

SILENCE

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In the midst of a busy Copenhagen neighbourhood the exclamation 'SILENCIO' is written on a wall. Taking up much space, the writing can be seen from afar. For years the city council's graffiti squad has for some reason decided to leave this particular piece alone. One can only speculate if the word is meant as an imperative.

Passing the wall every day, it makes me smile. The silencing effect of the exclamation is at best a reminder that things can be different. In the street, cars, people, trucks and shopkeepers go about their business. Every hour the bell from a nearby school rings through the hustle and bustle. Children are playing in the schoolyard. Whenever they get the chance, they cross the street in large and noisy groups to buy candy bars for lunch. A competing bell from the church on the other corner makes people hurry in the morning and again in the evening. An extended melody from the church tower is underlining the eight o'clock hour in the morning as particularly important – it's time to go to work!

Every Friday evening the classic, blue coloured ice cream van rings its bell, and children and their families gather around. 'Old and nostalgic noises' already have permission to communicate in public space, while 'new noises', such as calls to prayers from the mosque, have to be approved. It is not easy being a newcomer to the city's soundscape, and rumour has it that the application from the mosque has not (yet) gone through.

Particular forms of activities, working procedures, forms of public communication, indoor and

outdoor cultures of leisure, and the norms of different groups occupy and negotiate the 'right' balance between comfortable silence and entertaining noise. But what happens when everything falls silent? What accompanies the phenomenon of silence, how is it interpreted, and with what meanings is it impregnated?

Moving from a public soundscape to a private one, I am going to discuss how silence is narrated and defined in connection with intimate relationships. Silence engages in a storyline of coupling and in this context it can be understood as a phenomenon that tells you something about a current condition in a relationship, and creates a space for the cultural imagination and fantasies of that relationship.

Relationship Research, Reflexivity and Silence as Pause

In my field of study – contemporary, heterosexual, white, Western, middle class, adult couple's relationship narratives – silence seems like something either to be avoided or to become involved with in particular ways.

The interpretation and meaning installed in silence is understood differently when they intersect with larger identity categories such as age, class and sexuality. Furthermore, silence as a phenomenon involves polarized relational concepts, for instance silence–talk, known–unknown, hidden–visible, dream–reality. In relationship research a strong presupposition is that 'fundamental things are hidden and must remain hidden for those concerned' (Kaufmann 1998: 8).



Still, the ability and desire to narrate and listen to relationship stories occupies the centre of my field of study. Silence in this sense becomes both a pause and a space in the relationship narratives, and is defined through an underlying and secretive narrative that contains certain (undefined) 'truths'.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens has interpreted late modern heterosexual relationships through the storyline of the romance, a story with a beginning, a middle and an ending (Giddens [1992]1995: 31, 44). In the process of building up and 'working on' the relationship story – how we met, what kind of obstacles we had, how we overcame them, where we will go in the future, what we will do in old age – silence expresses ideas about causality. A pause here changes and comments on a preceding narrative and affects what will come after. The beginning and/or end of the present storyline changes because an underlying storyline is added on to it, either maintaining, disengaging, or making space for another one.

What is being included in, and what is being excluded from the storyline of a relationship, can be difficult to examine. In what follows, I will examine how silence – when approached in the field of intimate relationships – is sometimes created as a space of the fulfilled, fearful, and marginalized. A silent space is sometimes supposed to be hidden, or approached and accepted as hidden, and thus suggests meaning and non-meaning. It becomes an interpretation in which the conditions of an intimate relationship can be defined differently by persons and couples. This kind of silence contains embedded cultural meanings and fantasies.

Still, silence – being silent – has a practical dimension when studying relationships through ethnographic interviews. Remaining silent becomes difficult – perhaps annoying to the interviewer. In order to get silence across to the reader, researchers need to describe and define silence with specific words and/or codes. In this sense, the definition of the pause of 'nothing' evokes the definition rather than the content. An ethnologist wrote:

At our meeting Jonny and Jeanette talk about themselves and their reality in a quiet way. There

are many things, they say, they have never thought of. My questions are answered briefly or not at all. But what they say, and what they keep silent about, shed a certain light on my other interviews with informants who are more than eager to talk about their lives up front with me (Martinson 1997: 71, *my translation*).

Silence – to be silent or quiet – is thus judged against the researcher's expectations that coupling is a talkative and highly reflexive field so when couples are silent it is difficult to deal with. Jonny and Jeanette have working-class backgrounds. I cannot know how this colours the researcher's expectations of this couple's self narrative. I can only point out that *something* happens in this example with Jonny and Jeanette that places them as a couple at the margins of coupling. They do not seem to fit expectations about how 'coupling' is supposed to be done, namely performing a particular style and praxis of talking about relating. When placed at the margins, this couple is also marginalized. It seems that a couple, in order to be placed at the centre with all the other 'similar' (and here referred to) couples, has to practise talk, communication and reflexivity. This practise is supposed to reflect a cultural and social ability to relate, handle and develop an intimate relationship. Communicative style thus becomes crucial in understanding relationship building.

