

Studying Silence in Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

This article explains the impetus for and execution of a team-taught, interdisciplinary class in silence using popular culture materials and practices, such as silent film, music, meditation, and mime. The course identifies individuals as possessing characteristics of introversion and extraversion and explores the role of silence in the modern world, incorporating the following: (1) Foundations for the Study of Silence, (2) The History of Silence, (3) The Role of Silence in Spirituality, Creativity and Reflection, (4) Silence in Communication Study, (5) Silent Film and Silence in Film, (6) The Role of Silence in a Highly Technological, Mediated World, and (7) Student Research Presentations. The class made students aware of the media-rich environment in which they live as well as the choices they have to seek quiet.

Key Words: Popular Culture, Silence, Quiet, Introversion, Extraversion, Spirituality, Creativity, Silent Film, Meditation, Mime, Interdisciplinary, Undergraduate Teaching, Higher Education, Curriculum Development

Hello, darkness, my old friend
 I've come to talk to you again
 Because a vision softly creeping
 Left its seeds while I was sleeping
 And the vision that was planted
 In my brain still remains
 Within the sound of silence
 —“The Sound of Silence”
 Simon and Garfunkel

Silent night, holy night
 All is calm, all is bright
 —“Silent Night”
 Popular Christmas Carol

Silence is golden.
 —Traditional Proverb

In grappling with the fast-paced technological changes of the eighteenth century, Scottish essayist Robert Carlyle paused to reflect upon what he termed the “Worship of Silence.” The phenomenon captured the bearded sage’s sacred respect for restraint in speech until “thought has silently matured itself; to hold one’s tongue till some meaning lie behind to set it wagging.” Out of silence great things fashion themselves, emerging “full formed and majestic into the daylight of Life” (Carlyle, *Works* 174). More than mere prudence in communication, more than a word spoken in season, and especially relevant for this age of regrettably sent premature tweets, this doctrine expressed the notion that silence, defined simply as the conflation of quiet and aloneness, provides the very womb out of which all great things are born.

Impetus for a Course on Silence

While classical culture took the need for silence as a given, contemporary culture does not. In the twenty-first century, digital media and the ubiquity of smart phones have transformed the modern world, creating unlimited opportunities for entertainment and personal connections but rendering silence almost obsolete. Silence thus became the *modus operandi* for a course, questioning Carlyle’s dictum that “Under all speech that is good for anything there lies a silence that is better” (Carlyle, *Characteristics* 190). Looking at the noisy inanity of the world, Carlyle recognized keenly how foundational and essential is silence, but do others share this view today? Students in a senior seminar class in communication at Virginia Wesleyan University (a wooded setting in a suburban environment) set out to study the nature, value, and functions of silence. The interdisciplinary course drew on both classics and popular culture in order investigate how people understand and interpret silence. This course was inspired by a survey research project on the role of silence in Virginia Wesleyan University students’ lives that revealed that silence, defined as the conflation of quiet and solitude, has no place in many students’ routines, as technology makes it much easier and more expected to connect rather than to disconnect (Lane 17). This realization led to a discussion on what silence is, what it provides, how it relates to various disciplines, and whether or not it is necessary or desirable. Can one experience deep thought, reflection, creativity, and spirituality in a culture devoid of silence? Is our highly-connected society losing the capacity and need for silence? Susan Cain’s book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking* (2012) became a best-seller, and even in the twenty-first century, two movies, *The Artist* (2011), a silent film, and *Hugo* (2011), about the silent film era, were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture; *The Artist* won. Do these accolades suggest a collective yearning to preserve silence or a nostalgic

affirmation that silence is no longer part of our world? Does one value most not what one has but what one has lost?

A team-taught course at the junior/senior undergraduate level, offered by two professors with specializations media studies, popular culture, religious studies, and communication, set out to address these questions. Communication 411: Silence in Media and Culture continued the dialogue triggered by the previous class by offering an in-depth look at silence in media (especially film), culture, and modern life, and as a metaphor for many things, including spirituality and death. By approaching the phenomenon from multiple perspectives—including sociological, philosophical, psychological, historical, religious, literary, musical, theatrical, rhetorical, and cinematic—students attempted to better understand the dimensions and roles of silence. Is silence something present or something absent? What is its meaning? Why is it or is it not necessary? The topic provided a springboard for student research projects analyzing selected popular culture texts and prompted the kinds of discussions that form the basis of the liberal arts.

