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**ANXIETY OF EMPTINESS WITHIN LIMINAL
SPACE/TIME IN FILM, MUSIC, DANCE AND PAINTING**

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"[...] but to his surprise he saw that the door was open, and the more he looked inside the more Piglet wasn't there."

(from *A House is Built at Pooh Corner*, A.A.Milne, 1928).

Key Words

Liminal Zone: In its weak sense, liminality is the property of the middle, intermediate, in-between event, state or object. In a strong sense, it characterizes *areas of active mediation*, i.e., areas which actively function as conveyors of features (values, structures, techniques and so on) between cultural systems.

Emptiness: "Horror vacui": The Latin term "Horror vacui" is cited by scholars, especially in physics and art, commonly translated as "Nature abhors a vacuum." It is generally attributed to Aristotle (300 b.c.e.). This state of an apparent emptiness manifests itself in a kind of fear, covered up by filling every moment of our lives with activity and /or material things. It often results in a sort of anxiety, and even hyper-stimulation. This emptiness does not allow for quietude or silence.

Anxiety: "A state of uneasiness and apprehension, as about future uncertainties." (*The American Heritage Dictionary*)

Silence: According to John Cage, absolute silence does not exist, for even in an anechoic chamber a person can hear his or her heartbeats. Yet, here we take silence as an absence of signifying sounds. Depending on the culture or society there are unmarked silences, those which seem normal, and marked silences, those which seem out of place or unusual.

Introduction

According to studies on cultural silences there is evidence that, for example: the Finns as well as the Blackfeet North-American Indians are happy to sit in group silences, everyone listening or thinking; in Japan and for the Quakers or Friends the power of silence is recognized as a value; mother-tongue English speakers or Spanish speakers, however, become anxious unless there is continuous talking going on. Research has shown that the Anglophone speaker feels uncomfortable when silence in conversation stretches to four seconds.¹

On an individual level silence can be a very powerful focal point for understanding ourselves.

Implicature /Inference

What is implied and what is inferred can often be very different depending on numerous factors: culture, age, sex, education, and so on. Across cultures the members learn what to expect in which situations. Expectations within certain situations prove problematic in interpreting silences.



Gary Larson, *The Far Side* (1984)

¹ Nakane; Tannen & Saville-Troike (eds); I rely as well on personal experience with the Quaker or Friends communities.

So, a liminal experience can be frightening when these terms are at odds with each other. For example, "[...] juries often suspected that a silence before speaking meant the person was concocting a lie. The intention and the effect of silence are often different" (Tannen et al.).

Here, a selection of films plus a musical composition as well as an excerpt of dance have been chosen to examine what effect on the spectator apparent scenic emptiness might have in a culture immersed in garrulousness. According to Manolo Dos, film commentator, "The space is not actually empty, rather a set up forcing the thrust of attention toward the possibilities of that which lies outside the image" (Interview). My enquiry is whether there is an imbalance between the apparently empty as contrasted with expected content within these works.

In this selection we look through frames provided by the cinema and the theatre onto further archetypal frames, especially windows, doors, stairways and even rooms. The spectator most likely searches for some sort of conventional meaning. As in the case of Winnie-the-Pooh, some explanation is needed, maybe in the form of narrative, maybe in the guise of symbols. A something instead of a nothing. In this sampling of limited spatial and sound organizations, the off-screen in film as well as silence in music, and dance without music, the question is what is expected within the traditional Western *horror vacui*. Is there dread, threat, adventure, peace, discovery?



Wilhem Hammershoi, *Sunbeams in a Room* (1900)

Regarding the Subject and thresholds and the liminal

Sociologist Erving Goffman's studies on frames show how a person moves into and out of multiple situations entering different frames, or how a person is set in a single familiar frame.

As human beings we crave information when moving from one frame to another. However, in the following film, music and dance clips, we seem to have been left on our own faced with the ambiguity of silence and the apparent lack of fulfilled expectations. Of course, in our "under-consciousness" we know there has been a director, a musician, or a choreographer, but in our experiential consciousness we are left alone.

Goffman suggests that almost unconsciously we understand the meta-statements about the manner in which the framed signs are to be decoded. And most often they set up expectations according to our culture and history. Faced with a limited exposure to information it is well known that the brain fills in the lacking elements. However, depending on who we are, we carry out this operation in various ways.

As Eugenio Trías, Catalan philosopher of the Subject and the Limit, says "[...] art and religion try to formalize the beyond" (96), both that which is somehow beyond our accustomed experience and that which we search to understand.