As researchers we may be trapped in studying relationships through words, and thereby participate in creating a strong verbal storyline in coupling narratives. All that remains is a little room for pauses and silences, narrative by-products that contest reflexivity, leaving an undefined, marginalized space, outside the 'proper' form of coupling and therefore often remaining outside coupling research. When it is mentioned by researchers, silence often is interpreted and impregnated with fantasies about the conditions of the relationship, defining silence either as relationship ease or unease.

In the following examples from movies and my own fieldwork observations I will examine how the phenomenon of silence, closely connected with general and cultural understandings, can be understood

as the relational and imaginable 'content' of a close relationship.

Silence in the Bedroom. Cultural Imaginations of the Adult Couple

The archetypal bedroom scene of couple trouble in an American Hollywood film relies on the formalities of the chamber-play: In the closed environment two people depend on each other to move the story along, and silence between them points towards something wrong and imperfect in the storyline of the relationship. Silence is narrated as a tension, a break in the order of things, a lack of communication and intimacy and thereby a lack of togetherness.

In a classic scene like this, the light is turned off at one side of the bed, the back of a person is turned towards the room and eyes are gazing emptily towards the dark skies outside the window. The other side of the bed is empty, the lights are on, and water is running in the bathroom. These ten seconds of the film feels like a lifetime. The silence is evaluating the couple's relationship. What is the matter? What is going on?

This between-ness of tension is orchestrated as a silence that points towards an obstacle, a shift in the storyline of intimacy and relating. Something needs to be said, everything has been said, but nothing has come of it, and the man and the woman's storylines have gone different ways. As the One returns from the bathroom, the spectator (me) finds herself hoping for a big fight that can either clear the air or make a clean break. Either way, get the story straight!

This form of silence is playing on the cultural imagination of what is *missing* in the scene: The bedroom is a strong marker of the (noisy) intimacy between the two. The bedroom is the place where the voyeur of this kind of mainstream film expects to see the various elements of belonging. There are just the two people at night, leaving all others – children for instance – out of the scene till the morning, so the bedroom is a cultural place founded in the imagination and order of adult heterosexuality. This order connotes the couple's claim to the future legitimated by association with the 'correct' meaning of being together, namely reproduction. In contrast with this

interpretation of the bedroom, need I say that same-sex couples are silenced in the mainstream bedroom scene? Homosexual couples are not even supposed to be there.

The manner in which adult age and silence are combined can be infused with a certain (wishful or unwishful) imagination of togetherness, which locates the adult couple within the centre or matrix of ideas about how an intimate relationship should be lived, and even by whom. The 'long' pause and the expectations of the bedroom scene indicate that intimacy has a whole range of micro-elements attached to it. Right and wrong tempos and rhythms in the events describe and expose the idea of a 'natural' and 'normal' adult intimate relationship, which flows forward with ease.

The Undisturbing Silence. Becoming an Old Couple – to Others

At the opposite end of a couple's life path is a narrative of the old couple. Silence in old age defines other kinds of expectations to an intimate relationship. This is exemplified in my field notes by an incident in which Carlo and Gerda, a couple in their eighties, moved away from their home and into a home for the elderly. This is the story of a couple who lived a full life, raised children, helped with their grandchildren, and grew old together, they stood by each other's side through ups and downs and have thus followed the lines of classic values, not because they had to, but because they wanted to. In old age this 'version' of a lifelong relationship is explained though their primary recognition and remembrance of each other:

Together with two grandchildren I am packing up Carlo and Gerda's house. They have lived in the outskirts of Copenhagen for almost fifty years. At that time, they moved to a group of very modern one-floor houses, in green areas, with common leisure facilities. The houses belonged to a Danish beer factory where Carlo used to work. Gerda has worked most of her life in a factory making carton boxes. Carlo and Gerda are socialists and realists; the everyday care they gave to their

grandchildren, when they were little, getting them to sports, picking them up, helping them with homework ‘without it never getting dull’, a particular dessert Gerda made out of ice-cream and a mild spirit they brought back from a vacation in Spain, is part of the stories the grandchildren tell me, as we are clearing out their home. Pictures in the family album show different holidays, birthdays and festivities. We divide the china – 24 settings into six sets.

Two other grandchildren return from the home where Carlo and Gerda now live, telling us that the moving has confused their grandparents. The grandchildren say that because the couple are old and cannot remember much, they now only recognize each other. The grandchildren had them sit together in a sofa. Holding hands, Carlo kissed Gerda on the cheek. The grandchildren had counted 23 kisses. This is the only thing spoken of as we pack up. Otherwise everyone is quiet. Carlo and Gerda do not return (Field-note observation. November, 2003).

