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*Silêncio habitado: construções sonoras da espacialidade conventual*

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# Inhabited silence: sound constructions of monastic spatiality

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*Francesca Sbardella*

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This paper is based on an extensive and engaged ethnographic study in which the researcher lived the life of a postulant in two French Carmelite monasteries. The aim is to discuss the relation between sound (auditory sensation) – here intended as silence, i. e. the absence of sound or noise – and monastic space, highlighting to what extent the construction of space is implemented on a basis which is mostly sound-related and how such a soundscape, in turn, can produce and preserve certain shared behaviours and life values. Thus, the focus is not so much on silence and its generally accepted devotional function as a medium for prayer; rather, the emphasis is placed on its social value as a performative, group-building and identity de/construction tool.

KEYWORDS: anthropology of religions, monasticism, convent, spatiality, soundscape, body.

**Silêncio habitado: construções sonoras da espacialidade conventual** ♦  
O artigo baseia-se num estudo etnográfico extensivo no âmbito do qual a autora experimentou a vida de noviça em dois carmelos franceses. Pretende-se discutir a relação entre som (sensação auditiva) – aqui compreendido como silêncio, ou seja, como ausência de som ou rumor – e o espaço conventual, destacando até que ponto a construção do espaço é realizada, em grande medida, a partir do som, e como essa paisagem sonora pode, por sua vez, produzir e sustentar determinados comportamentos e valores partilhados. Assim, mais do que a função devocional do silêncio como meio para a oração, generalizadamente aceite, a ênfase é colocada no seu valor social como ferramenta performativa, de (des)construção identitária e de formação grupal.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: antropologia da religião, vida monástica, convento, espacialidade, paisagem sonora, corpo.

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SPACE AND SONORITY, TO BE INTENDED AS A (SOUND) QUALITY OF SPACE itself, are two fundamental aspects of people's corporality as individual subjects but also, and inevitably, as members of a societal group. Through their own bodies, individuals can construct environments, control situations and emotions, and locate objects and knowledge. At the same time, they can experiment and incorporate specific environmental structures, while receiving inputs and impressions. These environments shall be called soundscapes, i. e. auditory landscapes (Blessner 2007: 15). The world is full of sounds and any subject acts in a context that is acoustically characterized in one way or another. In this sense, sound can be considered as "both an ordered and ordering force" (Atkinson 2011: 24). Everyone performs gestures and actions more or less intentionally and in compliance with variable sound modalities on a daily basis. These gestures greatly contribute to defining the surrounding space and, as a consequence, they characterize the individual's persona. The body memorizes auditory representations determining behavioural choices and habits, which tend to generate and maintain precise spatiality conditions – spatiality being the characteristic of being located in space (Remotti 1993: 31) – as they are reified through time.

The present work is based on an engaged ethnographic study, during which the researcher lived the life of a postulant within two French monastic groups of Carmelite nuns.<sup>1</sup> The main aim is to analyse the relation between sound (auditory sensation) – here intended as the absence of sound, i. e. silence – and cloistered space, with a view to appreciating to what extent the monastic silent soundscape may influence one's self perception and religious behaviour while structuring and favouring the group's activity as a whole.

The context under examination is an extreme condition of sound reduction, affecting both sound-speech (i. e. verbal communication) and sound-noise (i. e. any other acoustic event). Indeed the same context is particularly interesting when analysing how auditory representations, and the resulting acoustic norms, form and de-form dwelling spatiality which, in turn, contributes to constructing the religious subject.

The construction and deconstruction of monastic spaces, their management and use are designed and experienced primarily on a sound basis, as concerns a quest for silence. As explained herein, this means suspension, regulation and canalization of both speech and noise. According to Tim Ingold (2000: 172), the construction of space coincides with dwelling. It is in the very process of dwelling that individuals can shape the surrounding world as well as themselves. The direct relation between the interpretation of sound – or absence thereof as analysed herein – and daily life experience, where space plays a central role, should also be acknowledged. An attempt was made in this

1 Due to confidentiality reasons, the names of the convents shall not be specified.

study to understand how a choice of seclusion, i.e. a choice of silence, may become a routine and how it can shape the processes of real life and the modelling of space along with the individuals living within that space. According to the Carmelite rule, day after day the nuns create their system of everyday life, which is reiterated through time and transmitted through the mimesis of their gestures. Due to its secluded nature, studying a monastic context means, first and foremost, coming face to face with a concrete limitation on access and then, once this limitation has been overcome, dealing with the forms of structured silence. Going beyond the grating and, consequently, beyond what is reported by those who choose to live behind it means being allowed to take part in real life situations that are normally inaccessible to lay people. Thus researchers find themselves having to play a completely new role in a context where they have to learn everything anew.