The search for discerning continues from the Poundian "Make it new" through to Wallace Stevens' manifesto at the end of "The Snow Man" (1921) where the experiencer must figure out: "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (54):

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Off-screen in films

To cite Manolo Dos again about what off-screen shooting brings about: "That something is the Important Thing beyond the experience of the scene [...]. Both the emotion and the significance of the scene rely on the highly conscious design of the director meant to influence the somewhat "under-consciousness" of the spectator/subject" (Interview). "Under-consciousness" because we know what a film is. Yet it is Coleridge's dictum "the willing suspension of disbelief" that defines how we interact within a fictional world. In this lies the crossover, a threshold that leads to another threshold, the latter leading to an unknown, a liminal zone, which we will eventually abandon upon leaving the cinema or the theatre.

At the same time the off-screen surely contains a zone beyond which there might be something strange such as an undesirable presence. The off-screen technique places value on "suggestion and not on transparency, a filming that conceals the greater part of its components, yet at the same time unveiling a sufficient number of elements that give the spectator an important role in understanding the filmic artifact" (Gómez-Tarin 216).

First under scrutiny is *M, the Vampire of Düsseldorf* (1931) by Fritz Lang (1890-1976), Austrian-American filmmaker. This film lasts 117 minutes, and so the scenes that occur about ten minutes into the film are particularly unsettling. The first disquieting moment comes with the high-angle shot of an empty stairway, which should be the passage for the little girl up to her warm lunch and her waiting mother. The scene is not silent, but dependent on certain diegetic or internal sound effects, especially the mother calling "Elsie." What is disturbing is the series of shots that show the mother's voice growing fainter and fainter down the stairwell while we have a very long-lasting shot of the child's empty place and plate at the table. It dwells on this emptiness for seven seconds. Then, we have two metonymic shots regarding Elsie's fate: a rolling ball (five seconds) in a clearing near some bushes, and a floating balloon (also five seconds) in the shape of a child, first caught in the telephone lines, then freed into the sky.



Fritz Lang, *M, the Vampire of Düsseldorf* (1931)

Minute 8:43 Elsie walking home, 8:47 stairs, 8:55 Elsie, 8:59 plate waiting,
9:06 (metonymy) ball, 9:13 balloon.

Next is another impressive sequence also set relatively close to the beginning of the 135-minute-long film *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) by Roman Polanski (1933). The French-Polish director has calculated an off-screen scene twenty-seven minutes into the film where the only visible action is smoke coming from beyond the arching threshold. The shot lasts barely two seconds. The unfolding menace is only slightly perceived by Rosemary while a quizzical expression forms on her face as she turns to look through the arch onto the living room. From now on the spectator must decide how to meander through the soon-to-begin terror of the ambiguous state of Rosemary. Off-screen is where the story lies.



Roman Polanski, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968)

And finally, to lighten up, is the comic detective story by Woody Allen (1935). This New York director has a full bag of stock tricks, so we almost know what to expect in his off-screen ruse inserted at one hour thirty-six minutes in his one hour forty-four-minute film *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993). Here we have another archetypal threshold passage — the empty hall, the woman going to change in the bathroom with shower curtain included. A mere two-second shot, but worth its suspense for the narrative.



Woody Allen, *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993)

Emptiness in music and dance: John Cage's 4'33" and Merce Cunningham's *Silent Dance*

Cage's 4'33" is a composition that consists of exactly that many minutes and seconds of silence. This is a case of marked silence; that is, silence in a very unexpected context. It is a liminal zone. The audience has crossed the threshold of the theatre only to enter into an experience of a kind of rite of passage from a familiar social event to one of nearly five excruciating minutes of musical silence. This causes doubt, anxiety and extreme discomfort as the audience suffers through an awareness of how difficult silence is. After the coughing, the shifting and squirming, the time is finally up. So, the audience completes the ritual to be reintegrated into the concert-going mode, hopefully with a new awareness of the importance of silence:

4'33" impels us to take time out to listen, and *really* listen. And it encourages a special kind of in-the-moment focus, common to the practice of meditation (Tendler).



Merce Cunningham, *Silent Dance*

Since we expect some sort of music or sound to accompany or even to create the need to dance, this sort of movement alone leads to, as Cunningham wished, a new appreciation of pure movement.

Both Cage and Cunningham experimented with indeterminacy and improvisation; both experimented with using only a time-frame for performance.

Finally, an example of a painterly consideration of the empty Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas:



This Chapel dating from 1971 is composed of fourteen black-hued canvases painted by Mark Rothko between 1964-1967. The largest is fifteen feet by eleven feet (4.572 m x 3.53m). All together with the nearly silent music by Morton Feldman they create an atmosphere for quiet meditation.

Concluding remarks

Threshold, liminal zones and border zones have been the themes of this paper with special regard to the possible reactions of the spectator. From the key terms of the Border Poetics Group, I would like to quote: “Because border zones are places of negotiation and hybrid interpretation, they can also become contact zones between the real and the imaginary” (Schimanski & Wolfe).

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