Course Description and Objectives

Structured thematically and linearly, this course offered weekly lectures, discussions, guest speakers, films, activities, and other media presentations on the topic of silence. Its dominant pedagogical approaches included the Socratic Method and experiential learning. The latter is particularly appropriate to provide hands-on experiences in a course heavily weighted with researching and writing assignments. The course began with silence as a manifestation of the inability to hear and speak, and of the definition of silence as a complex and positive phenomenon, not just as an absence of speech or noise. Writing in the last century, Max Picard argued that “when language ceases, Silence begins. But it does not begin *because* language ceases. The absence of language simply makes the presence of silence more apparent” (Picard, *The World of Science* 15).

The course progressed through an understanding and appreciation of silence in history, literature, religion and spirituality, creativity, music, theatre, painting, film, and communication, and concluded with silence as a choice that fewer people in the modern technological world are willing and able to make. It required students to recalibrate and listen to silence, and the course syllabus issued a warning:

In order to study silence, you must experience it, and for some of you will be excruciating. But try your best. In the long run, you should be able to pull together the disparate threads of this class into a meaningful and cohesive fabric and produce a quality research paper.

Instructors identified the following objectives:

1. To understand and define the nature and functions of silence in history, culture and media
2. To understand the diachronic role of silence in life, thought, communication, and relationships
3. To identify, analyze, and critically evaluate key media texts addressing silence
4. To investigate the relationship between silence and reflection, creativity, and spirituality
5. To gain appreciation for the attributes of introverts and extraverts
6. To understand how silence functions in literature, film, music, theatre and the arts
7. To understand the rhetorical and metaphoric uses of silence
8. To develop skills in research, analysis, discussion, writing, and oral presentation
9. To write a substantive critical research paper on some dimension of silence and culture

Course Required Readings

Two texts on silence provided a basis for the course. The first, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* by Susan Cain, characterizes introversion and extraversion in American culture and explores American society's preference for and privileging of the latter; it became a best seller, acknowledging

the sheer pervasiveness and feelings of those who self-identify as introverts. Cain's February 2012 distillation of the book in a Ted Talk reached nearly 14.1 million views. Such attention thrust the book into the public limelight, making it a topic for discussion on television and radio talk shows and online forums. The juxtaposition of an introverted female professor and an extroverted male professor made for a provocative contrast in the classroom, as the female would gently elicit volunteer responses from the class in nurturing, organic ways, and the male would directly call on students, spurring them to move out of their comfort zones. The pairing enabled students to clearly differentiate concepts in Cain's text. The second work, Colum Kenny's *The Power of Silence: Silent Communication in Daily Life* served a more conceptual analysis of the ways in which silence influences history, culture, and the human soul.

These books, along with Jane Stokes's *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies* (2003), provided a framework for the course. In addition, students read weekly selections from a Course Handbook prepared by the instructors that offered interdisciplinary approaches to the study of silence in media and communication. Sample readings included Leland Person's "Hester's Revenge" on the symbolism of silence and how speech was "suppressed from without and repressed from within" in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*; "The Upside of Being an Introvert (and Why Extroverts Are Overrated)," a *Time* magazine cover story by Bryan Walsh; "10 Things to Know about Silence in Communication" by Susan Dunn; "The 8 Types of Silence: How to Improve Communication when People Aren't Talking" in *Silent Counseling* by Eric Klein; and excerpts from Ikuko Nakane's book, *Silence in Intercultural Communication* and George Prochnik's *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise*. These and other selections provoked discussion. One particular debate arose from Robert Heath's article "A Time for Silence: Booker T. Washington in Atlanta" about when the time is ripe or strategic for speech or action. As the book of *Ecclesiastes* declared (and the Byrds sang): "there is a time to speak and a time to be silent." The wisdom is knowing what time it is.

Background Readings

The professors relied upon readings classic and contemporary, scholarly and popular on silence to chart directions for the class. From the rules of silence among monastic traditions of ascetics and monks in the early Christian era, particularly of the Eastern Orthodox Church, through the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "Silver Blaze" (in which the dog that didn't bark in the night provided the vital clue for solving a mystery of a theft, as the villain who stole the racehorse was someone the dog knew), they sought various venues and expressions that opened up the diversity of material on silence. Other bits of literature provoked discussion about the advantages and problems of silence, such as the character of Gratiano from pop culture celebrity William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, who spouts doubt about the value of silence: "Silence is only commendable / In a neat's [cow's] tongue dried and a maid not vendible" (marketable) (1.1.111-112).

Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken: Rhetoric of Silence* opened up intercultural aspects (e.g. silence of Native Americans among Navajo, Hopi, Pueblo, and Apache), dealing with both the forms of silence and its diverse communication functions. Glenn also focuses upon "engendering silence," investigating how silence relates to systems of power (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, age, etc.) with case studies of silencing women from "Anita Hill" to "Clinton's women." She connects the silence of Protestant reformer Anne Askew's appeal to a "rhetoric of silence" to biblical foundations and strategies of remaining quiet, even in the face of torture. Glenn concludes with a fascinating chapter on "the circulation of silence as a creative or ethical resource within the college classroom" (Glenn 150-162).

Course Assignments

Because the class satisfied the college's writing across-the-curriculum requirement, student writing assignments dominated. The first assignment, due the second week of class, was a collaborative annotated bibliography in MLA style with at least thirty books, chapters, or scholarly articles on silence. The preparation

of this list, worth five percent of the grade, enabled students to work together and get to know one another and culminated in a general list of sources that the entire class would reference for the rest of the semester.

This bibliography provided a starting point for a short research paper analyzing silence as a theme or device in a film, television show, song, or other popular culture text not covered in class. In an approximately three –to–five–page paper, plus a works-cited page that included at least six articles, books, or reviews, students delved into ways that silence functioned physically, rhetorically, and metaphorically in their chosen texts. This was worth ten percent of the grade.

In lieu of taking a midterm exam, each student selected a different book or substantive article from the class bibliography and came prepared to answer questions about it in an in-class essay. This was worth fifteen percent of the grade.

These three preliminary assignments prepared students for their major writing project, which consisted of various parts. First, students submitted research paper proposals of approximately five-hundred words, outlining the topic of study, reason for its importance, and thesis. This paper, along with a short, informal presentation to the class, was worth ten percent of the grade. Two weeks later, students submitted an annotated bibliography in MLA Style with at least twenty-five sources on their specific media text or topic. This was worth ten percent of the grade. A rough draft was optional, and during the last two weeks of the semester, students submitted final, polished twenty-page research papers and presented their work to the class in panels of four. The papers accounted for thirty percent of the grade and the presentation for ten percent.

The class culminated with a comprehensive essay final on silence in media and culture, covering readings, discussions, films, activities, and presentations, worth twenty percent of the grade.

Course Outline

The semester-long course was divided into following six sections: (1) Foundations for the Study of Silence, (2) The Role of Silence in Spirituality, Creativity and Reflection, (3) Silence in Communication Study; (4) Silent Film and Silence in Film, (5) The Role of Silence in a Highly Technological, Mediated World, and (6) Student Research Presentations.

Foundations for the Study of Silence

The first two weeks of this class centered on the question of definitions of silence and why one should study it in the twenty-first century. Kenny's *The Power of Silence* inaugurated the discussion, with his first three chapters outlining the phenomenon throughout history, exploring the thoughts of characters from Saint Teresa of Avila to Ralph Waldo Emerson. One of the most fascinating areas was the intercultural aspect of silence, with Asian cultures honoring silence as a sign of humility and respect. Also, Susan Cain opens up an understanding of the silence of introverts in a world of extraverts. According to Cain, most people have characteristics of both, but while introverts need quiet to refuel, extroverts get their energy from groups and stimulation. This became a running theme in the class as students worked through Cain's book, covering roughly a chapter per week. Cain also noted that introversion is not the same as shyness; however, introverts prefer deeper conversations with another person or a small intimate group while extraverts thrive on less in-depth talk with many people in a lively party setting.

To capture the cacophony of modern life and suggest whether students thrive more on quiet or chaos, the class watched, or suffered through, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) (85 min.), an experimental film directed by Godfrey Reggio with music by Philip Glass. The film's title means "life out of balance," and the jarring images and sounds of the film jolt the viewer. Beginning with this extreme example, the class set out to study

ideological parameters. Students were challenged to reflect upon dimensions of silence and their antitheses, as follows:

Dualities in the Study of Silence

Silence	Sound
Quiet	Noise
Solitude	Community
Isolated	Connected
Alone	Accompanied
Deep Thought	Superficiality
Deep Reading	Skimming
Reflection	Spontaneity
Writing	Speaking
Disconnect	Connect
The absence of sound	The absence of silence
Inability to hear (deafness)	Inability <i>not</i> to hear (Cacophony of modern life)
Silence as sign of closeness (words need not be spoken)	Silence as sign of isolation (nothing to say)
Silence as love and support (physical presence, smile, touch)	Speaking as love and support (proclamations, cheers)
Contemplative religion	Celebratory religion

From here, the class turned to the condition of deafness, or the inability to hear. Students watched *The Miracle Worker* (1962) (106 min.), a film with Patty Duke and Anne Bancroft which told the story of the deaf, blind, and mute child, Helen Keller, and her teacher, Annie Sullivan, who penetrated her world of silence by teaching her sign language. Duke won an Academy Award for best supporting actress for her role as the brilliant but unruly child who is frustrated by her inability to hear or see.