At this stage, some more precise information about the role of the researcher who conducted this study is in order. Although every convent retains a certain degree of operational autonomy, their political-spiritual orientation still falls under the bishop's control and authorisations. Therefore, it is clear that the possibility of participating in cloistered life must be voted and approved of by the nuns' council, but it must also be endorsed by the ecclesiastic authorities. Being admitted to cloistered life for research purposes entailed the researcher to enter the convent as if she were a postulant, i.e. she who, as described in canon law, after expressing the desire to enter a religious order is admitted for a trial period, called postulancy. During this first step, before deciding whether to serve her novitiate or not, the person involved begins her living experiences inside the convent, lasting for one or two months. This enabled the researcher, during her stay,<sup>2</sup> to take on the rights/obligations that are normally applied to the postulants, and to personally follow the learning stages through which these women, acting upon themselves, construe their religious being. The first learning stage consists in deconstructing the social representation of the female person to progressively replace her with another one. In order to fully take part in everyday life, both in praying and in working, the researcher was assigned to a cell, as is the case with any other postulant, in contact with the other nuns, and was assisted by the so-called *ange gardien*, i.e. a nun in charge of explaining appropriate behaviour and helping her. In fact the possibility of entering the convent as a scientific investigator had already been discarded by the nuns themselves, since they rightly pointed out that such a presence, with its excessive number of questions and investigations, would have altered the ordinary course of life in the convent. Similarly, it would have put the researcher in the position of a mere observer, preventing her from concretely

2 The researcher spent two months and a half in each convent as she was the only postulant at that time. Subsequently, she also had the opportunity to pay further visits for a short time.

experiencing movements, efforts, and habits. In fact, many gestures in cloistered life are invisible and can only be observed by experimenting them on one's own body. The main research focus was not to address the issue of choosing to isolate oneself from the rest of the world, as a unique and unrepeatable moment marking the beginning of a new life for the person involved; instead an attempt was made to understand how such a choice, considered a specific event (d'Haenens 1985: 17), may become one's daily life and contribute to shaping the persona and processes of one's concrete life. Interestingly, although the researcher aimed to study such a Catholic otherness from a lay perspective, as if it were something external and distant, she found that her background had been influenced much more than she would expect and admit, as a result of her education as a Western scholar.

#### THE VOICE OF SILENCE

Silence is usually analyzed from a number of different perspectives, i.e. technical, speculative, mystic or literary ones. Technically speaking, silence is a necessary condition for speech to materialize in its sound form and meaning. In this sense, silence surrounds and regulates the speech process, and it is an integral part of any communicative interaction. The pace of speech, or speech rate, is based on words and pauses. This perspective thus includes linguistic or ethnolinguistic analyses, mostly focused on questions concerning language in terms of grammar or interdependence between languages (Cardona 1976). The second perspective mentioned above frames silence as that which cannot be expressed by theoretical research, i.e. beyond what can be said and described, thus marking the boundary of human knowledge and understanding, which are considered to be incomplete and relative (Wittgenstein 1963). Thirdly, the mystic perspective tends to interpret silence on the basis of ecclesiastical, normative or doctrinal texts (Petit 1999; Blée 1999). Finally, further contributions pertain to studies in literature (Valesio 1986; Steiner 1967), and in the history of philosophical-religious thoughts (Chrétien 1998; Nesti 1989; Illich 1984).

All the research areas mentioned so far seem to have only a theoretical-interpretative scope, offering analyses that do not hinge on real situations and practices. On the other hand, some contributions from sociolinguistics (Tanner and Saville-Troike 1985), or more specifically from anthropology (Samarin 1965; Le Breton 1997, 1999; Jamin 1977), together with recent works on sound in urban contexts (Atkinson 2011) and on music/sound in monastic contexts (Haste 2013) have paved the way to investigations based on field work, where sound and silence are seen as social practices through the analysis of concrete situations. However, the present work went even beyond that, being an engaged study in which the researcher had a protagonist and active participation – as Jeanne Favret-Saada put it, it is a form of non-represented

involvement (1990: 4). This is a kind of active and non-simulated involvement, through which the anthropologist steps in as an actual actor in the dynamics of the group under examination and is forced, sometimes due to external and contextual factors, to leave her institutional role aside. In particular, the present paper aims to give a new phenomenological interpretation of monastic silence, focusing on what the interested subjects do, hear and say, with the researcher being directly engaged in the field as a protagonist social actor. In this sense, it is worth highlighting the relationship between one's interpretation of silence and one's daily life experience. By having access to concrete situations, which are linked to local and everyday contexts, it is possible to illustrate the strength and the role attached to the lack of speech production in practice. This provides the social actors with a valuable means of both context creation and identity definition.

Cloistered life implies right from the beginning that a person has to face an extreme sound dimension, having a total impact on the individual and space, namely silence. Globalisation and social mobility in terms of sound can be used at an emic level to define the identity of the monastic group in a negative sense. The monastic daily life is characterised by the tendency to annihilate sound coming from individuals and the environment and is designed to be in contrast to external sound flow. Spatiality is a fundamental practical means to achieve such an aspiration. As explained below, the construction of the nun-woman takes place through her reduction to essentials, eliminating all that is superfluous both on a material level and on an emotional and linguistic one.

For the sake of clarity, a standard monastic day is briefly taken into consideration. Time is organised on the basis of the Liturgy of the Hours, i. e. a number of moments dedicated to prayer throughout the day. In addition, there are other types of meetings or gatherings of a religious-devotional nature (mass, recitation of the *Angelus* and silent individual prayer) as well as for recreation and work activities. Going into greater detail, the following table shows the exact schedule of an ordinary Carmelite day.<sup>3</sup>

Excluding the two moments of recreation (30 and 45 minutes each), no verbal exchange is allowed apart from reciting prayers and chanting within the Liturgy of the Hours; all the activities, including lunch and working, are carried out in silence. In order to quantify the actual time, some specific figures must be considered: a cloistered day lasts 16 hours and 45 minutes (from 5:45 am to 10:30 pm), i. e. 945 minutes in total. Throughout the entire day, there are 75 minutes available for any possible free sound verbalisation, i. e. approximately 7.9 percent of the time when the nuns are awake. However,

3 On occasion of religious events, the time for praying and silence may be extended, detracting time from periods of work and recreation. Each convent may vary its times and/or time intervals between activities, but the structure remains basically unchanged.

this freedom of speech is channelled into precise moments (the two recreations), without any alternative choice.

