



## Shadows of Silence

Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera

### abstract

In this paper, an observation of how silence, as well as some sound, is performed and utilized in a work setting of computer programmers provides us with an opportunity to reflect more generally upon the issues of silence and communication, as well as upon some aspects of spirituality and socially constructed spaces. Our study is also an attempt to highlight benefits that the shadowing method provides for researching concepts that resist easy verbalization.

### Introduction

Silence can be many things. It may seriously disrupt a conversation, making its continuation impossible or difficult, changing its tracks. It may mean that one is unable to speak, because of sudden shyness, high emotion, both hate and love can make that effect, both the unwillingness to talk with the other, and the desperate desire to do so. It may be a way to concede that one has nothing to say, the confession of the lack of knowledge: although this kind of modest ignorance is very rare. Silence can also be the expression of wisdom, of the knowledge that insight is beyond words. It can form the passage into the empty space. The empty space is a sphere of reality which is unclassified and unclaimed, the margin where change can be initiated (Kostera, 2000). Neither a cleared away space, nor a spot wiped clean of all things, it is an absence of expectations, a readiness to embrace an ambivalent interpretation of reality. Chaos, on which rests a fragile socially constructed science (Bauman, 1991) can be encountered, and from it creation may take origin. It is not a place, nor a form of reality, but a state of mind.

In an earlier paper we explored such emptiness, when we purposefully walked around in unused and forgotten parts of various official buildings, such as universities, public administration buildings, houses where we ourselves lived (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1999). We sought to adopt an anthropological frame of mind

expressed by not taking social realities for granted. This means, on the one hand, modesty and openness toward new worlds and new meanings, and on the other, a constant urge to problematize, to turn what seems familiar and understandable upside down and inside out. (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992: 72)

We observed reality from an unusual perspective, enjoying the feeling of freedom and undefined presence. We gave up any preconceived pictures we might have had, resigned from interpreting what we saw, we observed. At the same time we did not feel that we were trespassing on someone else's territory, like we often otherwise do while engaging in observation. We were in no man's land, free and lonely, and yet not lonely at all, abandoning the illusion of order usually imposed on perceived realities. However, we did not regret the loss, as it offered the possibility not only of altering perception, but also of perceiving the chaos underpinning reality that allows freedom to create, and freedom to wonder.

Silence can also be the space for important feelings and awareness to evolve within us. This aspect of silence is strongly related to the empty spaces, and also to the wisdom of listening and looking. Falling in love, and refraining from giving it a name for some time, can bring the experience of the sacred. Silence can enable feelings to develop, unnamed and undefined, until the person becomes one with them, and then using the word, 'love', makes the person aware of the metaphorical, rather than shaping and causal, character of the name. Feelings that are both fragile and powerful transcend the thin lines of what is worn, what is carried, what is utilized. They can remind the person of the divine that is neither outside nor beyond; it is within us. This is the reason why some people, when they are creating something – a painting, a poem, or an essay – refuse to talk about it. Talking during the creation may take some of the fun away, it may also interfere with the creative processes. And the relation between talking and creation is one of the topics of our study.

In our research on emptiness, we remained silent and invisible, much like the spaces we wished to explore. This time, we were more noticeable, though no less silent – our field research consisted of non-participant observation and shadowing of a computer programmer, undertaken with the express aim to explore silence in an organized setting. Shadowing (Czarniawska, 1998) is a technique in which the researcher follows the observed subject throughout his or her work day, trying to get a relatively complete sense of the setting of that person's work, and the social processes it involves. Obviously, this is done only with the research subject's full agreement.

We received the permission to shadow a programmer working in a company producing custom databases, mostly for corporate clients. Because that person's work turned out to be not only stationary, but also carried out in a room occupied by other people as well, we were able to combine shadowing with observing those people. While we were up front about our interest in the whole organization, the observer's primary identity at the company was of a person shadowing the one programmer. This proved quite beneficial for the study, as the other IT specialists did not feel under scrutiny and found it rather easy to ignore the observer. The person we shadowed seemed somewhat more constrained by the researcher's presence, at least initially, which is not surprising as shadowing is emotionally draining to both the observed and the observer. As shadowing is an intensely personal form of observation, it is particularly well suited for researching subjects that are difficult to verbalize and talk about in everyday language. Silence fits such description perfectly.