The second week of the class, student read excerpts from *Walden Pond*, and a colleague from philosophy gave a guest lecture titled “Philosophers from Aristotle to Thoreau” and discussed silence and nature. “Silence,” Thoreau opined, “is of various depths and fertility, like soil. Now, it is a Sahara, where men perish of hunger and thirst; now a fertile bottom or a prairie of the west.” The guest professor showed an original film, *Walden Pond*, ironically contrasting Thoreau’s solitary experience with the Walden Pond of today filled with loud tourists tied to their technology.

A weekend assignment involved a field trip to the Edgar Cayce Association for Research and Enlightenment in Virginia Beach, Virginia, where students attended a free meditation class and then walked the outdoor labyrinth designed to mirror some of the sacred spirals and meandering patterns in nature. Cayce (1877-1945) was a popular and controversial twentieth-century psychic known as the “sleeping prophet.” He went into trans-like states to discover cures, psychic practices, and universal truths, and his followers maintain a facility at the Virginia Beach Oceanfront that archives his papers and promotes his alternative-lifestyle teachings through education, activities, and services. A quiet refuge in the midst of a busy tourist area (when the Navy jets were soaring over), the Edgar Cayce center encouraged students to slow down and appreciate solitude. The students’ practice of silence (sans phones) seemed unnatural at first, but soon quickened their senses of other sounds, as the center is near Seashore State Park, a quiet National Historic Landmark where trails lead one through bald cypress swamps, lagoons, and the maritime forest, an alternative site for the

sensory exercise of silence. Here students were able to experience the silence of space as well, as the solitude of the location opened up an opportunity to escape the crowded bustle of their everyday lives.

The Role of Silence in Spirituality, Creativity, and Reflection

The next phase of the course addressed the roles that silence plays in one's inner life. Continuing discussion from the Edgar Cayce visit the week before, the class entertained readings on meditation and spirituality and watched *Into Great Silence* (2005) (162 min.). This documentary by filmmaker Philip Groning, the antithesis of *Koyaanisqatsi*, examines the daily life and rituals of an ascetic sect of Carthusian monks who occupy the Grande Chartreuse, an isolated monastery high in the French Alps. The film runs nearly three hours and contains no voiceover, score, or archival footage. Using no crew or artificial lighting, Groning spent six months alone in the monastery, which almost never permits visitors, in order to capture the lives of monks who lack communication with the outside world. He spent two and a half years editing his footage. The film provoked a lively class discussion, and students remarked that they would not have been able to sit through such a long, soundless piece just a few weeks earlier.

Into Great Silence juxtaposed nicely with a missive from Pope Benedict XVI, who in 2012 offered a word on silence for the 46th World Communications Day, reminding his followers that "God's silence prolongs his earlier words. In these moments of darkness, He speaks through the mystery of His silence" (*Verbum Domini* 21). Pope Benedict pointed to the fact that our language always proves inadequate and "must make room for silent contemplation;" thus, Word and silence together teaches one that "learning to communicate is learning to listen and contemplate as well as speak." *Into Great Silence* proved to be a strategic entry for the class to read and discuss the final chapters of Kenny's *The Power of Silence*, which addresses silence in the arts, media, music, therapy, and spirituality and religion.

Few artistic works demonstrate the ambiguity of silence as much as Martin Scorsese's *Silence* (2016). As students read *The Atlantic* article by Emma Green, "Martin Scorsese's Radical Act of Turning Theology into Art" (December 21, 2016), they wrestled with both the aesthetic beauty of silence and the horrific repression of religious speech with its heart-wrenching spirituality.

The following week the class entered this realm of creativity and the arts. Students read an excerpt from *How Creativity Works* by Jonah Lehrer, which states that insights happen in times of quiet when the mind is at ease (31). A professor in the music department came to speak on silence in music and creativity, emphasizing that MRIs indicate that when silence occurs in music (and life), brains are activated and have time to digest. Silence enables other things to be revealed as significant. In particular, the professor noted how silence figures in musical compositions, and she brought with her musicians to demonstrate by playing Haydn's "Piano Trio." The musicians also performed John Cage's 4'33"--a totally silent piece in which musicians sit quietly with their instruments-- which became the composer's best known work. James Pritchett, in an essay written for the catalog of a 2009 exhibition at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona titled "John Cage and Experimental Art: The Anarchy of Silence," explains the impact of 4'33":

The piece can be difficult for audiences. . . . Sitting quietly for any length of time is not something to which people are accustomed in Western culture in general, much less in a concert hall setting. That tensions will arise, with controversy and notoriety following, is only natural. Confronted with the silence, in a setting we cannot control, and where we do not expect this kind of event, we might have any of a number of responses: we might desire for it to be over, or desire for more interesting sounds to listen to, or we might feel frightened, insulted, pensive, cultured, baffled, doubtful, bored, agitated, tickled, sleepy, attentive, philosophical, or, because we "get it," a bit smug.