The use of voice is cancelled and speech is authoritatively permitted according to a pre-established time schedule. These observations inevitably lead to a consideration of the notion of constraint. Indeed, at a cognitive level, there is a sort of two-fold burden due to the duration of abstention and to the obligation to comply with that behaviour, which is perceived as a moral obligation. Lack of compliance would entail the condition of “sin”, which must be confessed as an act of infringement against a shared religious norm. Being able to control one’s emission of vocal sounds, and consequently of speech, is a long and demanding personal endeavour, which is part and parcel of a novice’s spiritual apprenticeship and which is to be faced for the rest of her life. As Christoph Wulf put it, being silent can also be learnt (2002a: 1149).

From a Catholic perspective, the condition of silence can favour the act of establishing communication with the assumed divinity, perceived as inexpressible or, as Rudolf Otto put it, as a “non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self” (1970 [1917]: 40). It is interesting to note that the medium (i.e. silence) used by the nuns to reach what is considered unspeakable and total “otherness” belongs to the same perception level of the objective to be achieved. Thus, a kind of homeopathic process is implemented.

“Saint Jean de la Croix nous dit que Dieu parle dans le silence et que le silence lui-même est parole de Dieu. De toute manière, Dieu ne nous parle pas avec des mots. Les mots sont une chose qui appartient à l’humain.

*Table 1*  
**Time flow of a typical Carmelite day**

Time	Event
5:45	Rise
6:25	<i>Angelus</i> and silent individual prayer
7:30	Lauds
8:00	Breakfast
8:20	Spiritual silent reading in one’s cell
9:15	Prayer of the third hour
9:30	Work
11:45	Mass and prayer of the sixth hour
12:40	<i>Angelus</i> and lunch
13:45	Recreation
14:15	Prayer of the ninth hour
14:40	Free time in silence
15:30	Work
16:55	Silent individual prayer
18:00	Vespers
18:40	<i>Angelus</i> and dinner
19:30	Recreation
20:15	Compline or last evening prayers, office of Readings
21:45	Retire into one’s cell, silence
22:30	Rest



On dit que Dieu parle dans un silence éternel, mais c'est un silence qui est une parole" [Sister C. M., 19/04/2006].<sup>4</sup>

The cloistered experience of silence, as is perceived and lived in a Carmelite context, makes it possible to address the issue of silence attributed to the (assumed) divinity itself. While this aspect can be found in many other religious traditions, it is a prominent feature of the context taken into account in the present study. The nuns ascribe the practice of silence to their divinity too. Just like them, this divinity is also considered to be silent: it does not respond, speak, or utter words, but it does exist. An active quietness with a communicative function, indicating however a presence of company, help and support, is created. From a mystic perspective, silence is interpreted and experienced as a means to activate a communicative sharing, within which it is possible to generate a condition of closeness and contact with the supposed afterlife presence and, as a consequence, with the rest of the group. Hence, a strong symbolic construction clearly emerges: on the one hand, the possibility to speak and establish a dialogue with an abstract entity is envisaged; on the other hand, silence becomes the linguistic tool attributed to an absent subject: "Dans un monastère, le silence est voulu pour l'union à Dieu, pour cette vie d'amour avec Dieu et avec les autres, car ça ne va jamais l'un sans l'autre" [Sister J. M., 19/04/2006].<sup>5</sup>

"Et le silence n'a pas de valeur en lui-même. C'est une aide pour être présent à Dieu qui nous aime, dans le cadre de notre vie offerte à tous les hommes qui n'ont pas de temps pour Lui. [...] ce n'est pas l'absence de bruit qu'il faut rechercher, c'est la présence à Dieu. D'ailleurs, le fait que nous recherchions le silence est pour nous aider à nous approcher de Dieu, pas pour exalter le silence en tant que tel" [Sister M., 30/06/2009].<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, this condition of silence is difficult to manage, in that it implies the symbolic acknowledgment of somebody/something not visible that can hardly be conceptualised and concretely expressed. The gap between what is real and what is symbolic can actually be found in silence, i. e. the most representative

4 "Saint John of the Cross tells us that God speaks in silence and that silence is the word of God. In any case, God does not speak with words. Words are something that belongs to human beings. It is believed that God speaks in eternal silence, but this silence is a kind of word" (my translation).

5 "In a monastery, silence is sought because of the union with God, because of this life of love with God and others, as one shall never be without the other" (my translation).

6 "Silence has no value in itself. It is an aid to be present before God who loves us, as a part of our lives offered to all men and women who do not have time for Him. [...] one shall not seek the absence of noise, but the presence of God. Then, we are seeking silence to be able to get closer to God and not to exalt silence as such" (my translation).



practice of cloistered life, but also the most extreme and problematic one. Every activity in this community is justified and experienced by the nuns in function of possibly activating this dialogue. From this viewpoint, eventually each moment and meeting during the day is perceived as a moral and/or personal obligation.

