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Holding Your Tongue: The New Language of *Silence*

Trzymając język za zębami: Nowy język *Ciszy*

Abstract: Ingmar Bergman's middle years – from the late 1950s to the early 1970s – were a period of great creativity, but also of irreparable destruction on a private and artistic level. This paper takes stock of a film immediately preceding his great international breakthrough (with *Persona* in 1966), namely *The Silence* (1962). Rendering, in Bergman's own words, 'God's silence', the film also thematises absence, wordlessness, and the void in at least three additional senses: showing a child's entry into the Symbolic Order, *The Silence* demonstrates the absence that is constitutive of this passage; giving an account of a specific relation between a master and his apprentice, the film shows a concrete example of the wordlessness at the core of their communication. Moreover, as an attempt to seek out the paternal figure, the film demonstrates the necessary void at the core of the new order – a community governed by silent praise.

Keywords: silence; language acquisition; mimetic relation; glorification; Bergman.

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Abstrakt: Lata „środkowe” Ingmara Bergmana – od końca lat 50. do początku lat 70. XX wieku – były okresem wielkiej kreatywności, ale zarazem nieodwracalnej destrukcji na polu prywatnym i artystycznym. Niniejszy artykuł nawiązuje do filmu bezpośrednio poprzedzającego wielki międzynarodowy przełom artysty (filmem *Persona* w 1966 roku), a mianowicie do *Ciszy* (1962). Realizując, według słów Bergmana, „ciszę Bożą”, film ten podejmuje tematykę nieobecności, bezsłowności i pustki w co najmniej trzech dodatkowych znaczeniach: ukazując wejście dziecka do Porządku Symbolicznego, ukazuje nieobecność jako kluczową dla tego fragmentu; relacjonując specyficzną relację mistrza i ucznia, wskazuje na konkretny przykład bezsłowności leżącej u podstaw ich komunikacji; i wreszcie, podejmując próbę poszukiwania ojcowskiej figury, film odsłania konieczną pustkę jako zaczyn nowego porządku: wspólnoty rządzącej się niemą pochwałą.

Słowa kluczowe: cisza; przyswajanie języka; relacja mimetyczna; gloryfikacja; Bergman.

1. Introduction

There is a darkness that shields the light ... By writing about the one, an absence, we write the other, the opposite, into being; we point negatively towards the other, towards a non-differentiating presence that gathers us together.

Jon Fosse, *The Mystery of Faith*
(Fosse & Skjeldal, 2015, pp. 35–36)¹

There are some things you can't say; you cannot say certain things.² Just as the child in Ingmar Bergman's 1962 film *The Silence* enters into a new language, he learns that there are some questions, perhaps the most import-

¹ Author's translation.

² The opening sentence is a paraphrase of the beginning of Jacques Derrida's famous *The law of genre* (1980), a rumination over Franz Kafka's parable *Before the law*, which in itself was a fragment out of the incomplete novel *The Trial* [*Der Prozeß*]. In *The law of genre*, Derrida outlined many of his chief concerns, such as the essential instability of semantic meaning, the always-already contaminated utterance, and the potential denaturalisation of any ideology. The inverted phrase closes in on, while not naming, unspeakable objects, echoing Derrida's contention that the openness of the opening ('Genres are not to be mixed. I will not

ant ones, that cannot be answered in speech (Bergman, 1962, cf. 1967). Why isn't my mother here? Why do I have to leave my parents? What does it mean to be a person? The present essay will begin to approach this issue with a threefold apparatus: from the psycho-analysis of Jacques Lacan we learn some key lessons about loss, longing, and language acquisition³; from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu we draw an understanding of the role of silence in training, and the part wordlessness plays in the transmission of knowledge; and, finally, from Giorgio Agamben we come to an understanding of a potential relation to the Other that cannot be uttered, and that, therefore, is reduced to speech about its perimeter, or negation. In Bergman's *The Silence*, the loss of the child's world coincides with the entry into a language that is different and marked by, precisely, silence. At the core of this new world lies an unfathomable void that cannot simply be articulated.