The students in class discussed their expectations for musical performance and their reactions to this

surprising, thought-provoking piece, and how it stimulated both discomfort and contemplation.

Paintings at the Chrysler Museum (e.g. Hudson River School painter **Jasper Francis Cropsey's** *The Old Mill*, 1876 and Gustave Doré's *The Neophyte*, 1868) invited a brief silent season of contemplative wonder, as one listened to the great works of art. In *Signs*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains, "language speaks, and the voices of painting are the voices of silence" (81). Words take us out of the realm of silence, but paintings invite the opportunity to be reabsorbed into silence. Paintings seep into our vision and then seize and captivate our imagination.

Silence in Communication Study

Although this course was interdisciplinary, it was offered under the rubric of communication and thus included disciplinary theory involving silence. Readings over the next weeks, including excerpts from Edward Hall's *The Silent Language*, addressed nonverbal communication. As a class activity, a mime came to perform and conducted a participatory class, focusing on how information and emotions are conveyed without words. In the exquisite Bergsonian tradition of Marcel Marceau, Red Skelton, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, and the Blue Man Group, students themselves experienced practicing the art of nonverbal expression.

Another pertinent communication theory, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory, recounts the tendency of people to remain silent when they believe that their views are in the minority on a particular subject. A reason for this, Noelle-Neumann argues, is that they fear isolation.

Intercultural approaches provided lenses for studying silence in the popular culture of other national groups. In his *Silence in Intercultural Communication* Ikuko Nakane explores the various roles and meanings of silence among various cultural groups, contrasting the eloquent west of Australia and the silent east of Japan. For Asian cultures, silence frequently connotes politeness. The Japanese celebrate what they call *ishin denshin* ("heart to heart communication"), suggesting that they might experience semi-telepathic communication, with an intuitive grasp of another person's feelings, culminating in the communication of *ittaikan* ("feeling of oneness"). The ritual of a tea ceremony as a disciplined practice of silence brought not only *ittaikan*, but also suspended the busy care of everyday life. Kyoko Murakami's "The art of dialogic silence in the way of tea" offered students a perspective on the quiet routines as a means to contemplation and peace. It was director Martin Scorsese's previously discussed film version of Shusaku Endo's *Silence*, a story of faith, doubt, and suffering, that explores such a possibility of peace within a cauldron of chaos. Anthropological studies of ethnicity and silence have raised additional questions. For example, the contrast between "loud black girls" and "quiet Asian boys" both looks at identity construction and challenges stereotypes. Sibel Tatar and others have also demonstrated how non-native English-speaking students are frequently judged negatively for their silence, while they may be wary, cautious, or reflective in the context of garrulous native speakers.

Finishing up the first half of the semester, the class also wrote a midterm essay and watched Mel Brooks' *Silent Movie* (1976) (86 min.), a welcome and silly respite from solemn topics and the examination. However, it conveniently led to the subsequent section.

Silent Film and Silence in Film

Over the next several classes students presented and discussed their proposals for research and submitted bibliographies, and the class continued to explore silent films by comparing early examples with contemporary ones. Two questions guided our discussions. First, how do silent films communicate? Second, how do sound films strategically use silence to evoke mood, establish character, or challenge its spectators to see more keenly. Students watched *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) (69 min.) and read an essay titled "The Keaton Quiet," in which Walter Kerr calls the deadpan-faced Keaton the most silent of all the silent comedians. They also saw Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931) (89 min.), a silent film predicated on the fact that a young blind woman misinterprets the slam of the door of a grand automobile so as to think that a tramp is, in fact, a rich

man. These silent classics contrasted with more current silent films, *Hugo* (2011) (126 min.) and *The Artist* (2011) (100 min.), sparking the class to suggest reasons why a film about the silent age and a silent film achieved popularity in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The class also watched two classic silent dramas starring Lillian Gish, *Broken Blossoms* (1919) (107 min.), directed by D.W. Griffith (in class), and *The Scarlet Letter* (1926) (115 min.), directed by Victor Sjöström (out of class). In the latter film students were directed to identify three kinds of silence, as captured through the three central characters. The students had already been exposed to silent films in previous classes, and most had developed, albeit slowly, an appreciation of them. They were gaining, though, the ability to speak about early cinema with a greater awareness of the relationship between silence and narrative technique.