Whenever a nun finds it difficult to translate, into a concrete form, her relationship with someone who is not physically present – evidence of this kind was reported in numerous instances – it is possible to resort to the help coming from the presence of others. The nun's uncertainty is quickly recovered and reintegrated thanks to the group, and it is worth pointing out that the group is often created by sharing one space, i.e. creating and living a silent space the nuns define the identity of the group itself. By sharing emotions and space, it is possible both to give meaning to an individual's behaviour and to keep the group united while preserving its internal balance. This common determination becomes a unifying factor and reifies the model. Each nun can see the other nuns around her acting in the same way in the same place, presumably believing in what they are doing and managing to continue to do so. This will increase self-assurance and foster community sharing. Taking part in symbolic actions is a way to shape one's perceptions and, in this case, sound meanings.

Whenever a communicative situation occurs, it is always going to take place within a certain context and this must be taken into account, regardless of the nature of the communicative situation in question, including those situations entirely based on silence. Silence, just like speech as well as any other human behaviour, is regulated by social norms and rules. It is necessary to respect relational attitudes, habits and customs. There are implicit rules which enable two persons engaging in a conversation to understand each other (Duranti 1992: 61). This is not just a question of subject matters, but it involves relationships and shared conventions. As philosopher Herbert Paul Grice pointed out, conversation is possible because collaboration and willingness to fulfil a request can be considered basic assumptions. In order to talk together, interlocutors must be open to each other and collaborate effectively to achieve a fruitful exchange of information. These are the precise behavioural norms which allow individuals to interact in an efficient way and to reach their goal (Grice 1957: 378). Similarly, the action of silence also presupposes an implicit context of reference and "functions" as long as there is a basic agreement on its regulatory principles. In other words, there must be a consensus on what individuals are doing and an agreement on the rules of the game.

Any form of silence, as much as speech, is "partagé" (Chrétien 1998: 83), i.e. shared. It necessarily entails a co-presence of individuals who, from the very moment that they decide to maintain their silence, perform a dialogic situation. Sharing is no secondary aspect. In seclusion it is a sort of extended sharing, involving the entire community and playing a cohesive function.

It makes it possible to collectively believe in what one is doing and to better manage possible moments of disorientation and fracture. When a nun is alone, for example during her work time or spiritual reading, the shared choice prevails and is successful both in giving meaning to the individual's behaviour and in keeping the group together as well as preserving its internal balance. This common determination is the unifying framework which allows this model to be repeated for an entire life. Each nun sees the other sisters around her who believe in what they are doing and are successful in perpetuating it. This provides personal confidence and feeds the sense of sharing in the community itself. This aspect was revealed clearly by some events that occurred during the researcher's stay. At the end of her stays within the cloister, the nuns thanked the researcher a number of times for her presence, particularly for her steady participation, as if she were one of them, in all the community activities, including those considered most demanding such as the two hours in silent prayer. They admitted that the researcher's presence gave them strength. This was interpreted as evidence of the fact that another person, especially a non-religious person, managed to share some precise forms of life (or at least attempted to do so), thus she was able to act following their same direction. Such a coercive strength of the group itself imposes adherence, with more or less awareness, to behaviours and orientations. On a performative level, the group exists first and foremost as a concrete monastic group in that it shares the same silent spatiality.

The monastic day is structured around the relationship between words for communication, words for praying and the absence of words. The first type, used daily by everyone, enables individuals to establish an interactive relationship and to communicate among each other. Their aim is to exchange information, let other people know and disclose mental or spiritual contents, as well as feelings. The second type is linked to acts of devotion and those who use it direct it towards the assumed divinity, with the intent to praise it, thank it, request help or forgiveness.

From a relational point of view, within this community individuals are framed by an altered communicative pattern – altered at least in comparison with ordinary patterns found in the world outside – where the aim is to cancel the dialogic exchange or to take on the role of speaker with an absent and invisible interlocutor. On an emotional and/or mental level, every nun tries to establish a dialogue *in absentia*. Except for recreation time, what could be considered as a sort of horizontal communication among nuns seems to disappear to the benefit of a sort of vertical communication (controlled and repetitive) directed towards the assumed divinity (prayers and psalms, hymns and chants, silent prayers). A closer look reveals that silence is however a carrier of active communication between the nuns: by sharing the different forms of silence they tacitly agree to believe in the same creed, thus they express their desire to belong to that particular group. As Wulf argued, the sense of hearing is the

social sense *par excellence* (Wulf 2002b: 463). Indeed, people may feel they are part of a situation or a group, or feel excluded, depending on the words they may or may not hear, as well as the noise they may or may not perceive. At the same time, hearing is the acoustic means that can convey the three-dimensionality of space. Sight enables individuals to perceive objects only when they are in front of them, but hearing allows them to grasp what cannot be seen, what is far away, and to perceive the presence of others. This aspect acquires a very particular meaning within a monastic context.

