

SAID MENTAK¹

Mark C. Taylor

SEEING
SILENCE

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Mark C. Taylor, renowned for his philosophical perspectives on human societies and the world they live in, is a prolific American critic who has published so far more than twenty books, philosophically tackling thorny issues in religion and culture. His *Seeing Silence* was concurrently published with *Intervolution: Smart Bodies, Smart Things* (2020), where he combines his personal medical experience with the revolutionary achievements in Internet technology. *Seeing Silence* also started as personal experience that triggered insightful ideas about the possibility of approaching silence from different angles. After his parents' death, he went with his brother to their childhood home to clean it; they came across different pictures that documented the past of the whole family. The pictures, Taylor implies in *Seeing Silence*, perpetuate historically and silently whole lives of people who were once alive and in motion: "No one was left to tell their stories. Lives once lived are quickly wrapped in a silent cloak of oblivion. Nothing seals death more than questions you can no longer ask."² Yet, pictures, together with paintings and sculptures, invite us to see silence, and keep asking questions without making noise. It is in this way that Taylor has smoothly moved us to deeper considerations of silence that combine art with philosophy.

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Even though silence can take multiple dimensions—silence as loving or hateful, for instance, silence as resistance or submission, and silence as punishment or reward—Taylor has opted to discuss what he calls ‘artful silence,’ that is, silence as presented by paintings and sculptures. Therefore, he discusses the paintings by James Turrell, who is said to be obsessed with a search for light, which begins “in the total silence of a completely dark room.”³ In this way, Turrell corroborates John Cage’s premise that the experience of silence may clarify sound in the same way that the experience of darkness may clarify light. Does this experience reveal anything about the color of silence? This is the question that seems to be haunting Taylor throughout the book: Is silence white, dark, or grey? Whatever the answer the reader could draw, silence remains a hidden dimension in this modern time of noise worthy to be discovered and meditated upon. “The work of art—true art—,” states Taylor, “makes us human because it is the ceaseless quest to hear silence by seeing the invisible.”⁴ The artist Ellsworth Kelly’s chapel abounds in colors where the white color is as silence to sound in music or as light to darkness: “The trajectory is clear: from light through darkness, and back to light. The squares are separated and joined by the silence of white space.”⁵ Step by step, and through the study of many artists, we become convinced that it is possible to see silence; however, once seeing requires philosophical reflection, silence is meant to be broken since “philosophy cannot tolerate silence and, therefore, tries to force everybody and everything that resists it to speak its own language.”⁶

Just as Taylor’s *Seeing Silence* is striking in its title and content, it is striking as well in the titles of its chapters. The book takes the readers on an enjoyable journey through fourteen chapters, which start with Zero (0) as title, then other titles follow: 1. Without, 2. Before, 3. From, 4., 5. Beyond, 6. Against, 7. Within, 8., 9. Between, 10. Toward, 11. Around, 12., 13. With, 14. In. The fourth, eighth, and twelfth chapters have no titles and no writing either; they are seen as empty and silent. The last chapter entitled “In” simply contains the other titles without further words. Taylor, thus, does not only tell us how to see silence in art but he also makes us see it. This echoes Paul Hegarty’s “The real challenge is how to stop noise,” or “the world is in some way hiding [silence] from you.”⁷ By reading Taylor’s book, readers learn how to face the challenge, find the hidden, and question what Aaron Zwintscher propounds: “Change begins with noise and belongs to the noises of the environment and takes them into consideration. There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear.”⁸ If noise pervades, and so there is no empty space, it is possible to go beyond space and time to see silence.

² Taylor, 5.

³ Taylor, 46.

⁴ Taylor, 66.

⁵ Taylor, 229.

⁶ Taylor, 172.

⁷ Paul Hegarty, *Annihilating Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 3, 131.

⁸ Aaron Zwintscher, *Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics* (Earth, Milky Way: Punctum Books, 2019), 128.

By the end of Taylor's *Seeing Silence*, we get the basic message: to live without noise, we need to look for it in visual art as "it is necessary to learn to live *with* silence by letting go of the noise of the world."⁹ We have to stop for a time tuning in, so that we can live moments of peace with/in silence. Taylor has finally informed us that he has himself decided to impose silence by letting go of the noise of the world and building a garden for all of us: "I hope that the space I have cleared with the books I have written and the garden I have created might be a quiet place where people who care might for a fleeting moment see silence."¹⁰

Clearly, after reading Taylor's *Seeing Silence*, we learn how to open this space of silence he has cleared for us with this particular book; we also learn how to contemplate silence in the different fields of knowledge humans have created and how to avoid the overwhelming noise of modern technology. In short, once we get the message of the book, we accept the fact that "it is necessary to learn to live *with* silence by letting go of the noise of the world. Letting go is a letting be, which, paradoxically, requires the willing of the nonwilling."¹¹ □

⁹ Taylor, 270.

¹⁰ Taylor, 272.

¹¹ Taylor, 270.