A programmer is a creative professional, a person who has knowledge and whose work consists in translating the knowledge into a language that makes it possible to work with computers. Much of his or her creative work is done in silence. The individual we have observed works for a rather unusual Polish company, where creativity is regarded as very attractive and orderliness is disdained as ugly. The director of this company has symbolically chosen an office for himself located in the cellar, in a room converted from a bathroom. His office is completely chaotic – devoid of order and linearity but also of emptiness. The entire company space is characterized by a living chaos out of which creativity is expected to emerge on daily basis. The person we have observed works, however, in a different setting. He is taken out of the company context and sent out to a branch office located in the building of a client company, in order to work with concrete practical issues. In his relocation, he also somehow fulfills the role of the company's emissary of anarchic creativity. Neither the headquarters nor the branch office are an empty space and our interest was, this time, different. While silence of the empty space was outside organization, or even outside organizing, in this study our emphasis is intra-organizational, the absence of sound in a better defined setting.

Actually, here we touch the first dilemma that we faced in trying to capture silence, as it can only be defined negatively. The most obvious proposition would be to see it as the absence of sound, but while being a very useful one, it is not the only possibility. Much of the talking we encountered during our observation was conducted through computer networks. All of it involved typing text and no sound (or just the subdued sound of keyboarding) was produced. At the same time, the activity was referred to as 'chatting' or 'talking', and it seemed to serve a similar function to face-to-face communication. This leads us to the possibility of equating silence with the absence of communication, both spoken and written. In such case silence would come close to meaning solitude.

It might be interesting to note here that the programmers we observed all perceived solitary coding as the more prestigious part of programming – any conferring or negotiations were devalued as 'just talk' and not 'real work.' At the same time, these programmers were quite aware that such negotiations constitute a large part of their work day; they just did not consider it an important or interesting part.

In reflecting on our observations we make use of both of the above propositions concerning the definition of silence: as lack of sound, and as lack of communication; we believe each shows a different facet of silence as performed in the organization we have studied. We have chosen to arrange our material in a series of scenes, or vignettes, representing divergent aspects of organizational silence. First, though, we would like to provide a few words of explanation on the setting of our observations. As we have already said, it is a small IT company (employing around 100 people), or rather its division involved at the time of the study in preparing and installing a large database project for a major Polish telecommunications company. Because of the need of tailoring the database to the needs and the existing IT setup of the client, the division worked off-site, in the telecom company's office building. It occupied a single room, partitioned into two smaller areas, and most of the time, the group we observed stayed within the confines of this room.

Out of our study, we have chosen to present three scenes, or vignettes, through which we hope to illustrate some of the more notable silences that tended to occur throughout our stay in the organization. Each is followed by a discussion of what we suppose to be the role played by silence in the story, and our musings of how it reflects on our understanding of silence, and especially of silence in organizing.

### **Vignette One: Spaces of Sound and Silence**

Two of the computers in the double room occupied by the observed programmers were equipped with loudspeakers, but each of the working computers (including those with loudspeakers) had headphones attached or lying next to it. The speakers were used to play music, an activity accompanied by a recurring discussion of what music and how loud it should be played. The debate was not very heated, however, as each of the programmers had an option to use one's own headphones to create a personal soundscape, either using music or by playing a game that provided its own sound effects. Indeed, as the multiplayer computer games used in the office placed the player's viewpoint firmly within the virtual world, headphones providing appropriate sound effects were considered a necessary component of gaming. This meant that in order to engage in a social activity of game playing, each participant needed to create a barrier separating his<sup>1</sup> soundscape from those of the other participants'.

Headphones and loudspeakers were also instruments for partitioning space. The two speaker systems divided the office into two zones of influence; indeed, a discussion on how loudly the music can be played ended with the verdict that it should not interfere with listening to the music emanating from the other computer. Against these background sounds, each person can establish his own personal space by using headphones. In an interesting twist, many people used headphones that were not their own; when at one point an actor attempted to locate his own headphones, he discovered that almost none were connected to the computer of their owner. Thus, while people carve out their private personal spaces, they do so using other people's headphones. Even as space is established (and performed) as personal property, so the props used turn out to be used as if owned communally.

In our view, this little paradox highlights the main thrust of our observations – silence is performed as a social activity, in relation to and in an interplay with other social practices and forms of communication. It defies simple explanations, being performed in a variety of very divergent social situations. It is a tool for bridging gaps and for creating boundaries, it establishes distance and invites communication. In other words, it is part of the process of organizing.

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1 Although the company we studied employs both men and women as programmers (with the former forming a significant majority), the group working in the room where most of our observation took place consisted exclusively of males. Therefore, when not generalizing our observations, we will be using male pronouns to describe the programmers we observed in our research.