From a functional perspective, the very structure of silence allows for the idea and the sensation of contact with “other” presences, although they might appear to be illusory to a certain extent. Through language, the cultural subject is able to channel the words into a range of possible meanings and then to establish a correspondence between sign and meaning. This leads to processes of semantic control and regulated usage, aimed at specific fields of relevance. With speech, individuals use a set of intersubjective signs that are able to convey, preserve and process information, which at least apparently seems to be controllable and usefully manageable for communication purposes. As Giorgio Raimondo Cardona advanced, information can be codified thanks to the correspondence between noetic nuclei and individual signs or their sequences (2006: 8). On the other hand, Pier Aldo Rovatti found a completely different situation in silence, as there is no denomination of things and there is no semantic correspondence with the sign. Silence allows a sort of oscillation of meanings, whereby names and objects no longer match (Rovatti 1992: 130). Mismatches and semantic shifts become visible: the word is not subject to the conceptual organisational structure and is led to manifest its own metaphoric halo. This way it is possible to have a greater visualization of metaphoric effects and of the unsaid. Reference is made here to visualization in that a modelling of the unsaid is produced, taking mental shape and reality in an image or sensation. Even in everyday life, ordinary people may activate such a process, attaching more meanings to the symbolic level of their silence or other people’s silence. As Wulf pointed out, the experience of the language of love, for example, is also often performed along these lines. Just consider when somebody wants to express their feeling of love to someone else and is not able to verbalize it: some forms of silence can make other people understand unspoken words and hidden feelings (Wulf 2002a: 1153). Similarly, Illich refers to “silence beyond words”, including all those situations in which silence fulfils a communicative function without any explicit verbal exchange, as is the case with a definitive, unquestionable “no”, an assertive, final “yes”, or the silence accompanying a meaningful gesture (1984: 43-44). In these cases, the linguistic capacity of words, spoken or written, seems to be insufficient and one prefers to use silence as a carrier of meaning. This kind of behaviour acts to all effects on the space-gap of the unsaid. Rovatti’s hypothesis can be helpful in

better understanding cloistered silence and its related spatiality. This symbolic space may be defined as supra-linguistic and becomes the key to fulfilling one's perception of the assumed divinity, justifying the intimate perception itself that is created during the practice of silence. The nuns attribute a mystic sense to this space, implementing a process of meaning creation in its own right. As David Le Breton put it, silence "n'est pas seulement une certaine modalité du son, il est d'abord une certaine modalité du sens" (1997: 144).<sup>7</sup> The resulting relational system is particularly strong, in managing and practising speech, where being silent is clearly not sufficient. As is the case in any other societal context, the nuns have constructed and make use of a precise code of meaning, which creates both reward and blame and, as a consequence, guides their lives.

### SPACE GESTURES

The various activities, carried out one after the other, represent a fixed and repetitive framework of reference for the community, resulting in a dense and fast-paced daily pattern. The day is intense and rigidly structured, with no real possibility of making any choice of occupation or individual action: time is divided into regular slots following one after the other, with no interruptions or pauses. During her field work, the researcher had the impression that she did not have any time left for herself: she was moving quickly from one place to another in the convent in order to be on time for the various gatherings; as soon as she started to get familiar with an activity or even enjoy doing it she was forced to interrupt it and move on to the next one. Between one activity and the other it is impossible to "have some time for oneself", in its literal sense, i. e. managing to stop and think for a few minutes, reading a couple of pages of a book or simply lying down in bed to rest. Indeed, anecdotes of the tiredness and fatigue typical of Carmelite cloistered nuns have been reported frequently.

"Dans un autre carmel, la prieure, qui n'était pas très âgée, est décédée d'un cancer il y a deux ans. Quand elle a commencé à sentir qu'elle était fatiguée, elle a consulté un médecin et elle en a parlé avec une autre religieuse, qui avait été prieure. Les choses ont été très rapides, elle est morte très vite. J'ai eu l'occasion de parler au téléphone avec l'autre sœur, celle qui avait été longtemps prieure et même présidente de la fédération, et elle m'a dit : 'Quand sœur Marie-Odile a dit qu'elle se sentait fatiguée, on ne s'est pas inquiétées : une carmélite est toujours fatiguée !'" [Sister X, 17/11/2011]<sup>8</sup>

7 "Silence is not just a sound mode, it is above all a mode of meaning" (my translation).

8 "In another convent, the prioress, who was not very old, died of cancer. When she started to feel exhausted, she spoke to a doctor and to another sister who had been a prioress. Things went pretty fast and she died very rapidly. I had the chance to talk on the phone with the other sister, [continues]

The nuns tend to emphasise the need not to waste time, e.g. enjoying some leisure time or carrying out activities not scheduled in their daily plan. Having a break, relaxing, amusing oneself are all attitudes that are not functional for the established target, thus they are perceived as useless and should be avoided. The need to respect the timetable during the day is particularly important: “Il y a une attention continuelle. On est toujours en train de faire quelque chose et, si ça sonne, on interrompt immédiatement ce qu’on est en train de faire” [Sister X, 17/11/2011].<sup>9</sup>

The sound of the bell marks the time, organising it into moments of sound and non-sound, and reminds the nuns of their various commitments. It is interesting to consider how the nuns interpret this particular sound indication. The tolling of the bell does not represent time *per se*, rather it represents a conventual space, the identification of a precise liturgical-devotional moment. The sound is interpreted and communicated on the basis of its spatial representation and not of the different liturgical-devotional moments – something that might be expected in a cloistered context. During her field work, the researcher happened to forget or misunderstand the correspondence between the tolls of the bells and the relevant moment, so her *ange gardien* would name the relevant location (e.g. kitchen, choir, refectory) and the other nuns would point at the direction she should take. Both expressions, one verbal and the other kinetic, are of a spatial type.

