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## In a silent way

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### ABSTRACT

I argue that silence is replete with aesthetic character and that it can be a rewarding object of aesthetic appreciation, assessment, and appraisal. The appreciation of silence might initially seem impossible, for, it might seem, there is nothing there to behold. Taking up this challenge, I attempt to dispel the sense of paradox. I contend that, despite our never actually experiencing absolute silence, there is much to enjoy in the silences that we do experience. I go on to argue that proper appreciation of silence is a two-way street, involving quiet on the outside and stillness on the inside. I conclude by offering some suggestions for how to make the aesthetic appreciation of silence part of a flourishing life.

### KEYWORDS

Aesthetics; appreciation;  
John Cage; paradox;  
soundscape; silence;  
Wittgenstein

We regularly seek out silence, a fact evidenced by what we say in ordinary language and by our ordinary behavior. We attend silent retreats, call for and participate in moments of silence, seek out remote areas of unpopulated wilderness, or spend a few hours on the golf course or knitting or hiking or fly-fishing. Or sometimes we simply sit and mind our own business. It is also true that there are awkward silences, uncomfortable silences, deafening silences, the silent treatment, and silent springs—none of which we seek out regularly.

Over the last few decades philosophical aesthetics has dramatically expanded its range of inquiry from the traditional topics of fine arts and natural beauty to previously ignored areas including mass art, swamps and bogs, rock music, the everyday, food, sex, wine, itches and scratches, video games, trash, and almost everything under the sun, including darkness. Moreover, popular culture has recently seen a surge in interest in silence, and this interest has been accompanied by a growing body of empirical research which purports to show that silence is good for our health.

It is time for a philosophical aesthetics of silence. Ultimately, I want to defend the thesis that silence is of aesthetic interest in its own right and a legitimate object of aesthetic response and appraisal. As a launching point, and in order to facilitate a defense of this thesis, I offer some observations about silence which I hope will contribute to an aesthetics of silence. I do not presume to provide an analysis of the concept of aesthetic appreciation of silence, but rather, I offer something of a framework for such appreciation.

## Expression, experience, and practice of silence

A comprehensive aesthetics of silence should distinguish among various ways of understanding the goal of such a project. First, we need to distinguish an aesthetics of silence in the sense of an investigation into the *expression* of silence, from an aesthetics of silence in the sense of an investigation into the *experience* of silence.<sup>1</sup> Silence, as expressed in the arts, might be very different depending on the art form. The ways in which ballet embodies silence are quite different than how a play uses silence, and both of these differ from how a sculpture or a painting or a building use negative space. Beyond the arts, in ordinary relations with other people, the expression of silence takes still further forms. A “pregnant silence” in a conversation might express excitement, anticipation, dread, humor, or any of an innumerable variety of meanings. Silence might be an expression of strength in one context and an expression of weakness in another context. Clearly, there is much work to do for an aesthetics of silence understood as an investigation into its various forms and ways of expression. The extent to which silence might convey semantic content by way of what Goodman (1976) called “exemplification” would seem a particularly promising line of inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, in this paper, I will concentrate on the *experience* of silence, reserving discussion of the expression of silence as a task for future work. Understood as an investigation into the experience of silence, here as well, our descriptions will vary richly, depending, for example, on whether we are concerned with the arts or the environment or the

ordinary and everyday. A unified aesthetics of silence ought to be sufficiently general to speak to this rich variety, and I will attempt to do so below. Similarly, and perhaps more pressing, we should note that the task of characterizing our experience of silence is especially vexing because it poses immediate meta-physical and epistemological challenges. Is there genuine silence? If so, and if silence is a kind of absence, can we have experience of it at all, or must we merely infer it from the existence of things that *are* present? In answer to these pressing issues, I will argue that the experience of silence is puzzling, but ultimately unproblematic. Even so, we are still left with the substantive task of describing more fully our experience of silence in terms of the aesthetic properties which attach to it in such a rich variety of ways. I address these and related issue in [sections 2, 3, and 5](#).

A second distinction to make is the one between a *descriptive* aesthetics of silence, focused on the expression and experience of silence, and a *prescriptive* or normative aesthetics of silence, understood as a guide to the appreciation of silence. I will argue, in [sections 4, 6, and 7](#), in favor of a participatory model of the aesthetic appreciation of silence. Practicing and cultivating the discipline required for such participation is the best way to refine and maximize our sensitivity to its aesthetic profile. To provide a hint of what I have in mind, one can easily see the importance of the participatory aspect of silence appreciation in examples from our ordinary everyday relations with other people. On the one hand, we might enjoy a shared silence together on a walk or at a silent retreat, while, on the other hand, we might be forced to endure, rather than enjoy, an awkward silence. This kind of participation can be contrasted with our usual expectations about participation in other aesthetic contexts, such as art galleries, concert halls, scenic byways, national parks, and ordinary interactions with other people.