2. Acquiring the new tongue

Ingmar Bergman, undoubtedly Sweden's most iconic film-maker, became, in his middle years, intensely concerned with the filmic sense of his art.⁴ This is to say that his films, to a larger extent, began to thematise themselves

mix genres.') ushers in an 'essentially unpredictable series' (p. 55). The author wishes to thank the reviewers of *Paedagogia Christiana* for their valuable input in refining the opening, and many other moments in this essay.

³ A key concept in this essay is the notion of Symbolic Order, as it was developed by the philosopher and psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan in the late 1960s. While certainly an order of symbols, this concept covers something more, and yet is more specific than the system we generally think of as our regulating order of symbols, namely language. A core question is precisely how the Symbolic Order is similar to, and yet distinct from, language. Key questions include: How is the Symbolic Order different from a structured system of communication, such as a language? What does it mean to acquire, or *enter into*, the Symbolic Order? How do we as simply as possible characterise this order of symbols? These questions will be treated separately, with a section dedicated to each of them.

⁴ This article is written as part of a larger project on Ingmar Bergman's middle year. It spans roughly the period from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, which was a time of great personal upheaval, but also intense productivity on Bergman's part. This particular essay is part of a triptych that investigates the films that turned him into a major name: *The Silence* [Tystnaden] was released to great critical acclaim in 1962, and won him a Swedish film award. A few years later, *Persona* (1966), his most well-known film to this day, won an Academy Award and turned him into a global film icon. Following this, the mystical *Hour of the Wolf*

as films. *The Silence* is remarkable in the sense that it brings to life, or, rather, to the screen, a rupture in the history of an art form that, in 1962, was still relatively young, which is to say that already in the title it reawakens the relatively recent history of *silent* films – moving pictures that in a swift movement made a technological innovation remarkably popular, finding a singular form, and ushering in an organised and structured mode of production that has lasted until the present day.

The break thematised by Bergman's title is captured at several moments in the narrative, although most memorably by the performance of a puppet theatre by the protagonist, a young boy abandoned to his dying aunt in a strange city by his philandering mother. The theatre is very simple: we see Punch beating at Judy until she screams, declaring that she can't breathe; she is dying. Observing from her bed is Esther, the performing boy's aunt, who indeed is sickly, and quite possibly dying. She asks the boy if Punch can say something or perhaps sing; the boy answers that Punch can't say anything right now, as he is too angry.

In the next shot we see the young boy crying, falling into Esther's arms, and asking her how come Anna, his mother, doesn't want to be with them. Not wanting to tell him the real reason, Esther simply says that she is sorry, and that she wanted the three of them to have a nice time together in the foreign city where they are lodging for the weekend, on their way back to Sweden, allowing Esther to rest. Esther's avoidance is telling for the film in its entirety: bound by courtesy or inhibition, she resigns to feelings of pity, keeping the boy in the dark about his mother's affair.

Who, or rather *what*, is this mother? In light of our initial considerations of Bergman's thematisation of film history, we are inclined to regard her as an embodiment of a lost history, indeed a primordial *originator* of film as a current art form. However, and perhaps ironically, this mother figure is not as saintly and pure as we perhaps would like her to be. She is a philanderer and opportunist, and when the chance offers itself, she throws herself into the arms of a coincidental lover for a brief moment of pleasure, while her son is abandoned, left to wonder where she is and whether she indeed still loves and cares for him.

[Vargtimmen] showed a new, more genre-conscious Bergman, now ready to finally depart from his early metaphysical concerns and begin a more earthly trajectory. This essay is a study of the first of these films.

The boy is essentially given to this new world where he *has to* speak to make sense of himself – a world where he *cannot* any longer rely on his mother to singularly fend for him and give him his voice; he is huddled together with his aunt, Esther, who is a translator and interpreter of foreign languages. It is Esther who becomes the primary bridge between his childish world, silent to the exteriority, and the emergent new sociality, fully embodied with a language that enables him to make his way and assert himself.