This way, a link is established not so much between sound and religious moments, characterised by a certain typology of prayer, but rather between sound and space, shifting the interpretation from a typologic-semantic level to a strictly spatial one. In the nuns’ mental representation, the tolling of the bell seems to be linked first and foremost to a localised situation. Similarly, when the nuns talk about their conversations with external persons or their moments of prayer, they prefer to use spatial phrases, such as “I am going to the parlour” or “I have been to the choir” rather than qualifying their actions with action-based terms such as conversation, meeting, appointment on the one hand, or silent personal prayer, prayer and vespers on the other. In these situations, space is defined and delimited in terms of sound, according to the number of tolls which provide a spatial indication and a connotation of meaning at the same time. Achieving the condition of silence in a monastic context is so important for the life of a nun that the relation between body and sound and the relation between body and physical space eventually overlap: sound is

[continued] who had been prioress for a long time and also president of our federation, and she said: ‘When Sister Marie-Odile admitted that she was feeling tired, there was no worry: a Carmelite is always tired!’ (my translation).

9 “There is constant attention. We are always doing something and, if it rings, we immediately stop what we are doing” (my translation).

interpreted on a spatial basis and space, in turn, acquires meaning in relation to sound.

The different parts making up the monastic space are often very similar to each other and might appear repetitive at first glance. Apart from strictly religious observations, there is no clear-cut distinction, in conventual spatiality, between the place of prayer, the choir, where the community performs all its liturgical-devotional activities (e.g. mass, prayer, meditation), and the rest of the convent, i.e. the rooms where the other activities are carried out (e.g. meals, recreation and work time). This is due to the fact that the entire convent seems to reproduce the choir itself, both at an emotional and at an architectural level. In the Carmelite rule, the expression *ora et labora* translates into the idea of continuous prayer and work as a bodily need such as eating.<sup>10</sup> Different situations can be considered in detail. The choir, located at the end of the nave, is part of the church. In a cloistered convent it is reserved only for the nuns. Spatiality is exclusively marked by the choir stalls, i.e. large wooden seats, mostly equipped with armrests and a back. They are aligned to form a mirror-like architectural structure, so that the nuns of the community can sit one in front of the other. The images of the divinity are the only characteristic elements to all effects. This is a static spatiality, which favours the visibility of each woman in the group, with a consequent mutual control. During the day, every time the choir is entered, a bow must be made – i.e. the act of leaning over, bending one's body forward as a sign of obedience – before the image of Saint Teresa of Ávila, the holy water is touched lightly and the sign of the cross is made; on some occasions, which are linked to specific devotional events, the entrance to the choir is performed as a procession, where the nuns, wearing the white Carmelite habit used during festivities, form two parallel lines.

The other rooms of the convent, though with different types of spatiality, also reproduce the two characteristic elements of the choir: the silence of the place of worship, extended to the entire premises, and the frontal, almost circular layout of the subjects. While in the refectory and in the recreation room this spatiality is usually predetermined and fixed, in the other rooms the nuns tend to repropose it when necessary. For instance, whenever a number of people gather in a room, which was not previously designated, for any possible reason, the nuns would move the chairs and armchairs around to recreate the situation as closely as possible. The frontal and/or circular arrangement is clearly preferred due to the sound choice for silence, which can be preserved more easily. Moreover, frontal visibility allows for a tacit mutual control, which is not bound to vocal warnings. Behaviours and habits performed in the choir also tend to be reproduced externally. When entering the recreation room or the refectory to have their meals, the nuns make the sign of the cross and kneel

10 "Primitive" rule of the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, 8 and 17.



down before an image or a statue representing the divinity, which is present in each room. This is repeated each time the nuns are in front of a statue or an image while moving around in the convent.

Silence is absence of tones, and thus of speech, but more generally it is absence of noises. In this sense the nuns put their bodies and movements under forms of motor control. Movements are limited to the bare minimum and performed with great awareness. The nun learns to control her movements, perform them quickly and, above all, weaken them. During the first week of field work, the researcher happened to make noise all the time, thus disturbing the usual quietness: the nuns could hear when the researcher would open and close the doors, go to the bathroom, go upstairs, walk through the corridors, move from one room to another one, enter her cell and leave it. Very soon the researcher decided not to wear her shoes anymore and to use slippers instead. She even considered walking barefoot if she had been allowed to. She spent the rest of her stay wondering how the nuns could walk without making any noise, even wearing their shoes, whilst she was still recognisable even using slippers. It is a matter of body techniques and control skills. As Marcel Mauss (1936) recalled, the body is the main technical device available to an individual. In order to achieve a physical goal, adaptation, training and practice are needed. In order to act and pray without making any noise, it is necessary to acquire specific techniques. Due to distraction or habit, often individuals do not control the small movements they perform in daily life and are not aware of the actual noise produced when they act. In fact, the very movements and noises establish and characterise their space.

In cloistered life, besides gaining control over one's movements, one also acquires the capacity of listening. By remaining all day in silence, every minimal sound can be heard; even sounds that are so feeble that they cannot be heard outside monastic life because they are covered by other sounds. It is only when these sounds are actually perceived that one can avoid making them, thus contributing positively to achieving the desired condition of silence. In time, the sensation of silence becomes fragmented and is split into minimal sequences. This leads to a dilation, which refines the perception of increasingly shorter time intervals and allows for the interpretation of the surrounding physical environment mostly on an acoustic basis. Objects are considered not only in terms of their functionality, but also in terms of their sound potential.