## Vignette Two: Coding and Huddling

One of the scenes from our observation that were often repeated with little variation begins with a programmer (which could mean the person we were shadowing or one of the other people working in the same room) silently coding, that is writing some part of a computer program. After a while, that person would stop typing, and start looking focusedly at the computer screen. Still later, he would start muttering something about the piece of code he was writing. When nobody responded, the same (or similar) comment would be repeated louder, and then perhaps again, even louder, if still nobody reacted. Somewhere along the way, one of the other people in the room would express interest in the programmer's dilemma, and he would proceed to gladly explain whatever problem perplexed him. One of the listeners would then proffer advice and possible ways of dealing with the difficulty, with perhaps some discussion on what promises to be the most appropriate solution.

Since the above scenario came to be repeated numerous times with very little variation (albeit with different actors) we assume, taking a hint from conversation analysis (Silverman, 1993; Shotter, 1993) that we are dealing here with an event both structured and meaningful, repeated because of the results it provides. We are also reminded of Francois Cooren's (1999) reappraisal of the speech act theory and his identification of communication as the building block of organizing. This is because our vignette describes an attempt at both establishing communication and organizing, that is, to provide space and means for concerted action. The process starts with the solitary (and silent) task of programming, playing itself out between the programmer and his computer. When he encounters a problem, however, such cloistered approach fails, because while programming is solitary, problem-solving is a group activity.

Back in 1980, the then prominent futurologist Alvin Toffler, awed by the early incursions the computers were making into social space, speculated that it is enough to "[p]ut a computer in people's homes and they no longer need to huddle" (Toffler, 1980: 215). The prediction, like most of what futurology had to offer, is quite inaccurate, but it nevertheless points to an important phenomenon: programming (that is, close interaction with computers) is both a solitary and a social activity. It involves both silence and communication. The actual code writing takes place in the former, without any outside input, but all major problems are solved through social discussion of the difficulties. Thus, in a way, silence represents the free-flowing creativity while sound symbolizes overcoming obstacles. Both are crucial to the organizational process of programming.

Obviously, it is this organizational aspect of sound and silence that interests us the most, the structuring of social interactions (and lack thereof) constituting silence and communication. In the above story, we can see the actors engaged in the process of defining spaces for both aspects of programming: nobody *asks* for help, but instead constitutes, or proposes, a space for public examination of his problem. Such action avoids direct supplication inherent and the pitfalls of power relation established through a direct plea for help, but also invites into discussion only those who are interested, who are currently not immersed in their own space of silent programming. Crossing the

border between solitude and communication is constituted as a voluntary act, the solitary space is not breached from the outside.

There is a kind of wisdom that consist of looking and listening, rather than talking and symbolizing, it is openness and meditation, a silence making the encounter with experience possible. In Anthony de Mello's writings (e.g. 1998), silence of this kind is a spiritual door to the experience of both absence and presence, of becoming, of the divine, and of what is – or perhaps is not beyond words and images. Silence is the passage into the empty space, where one sees the futility of categorizations, the hollowness of definitions, and the illusory character of passing and remaining. It offers freedom, the feeling of flying over a huge ravine.

We would like to stress the significance of creating such pockets of silence, if only because we have often encountered the opposite: organizations that aspire to omnipotence, to control of what is perceived as disorder, and can embrace things and people, the way they interact, they way they are. Having said that, we do not believe in real things called 'organizations,' they are but processes in which people engage (cf. Weick, 1979; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1996). The process can mean beauty and togetherness, fun, sharing, but also it can be performed in a totalizing way, limiting and dry. The beauty and repulsiveness of the human creation called organization can be studied with interest, as the beauty and repulsiveness of other human creations, such as theatre or music. However, in organizations, for some reason, the feeling of freedom is often, in our experience, banned from the creation. The lack of freedom is the ugliness and repulsiveness of organization. Frantic avoidance of silence, obsessive filling in blanks seems to be rather common. The most extreme example is the total institution, but there are indeed quite a few similarities between totalitarian organizations and apparently liberal ones, such as enterprises (see e.g. Kostera, 1997). Yet, as Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (1978) writes in his book about anarchism, existentialism and organization, there are other and much more interesting ideas of organizing than the mainstream bureaucratic project. We can use anarcho-existentialist ideas a lot more than we currently do. Why do we read about total manipulative projects in most of the management textbooks? Why so rarely about anarchy? Maybe management is a rhetorical project, archetypically male, ordering and avoidance of the blanks (Höpfl, 1995). It does not need to happen that way, but in practice it all too often does.