This *dislocation* is coextensive with what the psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan referred to as the entry into the symbolic order.⁵ The term is precisely different from, simply, language, thus indicating that we should distinguish the child's acquisition of language *per se* from this other, more decisive passage, even if language certainly constitutes an order onto itself, and an order of symbols to boot. Bergman's child in *The Silence* is linguistically competent when the film opens, but in a crucial way it makes sense to say that the passage of the film demonstrates the passage of the child into this *order of symbols*, and that the catalysts for this passage are Esther, a porter at the hotel, and a troupe of midget actors, all of whom, in their own ways, introduce the boy to a world, an *order*, beyond that of the child's infantile attachment to his mother – a world that is seductive, tempting, and also intimidating in its, precisely, command to *silence*.

Key to understanding Lacan's psycho-analysis is the fact that it is only with the passage through to the symbolic order that the child can acquire a sense of *desire*. Therefore, while in some sense reminiscent of Hamlet's encounter with his mother, Gertrude, in his bed-chambers, the depictions of intimacy between the boy and Anna in *The Silence* are not erotically charged. She takes a bath, and the boy washes her back; they rest naked together in bed, but it is only when Esther, the boy's aunt, enters the room that we get a sense of the distinction between drive and desire: Esther tenderly brushes her sister's hair off her face, but cautiously avoids the boy. It is, at this stage, clear that the events in and around the hotel will mark the protagonist's passage from a boy to a young man, giving him a glimpse into a world beyond the immediacy of his mother and his own impulse – a world that can only be grasped through mediatisation, at the core of which lies silence.

⁵ Dylan Evans notes that it was when Lacan 'began to use the term 'symbolic' as a noun' from 1953 that it became possible to regard it as one of a set of *orders*, the most important of which being the symbolic, which, serving as the ground of the work of the psychoanalyst, provides the condition of possibility for 'practitioners of the symbolic field' (Evans, 1996, p. 201f.; cf. Lacan, 2006, p. 72).

We see now that these two movements go together; the boy's longing for his absent mother is coextensive with his entry into the symbolic realm. While Anna is sensual and intimate, Esther is bookish, professional and diligent; and it is Esther who is left to care for the boy while Anna tries her luck at the cafe next door to the hotel. While claiming to be resting during their journey, Esther works obsessively at her translations. When the boy asks her about her profession, Esther answers that she is 'translating so that [he] can read things in a foreign language.' Again, Bergman suspends the sense of the term 'language.' Which language is he talking about, if, indeed, any specific language at all? Esther appears generally to communicate in sign language with the porter on the occasions when he enters her room to bring her food, drinks, and so on. However, as the narrative moves forward it appears that she is indeed learning some words from him, insisting that he explain to her what certain concepts are called in his language.

Nevertheless, it is certainly not *this* language (which seems to share some characteristics with Estonian) that Esther has in mind when she talks about the 'foreign language.' The work she translates must be in a different language, one she is more fluent in, rendering the term 'foreign language' to mean *any* language other than the child's first, which is often referred to as our 'mother tongue,' or 'native language.' The native land, then, is the land of the child – the country where all attachments are connected to the mother; and the foreign tongue, the alien country, is where we are heading as we grow into social beings, members of a larger community.

While Esther self-consciously declares that she is teaching the boy this foreign language, i.e. an order of symbols beyond the intimacy of his mother, there are two other instances that convey this novel realm to him, and this *plurality* of catalysts is indicative of a sense in which this new order is not a language in the sense we usually give the term, but a more abstract, generalised field of operation and meaning.