### Until we die there will be sounds

I ... heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. (Cage 1961, 8)

Thus John Cage describes his experience with the anechoic chamber at Harvard in 1961. Counter to expectations, even in an environment designed for silence, Cage finds none. As it turns out, our very capacity for auditory experience requires functioning nervous and circulatory systems.<sup>3</sup> What is required for processing sound is itself something that produces sound (although we might not be able to hear it). As such, we will never experience absolute silence.<sup>4</sup>

But when we seek out and appreciate silence, there is no expectation that this will involve the total absence of sound. There is no absolute silence, at least none that we can experience. And if so, then we never aesthetically appreciate absolute silence. Thus, an aesthetics of silence should be concerned with something short of the total absence of sound.

I suppose we could say that outer space is totally silent, as there is no medium there to transmit a wave detectable by our ears. Of course, there might've been something there, and we might've had some other kind of ears which would've allowed us to detect plasma waves or solar wind or something.<sup>5</sup> And so of course it is not a necessary truth that outer space is silent. But more importantly, outer space can be seen as analogous to a giant and more extreme version of Cage's anechoic chamber: even in outer space we would still hear our nervous system and our circulatory system. So then suppose our ears were not sensitive to *those* kinds of sounds (from our own bodies) and consider instead a situation in which our ears were sensitive to a certain range of sounds, but that there simply were in that situation no instances of those sounds to hear. In that case, there would be total silence for listeners like that. This kind of situation seems not merely metaphysically possible, but actually physically possible.

### Silence is partial

There are thus, admittedly, two kinds of absolute silence, one in which there is simply nothing for our auditory systems to detect, and the other, in which our auditory system is either deficient for detecting the sounds that are there, or else simply does not exist. Call the first, *total emptiness* and call the second, *total deafness*.

Neither total emptiness nor total deafness constitutes an instance of the silence I want to investigate here since each involves a kind of limit: what would auditory experience be like if there were either nothing to hear, or else no way of detecting what was there? I will leave aside these two extremes because our actual experience of silence lies somewhere in between. Our actual experience involves not absolute silence, but rather, the relatively silent, call it, *quiet*, and is the result not of a deficiency in our auditory systems, but rather, a capacity, call it *stillness*. An aesthetics of silence should countenance the fact that we never actually seek out or experience absolute silence, but that we experience instead a combination of quiet and stillness, or partial silence.

Even if strictly speaking we never experience absolute silence, one could argue that our experience often involves *local* silences in the form of absences of particular sounds or kinds of sounds. This fits with how we ordinarily talk. "I spent last week in Maine,

walking in the forest and just enjoying the silence.” If silence is the absence of sound, and if we experience silence, then we experience the absence of sound, and hence we experience absence. But the worry in that case would seem to be that it would commit an aesthetics of silence to a metaphysics of negative facts which can be the objects of appreciation. The fact that there is no sound would seem to be a negative fact, and that we appreciate this absence of sound would seem to commit us to the appreciation of a negative fact. This could threaten to descend into metaphysical profligacy. Are there negative facts? Which is more silent, the negative fact that there is no fat man in the doorway playing the bongos or the negative fact that there is no bald man in the doorway playing the bongos?<sup>6</sup>

Would localized absences present a challenge to the claim that we never experience absolute silence? I don't think so. We do seek out and appreciate partial silence in the form of a combination of quiet and stillness, and partial silence does involve genuine absences. So let's call the advocates of negative facts and properties, “absence realists,” and call their opponents “absence skeptics.” Absence realists need to distinguish the borders or the frame of the absences appreciated.<sup>7</sup> By marking out the boundaries, absence realists can approach silence indirectly, or negatively, as that which provides the edges or contours or the background of what *is* positively, aesthetically appreciable. Absence skeptics need to identify what are, if not absences themselves, the objects of appreciation. The absence realist might want to say that the negative fact that there is no airplane noise is itself part of what we appreciate while paddling quietly on the lake in the early morning. The absence skeptic might want to say that the absence of airplane noise is aesthetically important simply because it makes possible the appreciation of the otherwise ignored or inaudible sounds like the water droplets falling off the oar and plopping into the lake. But neither the absence realist nor the absence skeptic needs to claim that our experience of silence ever involves absolute silence. Our experience of silence inevitably involves just partial silences and their borders.<sup>8</sup>

The importance of borders can be reinforced by considering the role of silence in music. Jennifer Judkins (1997, 2014) has written extensively on the topic. She identifies two kinds of musical silences: *external or framing* silences and *internal or intrinsic* silences. Framing silences occur around the “edges” of a work, just before it begins, between movements, and just after it ends. (1997, 44). Similar to the frames of paintings, framing silences mark out the borders of the work, “delineating it from the ordinary world, the nonmusic background” (1997, 44). Internal or intrinsic silences occur within the work, and are “briefer and closely walled on both sides by musical events.”