The way I imagine this old couple through the stories of their grandchildren is viewed from the perspective of a younger generation. The phenomenon of age defines silence as a retreat, an undisturbed and quiet condition of being together. They are not expected to do anything – it has all been done. Here the category of class is also active, even romanticized, placing the couple in the centre rather than at the periphery of proper behaviour. Evolving around the metaphors and realities of working class life and of old age, the doing, the deed and the leading of life is the authentic, good, and true relationship.

In this image of the old couple, silence is a bodily sensation of both amnesia and the remembrance of what is understood as important in a relationship – togetherness, kissing, and holding hands. The silence while packing up the house works as an end to the storyline, not as a disturbing break and pause in the story as discussed earlier. The silent end is ordering the past, having an impact on rather than defining the events of the story. The younger generation thus places their grandparents at the end of a lived

storyline where their relationship is mutually agreed upon, fulfilled, and settled, a life lived with ease despite the possible hard work, with a sense of knowing each other without the need for words.

It is our preoccupation with the situation at Carlo and Gerda’s house that leads us to create an atmosphere of quietness that correlates with our imagination of the old couple. Navigating, understanding and negotiating the fragments of life, the rightful end of coupling is defined. Everything has been said and done and something has come of it; a common past of difficulty and joy that the true couple balanced out.

Organizing all of the events of living to reach this condition, where our silence defines their silence, can only in retrospect turn out as an ideal coupling story. The togetherness of the old couple falls into place at the end: the pair becomes a couple by fitting together. They have grown together, and now they share a synchronic form of silence where the one is the other and the other is the one. The old couple points to one of the strongest motivational themes in relationship stories: staying together.

The Silent Phone and the Undoing of the Couple

In the ‘straight’ and ‘natural’ story of the couple, elements of silence, except those at the end of the life path, connote a lack of engagement, activity and development. Cultural imagination of a constant process toward greater intimacy are contested when an intimate couple in the middle of the life path is seen as separated, while doing other things, apart and elsewhere. The lack of togetherness points toward the disintegration of, not only the storyline, but also the entire relationship. When the telephone suddenly stops ringing in a relationship, the expected process of communication, interrelatedness, sharing of words and the continuing of the relationship is suddenly cut off, and the discontinuity and inactivity can lead to fearful stagnation.

In the relationship storyline, this fall of silence indicates a liberating or frustrating pause of a possible ‘until’, including what has happened before the silence, and a happy or unhappy ending, moving towards the beginning of a new storyline. In this

sense the silence reflects on the disengagement and disidentification of two people (Ebaugh 1988: 10): The lack of doing, causes the undoing of the intimate couple. When everything else has been tried; waiting, calling friends and family, the hospital, the police, the two-ness of the couple is undone and cut off by the unspeaking of the one. As a shared cultural code, 'the unspoken' generates an interpretation of a change in the condition of the relationship and thereby gives meaning to silence. Silence in the middle of the life path and storyline is like an 'unnatural death'. The words, thoughts, and presence that remain silent have never happened, and will never happen between the two. The French philosopher Lisa Block de Behar describes this deliberate and intended cutting off:

Voluntary silence, which is doubly suspicious – because it is suspicious of the word, and is at the same time itself an object of suspicion – has its counterpart in the silence of the others, a conspiratorial silence, which the Germans, before the second decade of this century [20. Cr.], called with proleptic precision *Totschweigentaktik*, or, much more recently, what in Spanish has come to be known as *ningueneo* (de Behar 1996: 9).

The techniques of silencing something – the relationship, or someone – the other, to death (*Totschweigentaktik*) or the refusal of expressing oneself (*ningueneo*) is presented as the praxis of isolation and isolating. They organize social and cultural space, creating an interrelated condition between the two that evokes and/or maintains disappearance (Virilio 1996: 36).

The condition of isolation or meaningful noneness is perhaps a sanctuary of silence, depending on the other not to access or define the undefined. Standing outside this undefined space, the Danish poet, Inger Christensen writes:

Så alt hvad der er til i sin forsvinden forbliver sig selv og aldrig farer vild.
[So everything there is in its disappearance remains itself and never gets lost] (Christensen 1991: 484).

When the phone has stopped ringing, silence is a phenomenological condition and bodily sensation of being captured or liberated outside the two-ness and within the undone-ness of the couple. This creates an over-activity of couple nostalgia; sentimentality, melancholy or forgetting is entangled with moods and feelings of freedom and absence. The one leaving or left waiting by the phone engages with a void of over-hectic silence. This is a state of disintegration and disappearance, no matter if it is willing or unwilling; creating a vulnerability where the one left behind has a tendency to run into Freud, God or Death – all wanting to talk. Engaging with abstract figures of speech and thoughts sharpens the sense of solitude and intensifies a practical 'what now,' desperately trying to leave the twilight zone.