In this sense our project is counter-managerial as it concentrates on bringing out the disorderly blanks that clutter (or, as we believe, constitute) the bulk of organizational life. Blanks, or moments of silence, which are poetic rather than rhetorical (Höpfl, 1995), which open up space rather than define and delimit it, which provide seclusion rather than communication. At the same time, our observations took place in a company enjoying considerable success on the marketplace, albeit one that is managed very unconventionally, and there is a lot of space being left for silence in the organization.

Any categorization of our project would also be undermined by silence being consistently ambiguous and non-linear (though it can carry explicit, rhetorical, ordered arguments and power); it avoids being pinned down as forming coherent opposition to any particular project. This link with ambiguity is in itself a boon, knowing as we now do that *linearity kills* (Burrell, 1997: 8). This is not to say that clear barriers and decisive

divisions were not present in the setting we observed – one example would be the strong boundary between company employees and other people working in the same office building but outside the one room where our observation was centered. There was some contact with the representatives of the client company, but it was regulated through strict gate keeping. However, such strong barriers promoting linearity and stifling silent expression are not the focus of this study; we concentrate on silence and on the empty spaces within the processes of organizing.

### **Vignette Three: A Programmer in Love**

During our observation, the programmer we shadowed fell deeply in love (with a person having no ties to the company). This had a strong and obvious impact on his behaviour as all his thoughts and actions tended to drift towards the person he was in love with. He spent much of the time in the office using an Internet messaging program to communicate with her – silently, via a text-based interface. At one point, a colleague asked him if he were ‘chatting,’ and, after receiving a positive answer, did not try to include him in any conversation, talking instead to other people present in the room.

In this scene we see another way of carving out one’s own private space – the protagonist is treated as a person engaged in conversation, albeit a silent one, and therefore excluded from the office soundspace. People talking on the phone were treated similarly: various conversations were taking place around them, but they were not expected to get involved. The difference here is obviously the silence – the programmer’s Internet chat does not involve sound – as well as the high emotional engagement (and the accompanying wish for privacy). Also, while the protagonist himself tries repeatedly to start working on some other project, it is obvious that the silent conversation occupies most of his mind. Is there really silence at work here and, if so, what does it have in common with the silences presented in the other vignettes?

### **Musings**

All the scenes we have described touched upon the issue of communication. The first two concerned mostly the setting of boundaries, beyond which communication (and sound) was intrusive and unwanted, but also the inobtrusive ways of inviting contact. The third vignette, while also dealing with the boundaries between different ways of communication, stressed the silent (i.e. soundless) modes of contact. These themes intertwine, for silence paradoxically forms both an obstacle to and an opportunity for communication. In our stories, it sets out the protagonist from his usual surroundings, posing permeable, unstable barriers. But through the creation of boundaries, it opens up space for other modes of communication, for reflection, feelings and, ultimately, love. Love needs silence to surface – it is a state of being, shining through whenever there is enough silence to let it enter (Tolle, 1999). Silence is a portal, transforming the person who is silent and transforming the space around him or her. “Silence without, stillness within” (Tolle, 1999: 113). Love is one of the Unmanifested’s aspects. What is the Unmanifested? Good question. Answer it as you like: Buddha, God, peace, freedom. Or better even, be silent.

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## the authors

Jerzy Kociatkiewicz has recently finished writing his doctoral dissertation, *The Construction of Space in a Computerized Environment*, at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He has previously published articles in journals such as *Knowledge Transfer*, *Studies in Cultures, Organizations, and Societies*, and *Qualitative Sociology*. His current research interests involve the interplay between space, technology, and gender.  
Address: ul. Zytnia 16m35, 01-014 Warsaw, Poland.  
E-mail: kociak@kociak.org

Monika Kostera is Professor in Management and Organization Theory at Warsaw University. She has been a visiting professor and visiting researcher at a number of various institutions such as Utrecht University of Humanist Studies, Erasmus University in Rotterdam, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, Lund University. She has published several books and chapters, edited books, and has been the guest editor of one special issue of *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies*. She has published over 20 articles in refereed journals such as: *Organization; Management Learning; Studies in Cultures, Organizations, and Societies; Qualitative Sociology; Organization Studies; Human Resource Development International; Journal of Organizational Behavior; Scandinavian Journal of Management*, and others. She is a member of editorial boards of several journals, among them: *Human Relations; Management Learning; Tamara*. Her current research interests are: ethnography of NGOs, aesthetics and spirituality of organizing, critical perspectives management in East European countries.  
Address: Faculty of Management, Warsaw University, ul. Szturmowa 3, 02-678 Warsaw, Poland.  
E-mail: mkostera@poczta.onet.pl