(1997, 44). Musical silences of both varieties play in important aesthetic role, in that they “heighten our awareness of musical time and space by threatening the ongoingness and context of musical sounds and by casting our ordinary surroundings into sharp relief” (1997, 40). Judkins speculates that the aesthetic value of musical silences derives in part from their contribution to the meaning of the whole, “by the tonal and rhythmic material surrounding them (their musical edges)” and “by physical gesture in performance” (1997, 41).

In this way musical silences heighten our awareness of both what is missing and what is present. Here too neither type of musical silence involves absolute silence. Rather, framing silences and musical voids are examples of partial silences, and, both are compatible with realism or skepticism about absences. Judkins' work on musical silences helps to reinforce the broader point that silence can be a proper object of aesthetic response and appraisal, and that such appreciation needn't involve absolute silence. We do seek out and appreciate silence, but this always involves some combination of quiet and stillness, rather than absolute silence.

Similarly, consider how silence functions in our relations with other people. In ordinary conversation silences are employed with innumerable meanings, typically marking the sonic borders of our utterances, perhaps as punctuation, and rarely on their own. But sometimes a silence can stand more-or-less on its own, as in a pregnant pause, or in an awkward silence which might occupy an excruciatingly long and emotionally fraught increment of time. These situations have an aesthetic contour, but in such cases, the silence plays a supporting role. At a silent retreat, by contrast, where we can enjoy the silence together and in a way that affords a surprising sense of intimacy, the silence plays a starring role. Of course, even here, the silence is always partial, but this poses no barrier to our aesthetic appreciation of it, both in its supporting and its starring roles.

### Silence as discipline

Although no one experiences absolute silence, some of us nevertheless seek out and appreciate silence in other forms. In the 1992 documentary, *Écoute*, Cage remarks, in uniquely insightful fashion,

The sound experience which I prefer to all others is the experience of silence. And this silence, almost anywhere in the world now, is traffic. If you listen to Beethoven, or to Mozart, you see that they're always the same, but if you listen to traffic, you see it's always different. (1992)

Thus, one way to understand silence is as the ambient sounds of ordinary, everyday experience. Indeed, this

is often how we are advised to approach Cage's famous "silent work", 4' 33" (Davies 1997; Kania 2010). In that piece, Cage wishes to draw our attention away from the intentionally produced sounds comprising, for example, musical performances, to the ever-present but otherwise-ignored ambient sounds of our environments, including performance environments. Once our attention is drawn there, a space of possibility opens up, a space at least as interesting as the contents which fill it.

And what about it? Well, there might simply not be a lot that needs to be said about it once it does open up. And that is as it should be, because silence is appreciable not just for *how* it is, but also for the fact *that* it is. And one way of attending appreciatively to this fact is to practice silence. So my second observation for an aesthetics of silence is that appreciation involves a special kind of discipline on the part of the appreciator, viz., that they, as a part of the appreciation process, remain silent themselves. Here I have in mind something reminiscent of Wittgenstein's (1922) admonition from the *Tractatus: Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*.

There are two notions of silence at work here. Silence is both a state of the world, as described by Cage, and a way of appreciating the world, as advised by Wittgenstein. Part of the latter involves practicing silence, something we can do basically anywhere, even in the most mundane of circumstances, including within the midst of traffic noise.

While Cage draws our attention to a way the world is, Wittgenstein draws our attention to a way of appreciating and valuing it. James Fielding, in a recent work, weaves these two strands together. He finds a "deep intellectual sympathy" between Cage's silent piece and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, one which he says turns on a shared mystical appreciation of the ordinary and the everyday:

[T]he common aim of the two works [is] a mystical appreciation for the ordinary, everyday world that surrounds us, but also ... a shared methodology for bringing about this aim [which involves] tracing the limits of language from within in order to transcend those very limits. (2014, 157)

The limits languages place on what can be said and the limits rules of musical composition place on what can be expressed frame, for Wittgenstein and for Cage, what Fielding calls "an open space of possibility," in which the ordinary can be experienced for what it is, *qua* ordinary (2014, 160). But that space of possibility is something itself apt for appreciation, not just as frame, or background, or contrast, but "for what it is in itself rather than for what it contains" (2014, 160). Because this space contains quite literally nothing, and since factual discourse must be about something, silence, and in particular, the silence of 4'33" "is not

about anything whereof one can speak" (2014, 162). Instead, the space of silence can be seen as a space of possibility, a clearing or opening for encounter with value.<sup>9</sup>