3. Mimetic relations and silence

It is when we investigate these catalysts, comparing them with a view to finding their common characteristic, that we get a sense of this new symbolic realm and the means through which the boy enters into it. Already as they arrive at the train station in the opening scenes of the film the boy asks Esther, his translator aunt, to tell him the meaning of certain words he finds in the local language. While the sense of these words and their linguistic origin are

shrouded in mystery at the beginning of the film, when we reach the end, and the train departs the boy, and we, the audience, are indeed beginning to learn this new tongue. Esther, the mediator, is absent; she has been left behind at the hotel, too frail to travel any further, while we, the spectators, observe the boy reading from a note she has given to him as he searchingly mouths the words in silence, his mother Anna observing.⁶

The second catalyst, or instance, is encountered by the boy while he strays around the hotel as his mother prepares for her evening sojourn. We see the boy roaming the elegantly-furnished hallways equipped with a toy gun which he carelessly aims at a man who is standing on the top of a ladder changing a light bulb. The man looks quietly at the boy, but appears stunned, and the boy, content with the effect, carries on down the hallway, where he stops to contemplate a painting of a male creature worshipping a goddess.

It is at *this* moment that the flow of the narrative is reversed; the boy is now as startled as the man, who we come to realise is the hotel's porter and handyman, and the latter emerges to hurriedly but playfully wrap his arms around him, bringing the boy out of his contemplation. Even more starkly than in the scenes with Esther we get a sense that the boy is *captured* by a catalyst for a new order; the sudden rapture frightens him, and he runs off, back to Esther, but we, the audience, are left wondering what it was that he saw, or, perhaps *didn't see* in the painting.

What is clear is that the boy's playful cancelling out of the figure at the top of the ladder sets in motion a series of events that culminates in his own capture by the same figure as it returns, in a ghostlike apparition, to frighten him out of his stupor. The effacement of this figure facilitates the reversal: the boy is now, in a sense, *indebted* to the porter, having symbolically murdered him, and when the figure returns it is, precisely, to *collect* his debt. This gathering-together takes the form of an enunciation: the boy is called to correctly interpret the painting, as if holding the keys needed to unlock a new order.

What we have here is a double metalepses: while on the one hand the porter descends from his ladder to become, as it were, the boy's replacement-father, on the other hand, the boy is lifted out of his pre-Oedipal phantasms and into an entirely different order – a realm in which the mother now

⁶ Fritz R. Sammern-Frankenegg has noted that, as the boy tries to interpret the words left to him by Esther, the film ends, rendering a sense in which the meaning of the translation, and, indeed the film itself, is to thematise 'God's silence' (Sammern-Frankenegg, 1977, p. 304; cf. Bergman, 1967, p. 7).

figures not as his literal maternal other, but is symbolically elevated to a god-head. In effect the new order offers to the boy a way to incorporate his loss: by inscribing the maternal figure onto an extra-diegetic narrative, the boy can fully shoulder his part in the novel order.

The key to understanding this transposition is to acknowledge that the realisation itself is *never fully articulated*. It is as if there is a silent, secret understanding, initiated by a porter who comes to figure as a catalyst and father-figure for the boy. What we have here is a fully-fledged instance of what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to as the necessary silence that lies at the core of the libidinal relation between master and apprentice. This relation, Bourdieu noted, is chiefly characterised by mimesis. ‘Don’t do as you are told,’ the master says, ‘but rather begin by imitating, and in time you will yourself master the required skills.’⁷

Consequently, an apprentice who seeks recognition in a field begins by imitating the master, and the insights and skills are acquired as if in a silent understanding, body-to-body, as Bourdieu put it, prior to and beyond any explicit teaching. Thus, when in a later scene the boy and the porter play together, it is now with a secret, unarticulated bond between them, and it is this shared silence that allows the porter to first show and then donate a picture that appears to be of his own father to the boy while indicating how important this figure is to him. In the photograph it may seem as if someone, perhaps the porter’s father, is being buried, but the sense we get is that the aforementioned figure carries forth in this new order, in a way that is analogous to the maternal protagonist, namely on a diegetic level over and beyond that of the boy and the porter, as figures of shadows and light, as if on an extra-terrestrial plane.