In contrast, students were then invited to explore the tactical use of silence to create suspense in films like Ridley Scott's 1979 *Alien* ("In space, no one can hear you scream.") and *A Quiet Place* (John Krasinski, 2018), in conjunction with Ann Hornaday's April 19, 2018 article in *The Washington Post* on why "*A Quiet Place* reminds us of the power possible in silence on screen." UCLA Professor Daniel Blumstein noted that horror films provide a higher than expected number of non-linear sounds, abrupt shifts up and down in pitch, which range "from the sort of distorted notes that come from a hi-fi cranked up too high, to the squeal produced by blowing too hard into a trumpet or the screech of a cat." But these non-linear sounds, rooted in animal screams under duress, are made more piercing when they follow moments of complete silence. The silence is the platform for fear-inducing sounds.

The Role of Silence in a Technological, Highly Mediated World

The final weeks of instruction centered on the dearth of silence in modern life and ways to accommodate this. Popular articles, such as Neil Swidey's "The End of Alone" in *The Boston Globe* and Claudia Wallis's cover story of "The Multitasking Generation" in *Time*, and books, such as Sherry Turkle's *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, express the ubiquity of connectedness, rendering quiet and aloneness almost obsolete. The class took a field trip to a local tea room, where the owner gave a talk on tea's calming effects and served teas known for their herbal qualities to quiet the mind and body. Another invited speaker related her experiences as a Quaker and discussed "quietism." The Quaker Friends make silence an integral part of their meetings and, as the speaker related, value moments of quiet reflection, especially in a modern, mediated world. This discussion prompted one student to recall the Jewish tradition of sitting *shiva*, staying quietly with the bereaved during a time of mourning. The class also came to the realization that quiet in a relationship can mean lack of communication when two people have grown apart and have nothing to say to one another or it polar opposite: total communion between those of like minds who do not need words to convey meaning and feeling.

Student Research Presentations

During the final weeks of the semester, students submitted their final papers and shared their findings with the class in twenty-minute class presentations, which were attended and evaluated by not only the two instructors, but also three additional members of the Communication Department. The students had applied Venn diagrams to circle in on a relevant and personalized topic. As expected, their topics covered a wide range, including sports figures, social issues, film, television, and music. One student wrote on the Simon and Garfunkel song "The Sound of Silence," offering a substantive and novel interpretation. A campus athlete looked at meditation as a technique for coaches to prepare players for games in a paper titled "Coaching with Zen." Several students chose film topics, including "The Role of Deaf Characters in Film," "Silence in the Films of Stanley Kubrick," "M. Night Shyamalan and Silence/Introversion through Film," and "Chaplin's Gags." An adult student with an elementary school age daughter with autism found the class eye-opening: her daughter was taunted for being quiet while those bullying her were regarded normal. This student wrote the top paper

in the class, “Silence in Autism: The Deficit of Communication and Noise Sensitivity,” on ways of making autistic children who shy away from over stimulation part of the class so they can learn more effectively.

The course ended with a self-reflective essay final, consisting of a single question: In this class, we have followed many disparate threads regarding silence. How do they connect? Using various materials from the class, explain how your conceptions of silence and your practice of it have been affected.

Pedagogy and Assessment

The course aimed at helping students to learn to hear with their eyes, to catch glimpses and whispers of the visual world that too often they overlooked. In the practices of the Socratic Method and experiential learning, students were able to internalize their learning. Their minds were not stuffed with too much information that they could not chew or digest. Silence offered pauses to reflect after busy, noisy days. Indirect learning allowed for serendipitous discovery. While lecturing did occur, key moments of learning occurred within opportunities to contemplate.

Students were also invited to understand the nature of silence in their own education. Some saw silence as a defense mechanism, being in a context that they perceived as oppressive or judgmental. Some were simply shy and introverted; others bored or disengaged. Some educational scholars argue that certain marginalized people are *silenced*, as in Paulo Freire’s description of oppressed people in “a culture of silence.” Others, however, viewed their silence as strategic, adhering to the Proverb that “even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues” (17:28).

Teachers could employ silence, as Huey-li Li points out, “as an indispensable disciplinary act that aims at establishing an ordered milieu for effective teaching and learning” or as a means to “simply allow time for reflection on teaching and learning” (Li, “Silences,” 157). It is the latter that fosters creativity and imagination, allowing time for reflection on a theme to blossom into fruition. Students and teachers alike can come to see that even, as Gregory Bateson points out, a non-message is also a message. Silence tells us something. They learn that one cannot not communicate.