*Tractatus 7* is advice to be silent when we cannot sensibly express within factual discourse traditional philosophical claims about value, either ethical or aesthetic.<sup>10</sup> "Ethics and Aesthetics are one. Ethics cannot be expressed; and so it would seem to follow that aesthetics cannot be expressed either" (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.421). But silence nevertheless cracks-open a space of possibility that facilitates the experience of value in our everyday lives. As mentioned, Fielding makes the case that, for Wittgenstein and for Cage, this takes the form of a mystical communion with the ordinary. Silently washing dishes while doing nothing but silently washing dishes might be an example of a situation that provides such a clearing.

Silence can be approached indirectly, or negatively, as *border*, as that which provides the edges or contours or the background of what *is* positively, aesthetically appreciable. But perhaps, taking a hint from Wittgenstein and Cage, we could say that silence can itself be approached, and hence appreciated, *qua* silence. This would involve a reversal of the usual figure-ground relationship such that now the limits of language and arts provide the contours of silence—allowing silence to move from the background to the foreground.<sup>11</sup> But now what can be said about silence, once we have moved it to the fore of our attention?

### The paradox of silence

There is something seemingly paradoxical about an aesthetics of silence. What is supposed to be the content of our aesthetic experience, given that it is silence—the absence of sound? If there is something there to constitute an aesthetic object, then we don't have an absence; but if there is a genuine absence, then we have nothing in which aesthetic properties could inhere, and hence nothing to appreciate. If not paradoxical, this situation is at least puzzling. One might even go so far as to conclude that we don't appreciate silence at all, but rather take silence simply as an opportunity to attend to something else, such as the otherwise ignored ambient sounds of our surroundings.<sup>12</sup>

Something similar has exercised philosophers working in the aesthetics of the everyday, and perhaps we might look to them for guidance (Saito 2007; Leddy 2012).<sup>13</sup> Yuriko Saito wrestles with what she calls the "paradox of defamiliarization": the worry that the special or extraordinary conditions under which aesthetic appreciation occurs might "negate the very everydayness that needs to be captured and appreciated" (Saito 2017, 21). Taking the traditional aesthetic stance toward the quotidian requires, she

suggests, an attitude of disinterestedness and detachment inconsistent with their status as ordinary and everyday.

Allen Carlson takes up this challenge—“the dilemma of everyday aesthetics”—and suggests a cognitivist solution, according to which aesthetic appreciation of the ordinary is still possible if it is guided by the relevant knowledge. Aesthetic appreciation of the everyday proceeds, he says, from knowledge of “the events, activities and objects that comprise the main foci of everyday aesthetics,” including “what they are, how they work, and their place in human life,” as well as facts about “their histories and traditions ... their fascinating details, their complex operations, and their subtle functioning” (2014, 62). Meaningful appreciation of an ordinary American baseball game, for example, requires “knowledge of the history of the game, its place in human life, and especially its traditions and rules” (Saito 2007, 19). In this way the relevant knowledge provides the basis for sustained interest *qua everyday* activity; no special distancing or abstracting is necessary, for the relevant knowledge guides the mind to the aesthetic properties that the game and the activity of attending to it actually have.

Perhaps something like the broadly cognitivist approach advocated by Carlson will facilitate a solution to the paradox of silence. Recall the problem: silence, as absence, appears to preclude the possibility of an object which could sustain our aesthetic interest. As such, a solution would have to take one of two forms: it would have to show either how a genuine absence can nevertheless be appreciated *qua* absence, or else it would have to show how silence can be appreciated instrumentally, as that which makes possible, by uncovering or revealing, some otherwise ignored auditory object.

The cognitivist solution seems promising here. Plausibly, relevant knowledge of a silent environs would serve to orient and drive our appreciation of auditory absences. For example, basic physics might help us appreciate the silence at an acoustic dead spot where, due to destructive interference, the amplitude of the interfering sound waves is net zero. The silence deep in Olympic National Forest is better appreciated once we are aware of the wealth of sound-dampening effects of the surrounding temperate rainforest. Appreciating the four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence during Cage’s silent piece can be guided by knowledge of the mid-twentieth-century New York artworld in which Cage was immersed. Appreciation of the silence at a silent retreat would be impossible were one under the mistaken impression that they were being subjected to the silent treatment.