4. Agamben’s ontic priority of praise

The third mediator/catalyst for the boy is given the shape of a collectivity: on running away from the porter, who, after having captured him, releases him from his grip, the boy hears strange noises from behind a door that is

⁷ See Bourdieu’s remark that there is a silent, mimetic relation between master and learner in physical education where communication takes place wordlessly, body-to-body, entailing a kind of *awakening of the body*. The body understands, ‘outside conscious awareness, without being able to put our understanding into words’ (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 161). Bourdieu held that a relation between master and apprentice ‘always contains something ineffable, ... something

ajar. His curiosity spurs him on to enter, and after doing so he finds a troupe of midget actors in full preparation for their evening performance. Again, the boy takes out his toy gun and shoots the actors; however, this time his targets play along, acting wounded or dead. Having gained his trust, the actors put on the boy a girl's dress and start an impromptu performance for the boy, who, now rendered passive, observes as the midgets jump around on the bed. Then, as their seeming leader arrives, the jostling is brought to an end, and the boy is ushered out of the dress and out of their room.

How should we interpret this carnivalesque interlude in the middle of the film? What is clear is that the boy here is as far removed from his maternal, pre-Oedipal haven as it is possible to be. Has the porter provided a port for him, enabling him to take leave of his mother's scrutinising gaze, and to enter into a world where truths are turned upside-down, and expectations are reversed? What is clear is that this apparent inversion is temporary, and not accepted even in the world of the actors; as the leader of the troupe arrives, the carnival is over, and the boy is returned to a world where boys do not wear dresses, and midgets do not jump on beds.

The emerging order is not only rendered in the form of a carnivalesque reversal, but, more importantly, as a *negation* of established order. It is as if we, again, are given indications of a world, an order, that *cannot* be rendered in positive terms, but only as a *lack*, as negation. Is this not the world of desire? To Jacques Lacan, what distinguished the childish world of the drive from the symbolic domain of desire is precisely the crucial component of unfulfillment: desire is constituted as longing; as long as there is something we want *that we don't have* we can be said to desire; at the moment our longing is fulfilled, we no longer desire. In other words, absence and longing are constitutive of the symbolic order, and it is this longing for the *presence* of the Other that is characteristic of Bergman's *The Silence*.

Giorgio Agamben has noted that there is, in the trinitarian economy, a ground that is prior to both truth and good; this is the domain of praising, or an inoperativity characterised by rest, passivity, and glorification. In Messianic time, community is given as that which it *is not*:

But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not;

which communicates, so to speak, from body to body, i.e. on the hither side of words and concepts, and which pleases (or displeases) without concepts? (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 2).

and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away. (Corinthians 7: 29–31)⁸

In other words, what we have is a community, an order, given purely through negation, the purveyor of which *cannot* be uttered, but merely indicated. This is the reason that Jewish Messianism held that glorification existed prior to any rendering of truth or the good. Praising and glorification served to establish the godhead itself, rendering a void, a silent core, around which speech could establish itself. To Agamben this is the key to understanding Christ's prayer before his arrest: 'Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee. ... I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.' (John 17: 1, 4–5)

5. Brave, new void

An unresolved mystery in *The Silence* is the identity of the boy's father. We have indications that it is *him* the travellers are moving towards; Esther talks to the boy about his paternal relation, telling him that he will be reunited with his father this coming summer. The boy asks if his father will be there. 'I am sure he will,' Esther answers without commitment, 'if he has the time; he's a very busy man.'

What is certain is that while this new order, the symbolic order into which the boy is ushered, cannot be constituted singularly around his father, the attachment and longing embodied in the boy's search for his father *indicate* the sense in which the symbolic realm is governed by a logic of absence and void. We have a hiatus: at the beginning of the film the boy communicates largely in Swedish with his mother; at the end he is beginning to learn the new tongue with the aid of his aunt, and the tools given to him by the porter, as well as the experience with the actors. The loss of his childish phantasies about his mother have not been *replaced* by this new order, but they have enabled him to *reconfigure* his sense of loss and longing, and it is within this new frame of articulation that he can begin to find his place.

⁸ Agamben's translation (2011, p. 248).

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