Angelo Caranfa argues convincingly that silence is the very foundation of learning, as a means toward self-knowledge. Her position is that no discourse can awaken “self-knowledge” as Socratic learning, complemented by experience, leads to “an inner state of silence necessary for mental, moral, and spiritual growth of the human self.” She points to four benefits of such pedagogy. Education grounded in silence not only teaches students to think critically, but also “to see and to feel the whole of things.” It offers complementary forms of knowing, *savoir*—to know about something—and *connaitre*—to know something directly by taste or experience. Such is the medieval double epistemology of Contemplation and Enjoyment.

Second, with silence, teaching does not become a mechanical routine,” of merely rote learning. Third, silence opens up the joy of teaching. For Caranfa, “teaching is a joyous activity” because every time we enter the classroom we constantly create and recreate ourselves through a communion with the self that we do not know, that we have yet to bring into being.” Finally, silence fosters the creative nature of students, freeing students for spontaneity in their quest for understanding. The focus of the classroom in this model is listening, which alone renders us attentive to the *silent voices* of our spoken words. This works in a practical way in a classroom model of reading and writing, where the shift of learning moves to the student, as reading and writing invite a conversation with “the silent self and with the silent other.” Students thus acquire not only critical skills, but complementary creative and contemplative skills, stemming from this aesthetic of silence.

Students were also challenged to develop habits of seeing and hearing (and then thinking and writing) with disciplined care. Silence itself can enable a lazy student to remain lazy, but a focus upon the meditation of a clear idea, a person could regulate his or her own noise and find an auditory Sabbath or holy time set apart.

Assessment in this course took three forms. First, students were challenged to connect the readings and the experiences of silence in a media-saturated world. Second, their final research papers and presentations,

evaluated by several faculty members, demonstrated how well students succeeded at research, writing, and critical thinking on the complex topic of silence. The final component, a self-reflective essay, assessed by the class's instructors, determined how well students have absorbed course content so as to be aware of the applications to their own lives. In some cases, students found their quests for silence validated, affecting their behavior. Unfortunately, others quickly attached their iphones to their ears as soon as they finished writing.

Reflections on a Word

In *Silence in Media and Culture*, students explored a single word—silence—in all its permutations in popular culture and media. They experienced quiet places and learned through discussion developed through intense questioning. Although the class was offered in a communication department, it could easily fit in interdisciplinary studies or any number of disciplines and works well as a team-taught course. The course made students aware of the history of silence and the media-rich environment in which they live, as well as the choices they have to seek quiet. Most students in the class identified as introverts, even though their personalities suggested otherwise, and appreciated Susan Cain's argument and readable text. The popular book provided entry for more scholarly readings on their chosen research topics. Students also appreciated the wide range of popular culture areas that the course addressed: classic film, modern film, documentary, mime and nonverbal communication, music, meditation and new age philosophy, tea drinking, spirituality, disability, and others. Silence in the modern world may be becoming endangered, but as this class shows, it remains an intriguing idea for study.

NOTES

1. Robin Patric Clair's *Organizing Silence: A World of Possibilities* (State University of New York Press, 1998) offered insights onto the organizational and political structures of silence, such as our classroom itself, questioning how dominant groups silence marginalized others in society and how these groups lose their voices.
2. Heath, Robert "A Time for Silence: Booker T. Washington in Atlanta" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64 (1978), 385-99
3. See Merton, Thomas *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer* (HarperOne, 1997) and Doyle, Sir Arthur *Silver Blaze* (Creative Education, 1990)
4. Glenn, Cheryl *Unspoken: Rhetoric of Silence* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004) See also her edited volume (with Krista Ratcliffe) *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2011) with its special section on Praxes; and George Kalamaras looks at silence as a mode of knowing in his *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension: Symbolic Form in the Rhetoric of Silence* (State University of New York Press, 1994)
5. *Ibid.* xiii. cf 150-162.
6. Mary Reda's *Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students* (State University of New York Press, 2009) initiates a discussion for students on why certain students do not engage in the classroom.
7. See Arden Neisser's classic *The Other Side of Silence: Sign Language and the Deaf Community in America* (Gallaudet University Press, 1990); an alternative film was *Johnny Belinda* (Jean Negulesco, 1948), in which Jane Wyman won an Academy Award for Best Actress, especially for a scene where she signed the Lord's Prayer.
8. Such an exploration has been articulated as well by the meditations of Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast's *The Way of Silence: Engaging the Sacred in Daily Life* (Franciscan Media, 2016), Scott Bruce's *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Gunilla Norris' *Inviting Silence: Universal Principles of Meditation* (Bluebridge, 2004).