Whereas an aesthetics of the everyday is challenging because it seems to preclude disinterestedness, an aesthetics of silence is challenging because it seems

to preclude aesthetic content. Both cases appear initially to pose a challenge to the possibility of sustained aesthetic interest. The cognitivist solution provides a response by reminding us that there is much of aesthetic interest even in the ordinary and everyday, and that, similarly, there is much of aesthetic interest in silence—whether we attend to silence itself or to the sounds it makes appreciable.

The cognitivist approach is available to both realists and skeptics. The absence realist can claim that we hear silences, either the general silence in the room or the specific silence of each silent thing in the room. Silences might be eerie, as in the forest when the sun begins to set and the animals go to bed, or they can be deafening, as is the silence in the room right after I suggest to my students that they study hard over spring break. The absence skeptic will surely say that we don’t hear silences at all, but merely *infer* the absence of sound from what is present. In that case, the bearers of any aesthetic properties exhibited by silences would be the borders of the silence—either internally, like a visitor, or else externally, like a host. A silent forest can host a bird call; a silent retreat can be a guest in a noisy city. We appreciate the soft sounds made audible by the absence of loud ones; we enjoy a sense of relief when we escape to the quiet backyard during the kids’ birthday party; we enjoy the brief and oddly comforting low rumble of the jet passing overhead in an otherwise vast and quiet stretch of desert soundscape, lasting just long enough to remind us of how much we enjoy the absence of noise.

Thus, with its appeal to the notion of aesthetic interest, the cognitivist approach suggests a viable solution to the paradox. Nevertheless, although I am sympathetic to this approach, it gets us only part way there. In so far as silence makes manifest what is of aesthetic interest in otherwise ignored sounds, I suspect that even skeptics will agree that there can be much to appreciate in silence. But Carlson’s solution won’t help with those realists who find nothing of aesthetic interest in silence *qua* silence.<sup>14</sup>

Julian Dodd, for example, takes it for granted that there is nothing of interest in the *silence qua silence* which constitutes Cage’s *4’33*” suggesting we must therefore direct our aesthetic attention elsewhere:

While listeners new to the piece might, for a very short while, try to pay close attention to the performance’s content, they will soon discern that, since this content consists in silence, there is nothing there that rewards such attention. And it is just this realization that will prompt them to direct their focus onto ... the sounds of the environment, for aesthetic interest. (Dodd 2017, 635)

I want to suggest a slightly different approach: that we embrace the paradox of silence and allow the silence to come the fore, even though there is literally nothing

there. This allows the descriptive aesthetics and the prescriptive aesthetics to come together. We have to learn how to listen to nothing. Only in that case will be able to enter into, participate in, and appreciate the aesthetic riches there. In the following section, I will say more about our aesthetic engagement with it.

### Practicing silence

*Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That there is what there is* (Wittgenstein 2004, 86).

It is difficult to stand, balancing on the rocks underfoot—at least I think they're rocks. Of course they're rocks, but I don't really care. I cling to a vine for balance—at least I think it's a vine. Of course it's a vine, but I don't really care. The water—at least I think it's water—crashes down, violently but gloriously massaging my head and shoulders. Of course it's water, but I don't really care. Standing under the waterfall is exhilarating, and although the roar is deafening, I enjoy the silence, thinking about, well, nothing. This is fitting, as I am at a silent retreat, and there is nothing to do.

There is a great variety of ways I might appreciate this setting. One thing I could do would be to enrich my silent contemplation by informing it with some of the great wealth of geological, biological, hydrological, and ecological knowledge relevant to my surroundings. I could do this, and in some ways that would make my experience deeper, richer and more worth having. But, in other ways, it wouldn't do any of this—at least not right now—because my perfectly self-sufficient experience and appreciation of silence doesn't require any of that distraction. As we observed in the previous section, *that* I am here is as profound as the story about *how* I got here.<sup>15</sup>

The point of a silent retreat is the silence, not a deeper, richer, well-informed conversation about politics, or religion, or philosophy which would be more worth having. Of course, no one recommends silent retreats as a steady diet at the expense of everything else, and of course thoughtful reflection and discussion are appropriate once the retreat is over. They are all part of a balanced diet.<sup>16</sup>

Here's a problem though: the crashing water is washing my sunscreen into the river below the falls, contributing to an already chemically damaged water ecosystem downstream. What a buzzkill! Here's another problem: in all my excitement about the grandeur of the falls, I neglected to check for the presence of schistosomes, the parasite responsible for schistosomiasis, which is a very unpleasant, sometimes deadly, and sadly prevalent disease in this part of the country. It's hard to enjoy the silence now.

When we aim to appreciate the silence, what are we supposed to do? Is there a right way to do it? Obviously, there are many ways of attending to and appreciating silence, but, at bottom, the best way is simply to attend to the quiet with a still, or empty

mind. Quiet paired with cognitive quiet. This is easier said than done, but it is part of one's aesthetic education to learn how to do it properly.