It is worth emphasising that the control developed by the nuns over their body should not be considered just in a passive sense, i.e. as abstinence of most movements that are made in an individual's everyday life; it should also be considered in an active sense, i.e. as the ability to produce other gestures, have specific postures and, in some cases, to maintain these postures for a long time. Individuals can become part of their environment by using a set of



specific skills, to be intended as an implicit and embodied *know-how* (Ingold 1993: 461).

For the sake of clarity, one of the very numerous situations of this kind will be taken into account and explained on the basis of the researcher's personal experience. During the moments of silent personal prayer the nuns kneel down and sit on a low wooden seat, which is internally empty (with a length of 40 cm and height of 20 cm approximately). Basically the nun would kneel down, take the small seat, place it on top of her calves (these remain inside the legs of the seat itself) and then sit back on it.

During the entire stay in the convent, the researcher would get to the end of the hour of silent personal prayer (when she did manage to do so) with her legs aching and numb; she would stand up again clumsily and always make some noise with the small seat. Therefore, performing these actions and postures requires the acquisition of specific techniques, mental determination to implement them silently, control over one's body and, if not training, surely practice.

It is clear that there exists an incorporation process at the basis of these practices, which eventually becomes part of the movement itself. In certain circumstances, the social actor or actress develops a form of incorporation not just of the object-tool (Warnier 1999: 27), but "of the 'dynamics' s/he has 'interiorized' on the tool itself" (Lai 2004: 21, my translation). In a similar way, the nuns may incorporate the dynamics of movements and sequences of actions.

Sometimes these small gestures, essential and reduced to the bare minimum, are merged so well with the body techniques of the nuns that they cannot be perceived individually and it is hard to distinguish them both visually and acoustically. Rather than devotional actions and gestures, they become conducts of movement that are so integrated into the nuns' presence in the convent, as well as in their way of moving and walking that they tend to be unperceived by an external observer. They disappear when looking at the harmony of the nuns' movements. However, they reappear with all their power of devotional practice to be learnt whenever an attempt is made to directly face the effort needed to reproduce these gestures.

Living silently in a family environment requires and, at the same time, produces a fluid spatiality. Generally, in a cloistered context the venues, both those for gatherings (e.g. chapels, rooms for recreational activities and prayer) and those for transitions (e.g. corridors, staircases, halls) appear to be wide and easily accessible. This is due not so much to the actual size of the rooms, but to their essential aspect or to the scarcity of furniture and furnishings: objects are arranged in a way to prevent relational situations that may cause noises. The rooms in use include few pieces of furniture, tables and chairs, which are often located close to the walls and with little attention to their aesthetic-decorative aspect. Note that this almost empty or bare environment,

with not much furnishing, determines an amplified perception of sound, as it is reflected to a greater extent, so much so that even a tiny tinkling can be isolated clearly and that the overlapping of more than one sound may be very irritating. Therefore, the slightest noise and tone can be clearly perceived, so this makes it possible to control them and not to reproduce them. Even during recreational moments the nuns maintain their controlled movement schemes and talk softly, in turn, without overlapping.

At a social level, silence is a form of behaviour that is transmitted, learnt and acquired as an attitude to be implemented in specific circumstances, and individuals must know how to make use of it in order to achieve their objectives. For instance, in political or job-related contexts, silence is often a means of power or role recognition. When it prevails over a speaking subject or a main sound, hierarchical or regulating situations occur. Silence control is a sign of one's self-control and of submission at the same time. With reference to contemporary Western society, Le Breton studied the absence of silence and analysed this issue from the point of view of noise. The issue is addressed in terms of identity structure. He pointed out that identity affirmation is achieved through shouting and noise, which are often imposed and sought at all costs (Le Breton 1999: 24). Making oneself heard provides a tangible sign of one's presence in the world and establishes communication channels that can be easily implemented. Similarly, for the cloistered nuns silence and the conducts of movement implemented to obtain it are modes of subjectification, i.e. fundamental elements in the construction of oneself as a subject. Giving shape to one's role of a nun and highlighting one's own spiritual aptitude could be based on the ability to use silence. As opposed to what happens in the external world, the nun restates and communicates her own presence (almost shouting at times) stretching her choice to the limit, through the creation of a situation of speech and sound emptiness. As Georges Didi-Huberman (2006: 13) put it, with a poetic touch, the right word – incisive and performative – is not the one claiming that it “always tells the truth”, but the one that the social actor can construct by stressing it.

The mystical-intimist learning process that postulants must follow during their first moments of community life is based, among other things, on the knowledge of spatiality. The sisters learn, by imitation, a number of strategies to localize themselves and the elements around them, i.e. where they should position themselves during the various activities, how to arrange objects and place or angle the furniture.

After considering how the furniture is arranged, it is worth focusing on the types of furnishings (both for artistic-decorative purposes and standard use) and their positioning. From an external observer's point of view, apparently in a convent there are very few objects, and decorations normally found in everybody's house seem to disappear. It is not by chance or because of aesthetic

reasons that the objects in a convent are almost always positioned on top of doilies, embroideries, clothes and mats: the fabric under the objects muffle any noise in case they are moved. Even micro-spatiality seems to be affected by the sound issue.

