive relationships"* [19].

Beneficial knowledge

A Hebrew proverb delineates knowledge in four steps (**Figure 6**). The first step is to have the strength to be silent and not pretend to be a knower in fields you have not a thorough knowledge. The second is to pay attention to your teachers. The third is to study ceaselessly, to observe the details of a subject and to keep notes. The fourth and final step is to pursue teaching as pretext for transmission of knowledge and experiences to the younger ones [20].

It is not coincidental that we got used to associ-

ate silence with gold. When you choose to answer a challenge by remain silent, tension is being lowered, escalation is interrupted, rage is being cut to pieces, anger is reduced. The faithful have glorified the silence of the saints in their countless hours of ascetic isolation; they have praised the holy silence of the blessed who have given answers to confusing problems; they have preached the reflective silence of a hero before his or her self-sacrificial act. Saint Arsenios used to say: *"I have regret speaking, but not being silent"* as well as *"We have two ears and a mouth. More for listening and less for talking"* [21].

For the people who have chosen remoteness and quietism, silence determines humbleness, seeing through the heart, and fulfillment of the soul. Monk Moses in Mount Athos, the Greek Orthodox Holy Mountain, have said: *"Silence gives birth to clear, beautiful and rich reason"* [21].

These are challenging times. We are called upon, on a daily basis, to react with screams, protests, placards and banners. We can, however, reduce uneasiness (to the degree that this is translated to pointless talking), and also our worries and fussiness to make room for studying, reflection and introspection. In the poem *"As much as you can"*, published in 1913, Constantine Cavafy captures in his verses the merit of whispering and the trouble of everyday conversation that focuses on unimportant topics

And even if you cannot make your life the way you want it,

This much, at least, try to do

As much as you can: don't cheapen it


With too much intercourse with society,

With too much movement and conversation [22].

Conclusions

A difficult subject, such as that of silence, can be analyzed only by blending scientific writing and non-fictional creative writing. This is because any author's inner nature and its relation to the phenomenological "essence" of silence can only subjectively and poetically be comprehended. However, useful conclusions can be drawn from such a pursuit that can inform our life, making it more beautiful and peaceful.

Thought travels uncontrollably with dizzying speed to places inaccessible and unexplored by our bodies. Thought also struggles to listen to the wake of silence of deep space and the bottomless depths of the oceans. Utopia, a world without suffering, hatred and war, is one of its targets as well. Nothing can resist thought's unsurpassed charm. There is not *terra incognita* that can hide from its penetrating gaze.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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