In the last section, we saw that one way to appreciate silence is to attend to the quiet by paying attention to the wealth of sounds opened-up by an absence of noise. This might involve attention to the ambient sounds, whether these are natural or artificial, intended or unintended.<sup>17</sup> Our appreciation of silence can take place anywhere: standing under a waterfall, resting in a quiet spot on a mossy log in the forest, or on a rocky outcropping on a ridge with a fantastic vista, or on a sheltered bench in a corner of the park, driving together in the car with friends, or a nook in the library, or behind a bluff at the beach, or just on the grassy lawn in your backyard. These sorts of activities are all probably typical ways of appreciating silence. But these ways are not yet what I want to recommend because they don't quite capture the importance of the silence itself.

So, rather than attending to sounds rendered appreciable, another thing we might do is attend to the *borders* of the silence which frame and articulate it, perhaps in the way we attend to the borders of a silhouette. We listen attentively to the silence as it comes and goes, enjoying it via the ebb and flow of its borders. A plane flies overhead, and then the silence returns. I can now hear the soft pecking and crackling of a downy woodpecker dislodging a piece of bark to reveal a delicious wormy treat beneath. Then an even deeper quiet drops in and stays for a bit, only to be broken eventually by a family of jays moving in, bobbing up and down, squawking, whispering, whistling, croaking, rattling. And then as these avian borders move on, the silence returns. This opens a space for the rustle of the birch leaves in the intermittent wind.

All of that attention to the borders of the silence takes a lot of cognitive work. Was that rushing water or howling wind? A downy or a hairy woodpecker? Thunder or plane? To address such questions properly, I might need the help of an acoustics expert or an ornithologist or some other specialist. This is instructive, for it points to yet another way to appreciate the silence, one which any non-specialists can do: attending to the silence *in a silent way*. This involves resting the mind, freeing it from the grasping, interpreting, and categorizing which characterize its normal practical activity. Attending to the silence in a silent way is what is required in order to, as Cage recommends, appreciate the traffic as silence. For Cage, silence is not the total absence of sound, but rather, the absence of *intentionally produced* sounds, as he makes clear in the BBC interview from 1966.<sup>18</sup>

What interests me far more than anything that happens is the fact of how it would be if nothing were happening. Now, I want things that happen to not erase the spirit that was already there without anything happening. Now, this thing that I mean

when I say not anything happening is what I call silence, that is to say, a state of affairs free of intention, because we always have sounds, for instance. Therefore we don't have any silence available in the world. We're in a world of sounds. We *call* it silence, when we don't feel a direct connection with the intentions that produce sounds. We say that it's quiet, when, due to our non-intention, there don't seem to us to be many sounds. When there seem to us to be many, we say that it's noisy. But there is no real essential difference between a noisy silence and a quiet silence. The thing that runs through from the quietness to the noise is a state of non-intention, and it is this state that interests me. (Cage 2001, 123)

To listen to the traffic in a silent way is to listen to it as uninterpreted or unconceptualized—as “a state of affairs free of intention,” as Cage puts it. To *appreciate* the traffic *as* silence is to perceive it as an open space of possibility unconstrained by linguistic meaning and other categorical strictures. When we listen to traffic as silence, we hear the silence without hearing *that* it is silent. Appreciation of silence is best achieved when we do so in a silent way.

For contrast, consider that, despite what I recommend, there is a lot that *could* go on in aesthetic appreciation of silence: perceptually grasping relevant sensory qualities; cognitively grasping the silence as belonging to the right conceptual category; grasping and contemplating the aesthetic qualities made available via conceptual categorization; judging and assessing the relative merits of silence in general and specific silences in particular. When I recommend we listen to silence as silence in a silent way, I am not claiming that this is what must occur in every situation we would describe as appreciation of silence. It is simply something many, perhaps most of us often do, or have done, and maybe seek to do regularly.

### Anything heard

*A monk asked Ummon* in all earnestness, “*What is Buddha?*” *Ummon* said, “*Kanshiketsu (a dried shit-stick)*” (Yamada 2004, 102).

So far, I have argued that silence has three facets: outward quiet, inward stillness, and locutionary restraint, and I've encouraged an appreciation of silence that brings these three together. Although there is no absolute silence, we can appreciate what silence there is by attending to it in a silent way.

But is silence really fit for aesthetic appreciation? Famously, Paul Ziff (1979) advises, concerning aesthetic appreciation in general, that “anything that can be viewed is a fit object for aesthetic attention.” The idea is that even a non-traditional, non-art object like a gator basking in the sun on a muddy river bank is just as fit for aesthetic attention as *The Last Supper*. Ziff (1979, 285) offers a compelling illustration. We

might imagine someone pointing out to us an object of their aesthetic interest: “Look at the dried dung!” Although not a traditional aesthetic object, nothing prevents us from attending to whatever aesthetic properties—positive or negative—we might find there. Ziff's example is a reference to a well-known Zen koan, which he eventually quotes at the end of the piece.