#### THE SPACE OF EMOTION

These proxemic attitudes bring with them emotional and behavioural inclinations which are linked to the construction of the religious woman. Behaviours such as one's attention towards details, meticulousness, order of objects and cleanliness must belong to being a nun, in that they are all relevant to self-control. This skill takes a long time to be acquired and is achieved through the management of silent spatiality. Not speaking entails not only control over one's vocal and motor articulation and its channelling into pre-established timeframes, but also a normative imposition on oneself, i.e. a control over one's own emotionality and one's own human and psychological inclinations. The words spoken by an individual carry information of a colloquial nature and information about the individual him/herself, as a mirror of the person s/he really is. Therefore, the decision not to speak becomes a means to analyse and model oneself.

An example of this was seen during an event that took place during the researcher's stay in the convent. One day the researcher noticed that a computer pen drive had been left on top of the towel closet located in one of the bathrooms, as if somebody had placed it there and then forgotten it. Instinctively, the researcher took the pen drive, but then she decided to put it back where she had found it. However, while the researcher was sitting and talking to the other nuns during recreation, she decided to inform them about her discovery. Her intent was only to inform the others, at a moment when apparently speech was permitted, about the place where she found the lost object, so that the owner could go and recover it. None of the sisters replied to her statement. At the end of recreation, the *ange gardien* took the researcher aside to inform her that with her statement, on the one hand, she had been showing off and committed the sin of vainglory and, on the other hand, she had embarrassed and indirectly criticised the sister who had lost the object and left it in the wrong place.

This event can be interesting from two different perspectives. Firstly, it is not entirely correct to say that during recreation one is free to speak. In the light of what happened, one is not allowed to say everything she would like to. Thus the question is: which are the words that should not be spoken? When should one keep quiet and when can one speak freely? It could be advanced that communicating using those words otherwise forbidden at other moments is permitted; however, should such relational words exalt the person who utters

them or form any kind of judgment on oneself or on the others, then they are prohibited and one must keep silent. It is interesting to note that, despite being what would be accepted as an ordinary reaction, this is not a matter of bad intentions or speech interpretation: rather, it is a matter of speech *per se*: words of judgement must not be spoken, even if in good faith or for simple and practical reasons. One's sensibility must be controlled and stifled. Secondly, self-control is also created through one's awareness of places: every object belongs to its specific place, and the spatial structure of each room, as well as that of the convent overall, must be respected. The sisters act on the sonority of spatiality (preserving quiet environments) acting on the actual structure of spatiality (i.e. the arrangement of objects). And it is by constructing a silent spatiality that the nuns are able to build up their own selves. In this sense, spatiality, positioning and impassability play a central role. Just consider that the nuns are not allowed free access to the cells of other nuns. This prohibition limits the possibility of establishing strong emotional relationships, creating privileged friendships and taking off some time to chat. One's self, under every form, is levelled and silenced. Only secluded places allow individuals to exert control over sound and themselves.

Each group is the product of a social "construction" (Remotti 2008: 71), thus of choices and actions at a community level (in relation with the group) and at a personal level (in relation with oneself and another single individual). The construction process entails both an effective action, in terms of production and modelling, and a return, in a passive sense, of that activity. In other words, once the structure of a group has been shaped, it is bound to all the social actors that devised and created it, as well as to the context in which it is formed. This means that the pressure it makes, through its words and actions, both outwards and inwards, should be acknowledged, as it plays a pivotal role in the dynamics of preservation and self-reproduction. This seems to be one more form of "symbolic domination", which is sustained – as is often the case – by the same social actors who produce it. As was commented by Bourdieu in his seminal work, every symbolic domination presupposes a sort of complicity by those who sustain it (1994: 151), and this should be seen as neither a passive submission to an external obligation, nor as a free adherence to certain values. This mechanism is prompted by its very practice and responds, often in an unconscious way, to the set of acquisitions, norms and representations which are incorporated by individual subjects. Dealing with the "construction" of a group implies the acknowledgment of a "concrete situation", located in a historical period and part of a defined cultural and economic background.

Knowing a group means dealing with its life experience and interpretations, i.e. its practice and patterning. On the one hand, any form of life and experience derives from or is based, more or less explicitly, on interpretations; on the other hand, the latter are continuously shaped by the former. The group is an

interpretative pattern of reality. Once this has been adopted, it is experienced and transmitted. Transmission involves not only passing down the family model in its entirety to the next generations, but also all the individual elements which can be found in its constituent parts and in its implementation in everyday life. Every day the nuns build up their personae and the monastic group through the absence of speech. Once the *habitus* has been chosen and implemented, it might no longer entail either further knowledge or imposition in its daily reiteration, but it is sustained by virtue of trends which are the result of social determinism.

In cloistered life, much more than in other contexts, the sound element (i. e. producing sounds and noise) and the acoustic element (i.e. hearing/listening to sounds and noise) play a fundamental role. At an individual level, they coincide with a person's way of being, her role, habits but also with her creed. The nun is a silent woman, always – a woman who decides not to speak for her entire life in order to gain access to the assumed divinity. Silence becomes an integral part of her way of being in the world, it is introjected in her body and in her mind. At a practical level, the group enables the long introjection process to unfold: one's individuality is exposed to and fed by other individualities day after day. With the support of the group, these define and control, though involuntarily, the actions of each nun. In the monastery, the individual-group relation is vital and stringent. It is thanks to this relation that it is possible to maintain the symbolic level within which the divinity exists.

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