Club Silencio and the Silence of Definite Loss

The phenomenon of silence can be an unintended and unmarked zero-sign, possibly described as 'non-sense' or 'nothing' (Kurzon 1998: 5–7), while at the same time silence can be understood as meaningful and embedded into everything. Still, silence in and of the relationship, when it has not followed the lines of a 'natural' ordered life path and storyline, is left to fantasies and feelings of unease. These uneasy meanings of silence are impregnated with imaginable contours of every possible state of being and relating in and outside the relationship; how it was, how it is, how it could be. At the same time it includes nothing, desertion and disengagement – how it is not, what it was not, and never will be. The relatedness between these two poles of silence hovers dreaming and awake, known and unknown, and everything and nothing.

In David Lynch's film *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Club Silencio is a place in Hollywood where all the sleepless people go. At two o'clock in the morning the whispering of the word 'SILENCIO' calls them to the club. This club has no band, the music is recorded, not live, and the musicians are only pretending to play. When a beautiful singer falls dead on the stage, her voice is still heard. Here at Club Silencio the show and performance are presenting a twisted world between the real and the unreal, life and

death. Far from the causal order of time, Club Silencio is a place where existence contains several modes of times and spheres overlapping each other.

The main character of the film, a woman, is watching the show together with her girlfriend, but at the same time this reality is contested by another reality, namely the woman's sudden realization that earlier on she has killed the girlfriend she is sitting next to. In the twisted course of events, jealousy has stirred up time and reality. The girlfriend fell in love with a man and left her.

Her feelings of loss and love at the same time have mixed the real with the unreal, so times and spheres are intertwined. The illusion of her dream world falls apart when the song is sung without the beautiful singer. She has been living a perfect love relationship but with a dead girlfriend.¹ After this sudden realization of murder and death the film continues, but now the presence becomes an affair of recollection. Searching with her imaginative (living and dead) girlfriend, together they find her missing, dead, lost, disintegrated and gone. A mystical and metaphysical level of existence discloses an unreal relation between the woman and her dead girlfriend taking place between waking and dreaming.

The storyline of the film and the relationship is messy and chaotic, without linearity, changing times and is altering the 'natural' order of the life path. This disordered form points to the hidden, unreal, unnatural and undiscovered crime of passion. Not only does the disordered storyline underline the wrongness of Club Silencio with its false pretend music, and twisted causality of time. The club also symbolizes the organization of dramatized silence in a foul death, founded in the emotion that has put this whole distorted storyline in motion, namely the jealousy of the woman losing a girlfriend to a man; the most important figure of the 'right' and 'natural' relationship with a woman.

Meanings and Non-meanings of Silence

Putting the phenomenon of silence to the test in few examples as I have done, perhaps even overdramatizing or over-interpreting its meanings in intimate relationship, reminds us that silence is de-

finied (and protected) as both a zero-sign and a sign of underlying meaning. Silence can imply ease or unease, it can be stressful or relaxing, it can symbolize order or disorder, and it can be used to imagine and fantasize about an intimate relationship. As I have shown, this depends on the context in which silence occurs and who is performing the silence or pointing to it.

The end of coupling as in the case of Carlo and Gerda is a narrative of old age and mutually agreed upon restful silence. The narration of the mainstream 'bedroom-scene couple' has on the contrary little space for silence as a relational condition, nor has Jonny and Jeanette in the given example when perceived through the expectations of styles and communication practices of coupling.

Different forms of silences presented in the middle of the storyline and life path thus point to a break in relationships, to the undoing of a couple, and breaking up the twosome. They point to the 'wrong' order of causality and even the 'wrong' kind of sexual and intimate relationship. Furthermore they point toward what is missing in the relationship and could even be associated with what socially and culturally, coupling is *not* supposed to be: namely 'un-reflexive, quiet, marginalized or unnatural'. The silent couple becomes the not 'quite right couple'.

Furthermore the tight storyline of causality that occupies couple narratives in the field of popular culture, and is typically at the centre of heterosexual relationship research, sometimes suggests an underlying narrative of the hidden. Implicating ideas of secrecy, this fearful silence, when understood as a concealing practice, has connotations of inexplicable wrongness, darkness and distortion. Silence may be a camouflage for nothingness while, at the same time, it is charged with strong meanings. It is this uncertainty that makes silence such a provocative phenomenon for both couples and researchers.

Note

- 1 An extended interpretation of *Mulholland Drive* by Allen B. Rush is offered on the website: http://www.themodernworld.com/mulholland_drive.html.

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