A monk asked Ummon, “What is Buddha?” Ummon answered him: “Dried dung.”<sup>19</sup>

Although Ziff himself does not endorse it, one way to motivate the “anything viewed” doctrine is to understand it as the principle that we can take anything at all, no matter how mundane, or seemingly uninteresting, or ugly, and subject it to aesthetic scrutiny by approaching it via an appropriate conceptual framework. By categorizing and conceptualizing the object according to formal features, or functional role, or artistic genre, or ecological role, or etiological story, or cultural or historical or political story or even just common sense, the result will be something worthy of aesthetic response and appraisal.

Perhaps this reading of Ziff's principle can serve to guide our approach to silence. Appreciation of natural silences, like the silences between cricket chirps, might be enhanced by the knowledge that the intervals can be used to calculate the ambient temperature. Appreciation of musical silences requires, if not necessarily a sophisticated grasp of music theory, at least some basic conceptual scaffolding, such as the concepts of rhythm, musical time, musical performance, or kindred concepts. And our appreciation of silence in general might also be enhanced by learning that, as is becoming increasingly clear from empirical studies, regular doses of silence are part of a flourishingly human life, and constant doses of noise are not.<sup>20</sup> All of this is true, but none of these are really examples of what I have in mind for the appreciation of silence.

The appreciation of silence need not be guided by an especially sophisticated conceptual framework. Instead, in listening to silence, I recommend that one attempt to effect a kind of shift in the figure-ground relationship of the conceptual and the non-conceptual contents of consciousness. Rather than divide and conquer via the appropriate conceptual framework, we allow the “this-ness” and the “that-ness” of particular silences to come to the fore. And whatever these are, we do not actively subject them to conceptual categorization, but rather leave them be.<sup>21</sup>

Cage has already suggested how to do this when he recommended that we listen to silence in the form of traffic. Traffic can be silence when not conceptualized as intentional musical sounds or even traffic sounds—just sounds. The church bells ringing can be silence. But they aren't appreciable as such if our



minds are cluttered with questions like: “I wonder why the church bells are ringing? Did someone die? Am I going to die soon?” Silence is best appreciated with a still mind, with no compulsion to filter the experience via some conceptual framework or other. It is better to listen to the silence with, as they say, an “empty” mind. We can allow things to enter our awareness without the need to hold onto them and subject them to the crunch-crunch-crunch of rational scrutiny. One needn’t carve the soundscape up into categories, even correct scientific categories. Instead of asking, “I wonder how that ‘click and clack’ helped blue jay ancestors propagate their genes?”, we can let all of that recede to the background and allow the silence to show itself. Following Cage’s lead, we can listen to silence without looking to find intentions lurking behind or within it. And we can also let go of analogs of intentions, such as ecological roles, etiological stories, in general, and, even more generally, the conceptual frameworks by which we categorize silences—or their hosts or guests.

Listening in this way doesn’t entail perception devoid of concepts. Conceptual content can be part of an intentional object even when in the background, with the nonconceptual shifted to the foreground. When this happens, although there are thoughts there too, we are thinking of nothing in the ordinary sense.

## Conclusion

A systematic general aesthetic theory of silence should continue the recent expansion of aesthetics beyond the traditional art-centered approach and aim instead for a unified theory broad enough to comprehend varieties of silence found in the arts, the environment, and our everyday lives, including our interactions with others. As a launching point, I recommend Ziff’s “Anything viewed” doctrine, with a Cageian twist: even traffic noise, seemingly paradoxically, can be a form of silence. An aesthetics of silence should address related ontological and the epistemological matters. I favor realism about silence, but with the caveat that silence is always partial, and that we must do some work to attend to it. Similarly, I encourage the view that the experience of silence provides epistemic access to it, in contrast to the cognitivist picture according to which we merely infer silence rather than experience it. Realism, combined with non-cognitivism, is, perhaps, bound to seem paradoxical. In response, I suggest that we can find much of aesthetic interest in silence, including even the paradox itself.

I have focused on the experience of silence rather than the expression of silence, but a unified aesthetics of silence should also comprehend the variety of ways

silence is expressed in the arts, environment, and ordinary life. This is a project beyond the scope of the present paper, and I will leave it as work for future research. For now, I will simply mention that if, as I have argued, it is possible to make sense of the experience of a wide variety of aesthetic properties, it should be similarly possible to make sense of the expression those properties. Much work has already been done, particularly with the expression of silence in music, but the work of a more general theory has yet to be done.