For Professor Steven Emmanuel, the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard had pointed to the persuasive silent art of the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 6, in which the birds of the air and the lilies of the field silently taught one how to be grateful and kvetch; likewise, Ralph Waldo Emerson could see a farm as a mute gospel.

9. See Interview with Philip Groning <https://zeitgeistfilms.com/media/films/91/intogreatsilence.presskit.pdf> (Accessed June 9, 2016)
10. Ross, Maggie *Silence: A User's Guide* (Cascade Books, 2014) points to steps of contemplation practiced by monks and celebrated by Bishop Desmond Tutu.
11. In his satiric *The Screwtape Letters*, British author C. S. Lewis's devil railed against both music and silence. Detesting them both, he sounded like Nietzsche demanding "Noise—Noise, the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is exultant, ruthless, and virile—Noise which alone defends us from silly qualms, despairing scruples, and impossible desires. We will make the whole universe a noise in the end." (HarperOne, 2013), 120
12. Salome Voegelin provides a sonic sensibility and an aesthetic of audio design in her *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2010); Another curious cultural phenomenon is addressed in Malcolm Quantrill and Bruce Webb's *The Culture of Silence: Architecture's Fifth Dimension* (Texas A&M Pres, 1998) exploring the environmental impact of modernist architecture (especially Scandinavian) on noise and silence.
13. Cage, John *Silence: Lectures and Writings 50th Anniversary* (Wesleyan, 2011); An alternative aspect of silence and music can be found in David Steindl-Rast's *Music of Silence: A Sacred Journey through the Hours of the Day* (Ulysses Press, 2001), where he seeks to capture the sacred rhythms in each canonical hour of the day (e.g. matin, terce, vigil, etc.)
14. See Claude Kipnis's *The Mime Book* (Meriwether, 1988) and Richmond Shepard's *Mime, The Technique of Silence: An Illustrated Workbook* (Drama Publishers, 1979)
15. See also editors Wolfgang Donsbach, Charles Salmon, and Yariv Tsfati's *The Spiral of Silence: New Perspectives on Communication and Public Opinion* (Routledge, 2013)
16. See Nakane, Ikuko *Silence in Intercultural Communication" Perceptions and Performance* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007) See also his "Silence and politeness in intercultural communication in university seminars" *Journal of Pragmatics* 38: 11 (October 2006), 1811-1835
17. Murakami, Kyoko. "The art of dialogic silence in the way of tea: rethinking space and time for contemplation" *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (March 9, 2018) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13527258.2018.1448881> (Accessed July 11, 2018)
18. See Mark Dennis and Darren Middleton's *Approaching Silence: New Perspectives on Shusaku Endo's Classic Novel* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015)
19. Lei, Joy L. "(Un)Necessary Toughness?: Those 'Loud Black Girls' and Those 'Quiet Asian Boys'" *Anthropology and Education* 34: 2 (June 2003), 158-181
20. Tatar, Sibel "Why Keep Silent? The Classroom Participation Experiences of Non-native-English-speaking Students" *Language and Intercultural Communication* 5: 3-4 (2005), 284-293
21. See Walter Kerr's *The Silent Clowns* (Knopf, 1979) where he calls the deadpan faced Keaton the most silent of the silent film comedians; Samuel Beckett's *Film* (1965), a silent experimental film with Buster Keaton, took the class in a surreal self-reflexive direction.
22. See chapter five of "Film, TV, and Music" in Clum Kenny's *The Power of Silence: Silent Communication in Daily Life* (Karnac Books, 2011). Des O'Rawe's article, "The great secret: silence, cinema and modernism" (*Screen* 47: 4, 2006, pp 395-405) looks at critical writings addressing the expressive functions of silence within sound cinema.

23. Leland Person Jr. astutely pointed out what happened to each character when they kept quiet. "A ban on silence lies on everyone...speech is suppressed from without and repressed from within." In the silence of the text, gaps occur. Silences happen, which enrich the mystery and pathos of the narrative. "Hester's Revenge: The Power of Silence in *The Scarlet Letter*" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 43: 4 (March 1989), 465-483
24. See also Adam Jaworski's *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives* (Sage Publishers, 1992) for further work in media studies and politics. A fun digression is Robert Entman's *Scandal and Silence: Media Responses to Presidential Misconduct* (Polity, 2012) surveying case studies (from 1988 through 2008) in which silence was abused by media outlets.
25. See Quaker Rachel Muers's *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2004)
26. See Bateson, Gregory *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Jason Aronson, 1987)
27. Caranfa, Angelo "Silence as the Foundation of Learning" *Educational Theory* 54: 2 (April 30, 2004), 211-230

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