Beyond these descriptive elements, an aesthetics of silence should also comprise a normative project. Concerning the aesthetic value of silence, I favor an aesthetic empiricist approach, according to which its aesthetic value resides in the final value of the experience of silence—something valuable for its own sake. The aesthetic value of silence is just part of its overall value, which includes, for example, its positive contributions to our overall physical and psychological health. Unique about silence is that its aesthetic and its more instrumental values complement one another, especially when we experience silence with, as I have urged, an “empty mind”. This requires a kind of discipline that sharpens and refines our capacity to listen to and to locate its many riches.

I recommend appreciation of silence as part of a flourishing human life. We never experience the total absence of sound, but we can, following a suggestion from John Cage, appreciate silence in the form of minimally conceptualized, non-intentional sounds—even traffic. We can also enjoy silence in the ordinary sense simply of quiet. Both of these provide an opportunity to rest the grasping, interpreting mind, and allow for mental stillness, which is the inner aspect of silence. I recommend that we seek silence both externally, in the form of a lack of noise, and internally, in the form of mental stillness. In doing so, we can appreciate the silence in a silent way.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

1. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the need for this clarification.
2. In addition to Goodman, see van der Berg (2012) and, for a critical view, Carroll (1999, Chapter, 2).
3. This is a contentious point in philosophy of mind. Is it a truth of metaphysics that I must be embodied in order to have sensory experience? Gertler (2007) offers a Cartesian-style argument against this claim. I take it that Cage is not addressing a metaphysical issue of this kind, and that he is instead restricting his observations to what can be said about the lives of ordinary human beings.
4. For an extended treatment of Cage on this point, see Gann (2010).
5. Kahn (1997) makes this point about sounds otherwise undetectable to unaided human hearing.

6. Some philosophers countenance negative facts, and the issue is one of much recent and vigorous debate. See Barker and Jago (2012), Zangwill (2011), and Baron et al. (2013).
7. Thanks to Raamy Majeed for this point about borders.
8. Sorensen (2009) advocates an absence realist position according to which we hear local silences, they are real, but ontologically dependent.
9. For a discussion of the early Wittgenstein as mystic, see McGuinness' classic (1966).
10. My point here is to extend Fielding's insight about Wittgenstein, Cage, and their shared approach to appreciation of the ordinary everyday world, to something analogous in the case of silence more generally. But it is important to tread with care here. The claim that language has definite limits is a consequence of a view of language that Wittgenstein is widely understood to have abandoned later. There is an ongoing debate in the literature about whether the similarities and differences between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* weigh in favor of one or the other of two conflicting readings: the traditional one, according to which there are two Wittgensteins—"Early" and "Late"—and a newer reading, according to which only the expression has changed while the message has remained essentially the same. In the text, I assume a moderate version of the traditional view according to which Wittgenstein's view is, perhaps typically, a Modernist one. For more, see LeMahieu and Zumhagen-Yekplé (2017). On the debate, see Crary and Read (2000). Many thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing to my attention to this point.
11. Kania (2010) makes a similar point about the figure-ground relationship between musical notes and musical silences, but his purposes are rather different from mine.
12. Dodd (2017), for example, appears to take this for granted.
13. For a comprehensive list of references, see Carlson (2014).
14. Moller (2014) makes a similar point about the boring. Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to Moller's piece.
15. Compare Wittgenstein, "It is not how things are in the world that is the mystical, but *that* it exists" (1922, 6.44).
16. Trappist monks, of course, provide an exception, as they commit to a lifetime of silence.
17. John Andrew Fisher (1998, 1999) is responsible for early work on appreciation of natural sounds.
18. Cage's 4'33" is widely known as the "Silent Sonata". Gann (2010, 163) suggests that a more accurate epithet would be "Unintended Noise Sonata".
19. For aesthetic reasons, I prefer the Yamada (2004) translation, which has Ummon answer, "A dried shit-stick."
20. Gregoire (2017) cites a variety of compelling studies.
21. Can we even have perceptual experience without concepts? There is a lively and longstanding debate about this. Nonconceptualists cite perceptual illusions, the perceptual capacities of human babies and non-human animals, the hope for a bottom-up story about human cognition, and the richness and density of human perception, among other reasons as

evidence for their view. York Gunther (2003) identifies at least seven arguments for nonconceptual content.

22. I would like to thank two anonymous referees, Jill Cermele, Ray Cicetti, Adam Goldstein, Gerry Kammerer, Seung-Kee Lee, Tanya Nolte, and especially Kevin Melchionne for helpful comments and suggestions.

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