

Sound of Silence

Story, Sound and the Moving Image

Research in Context (ADAD5003) Lecture 6



...there is no such thing as silence

...there is no such thing as silence

- what is the sound of silence?
- absolute silence
- relative silence
- impressionistic silence

A person with long, dark, wavy hair is seen from behind, looking out a window. The background is a blurred cityscape with buildings and a train. The overall tone is blue and moody.

IN PURSUIT OF SILENCE

a meditative film about our relationship with silence, sound, and the impact of noise

an antidote to muzak

4'33"

There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.

John Cage

4'33"

for any instrument or combination of instruments

John Cage

60 ♩ = <—>
4/4

I

33"

II

60 ♩ = <—>
4/4

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"Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music."



JOHN CAGE (1990) THE FESTIVAL DES HORENS John Cage in an anechoic chamber

absolute silence

4'33" = 273 seconds

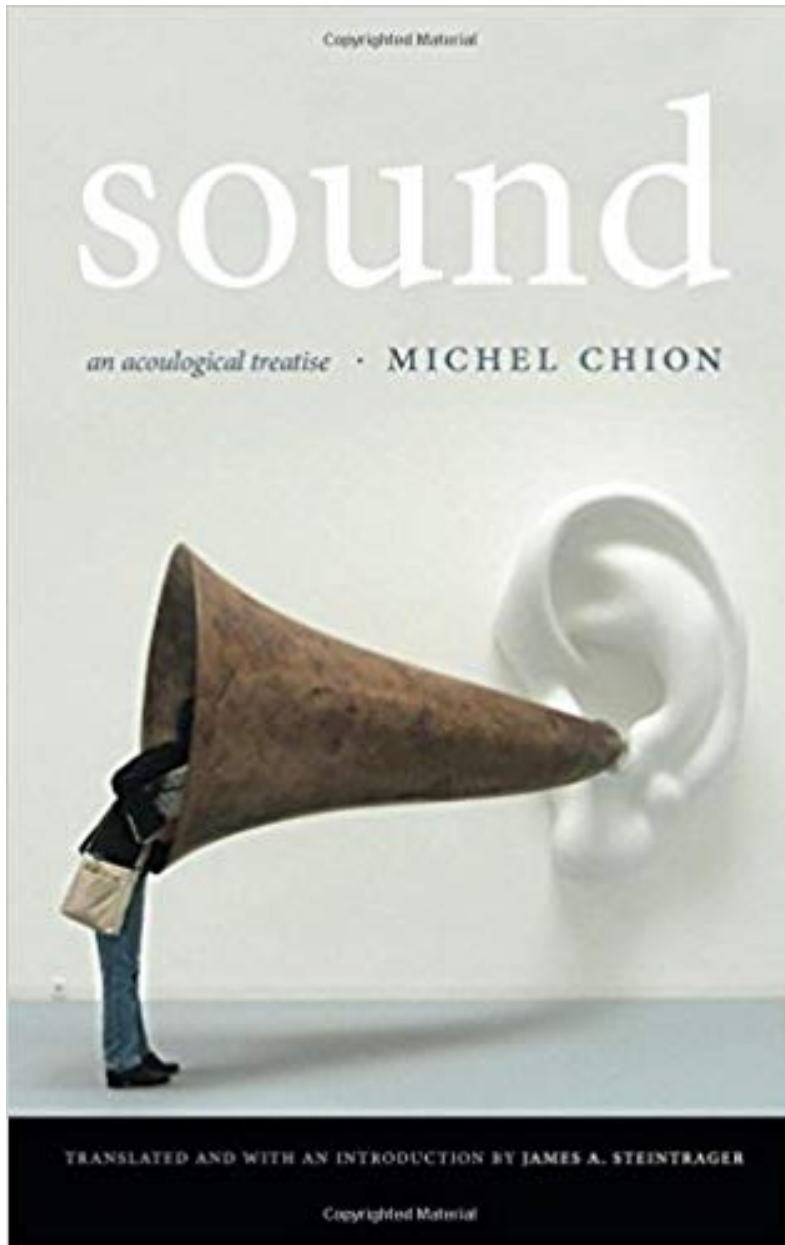
273 Kelvins = 0 degrees Celsius

...no such thing



“Ideally, for me, **the perfect sound film has zero tracks.** You try to get the audience to a point, somehow, **where they can imagine the sound.** They hear the sound in their minds, and it really isn’t on the track at all.

That’s the ideal sound, **the one that exists totally in the mind,** because it’s the most intimate. It deals with each person’s experience, and it’s obviously of the highest fidelity imaginable, because it’s not being translated through any kind of medium.” – **Walter Murch**

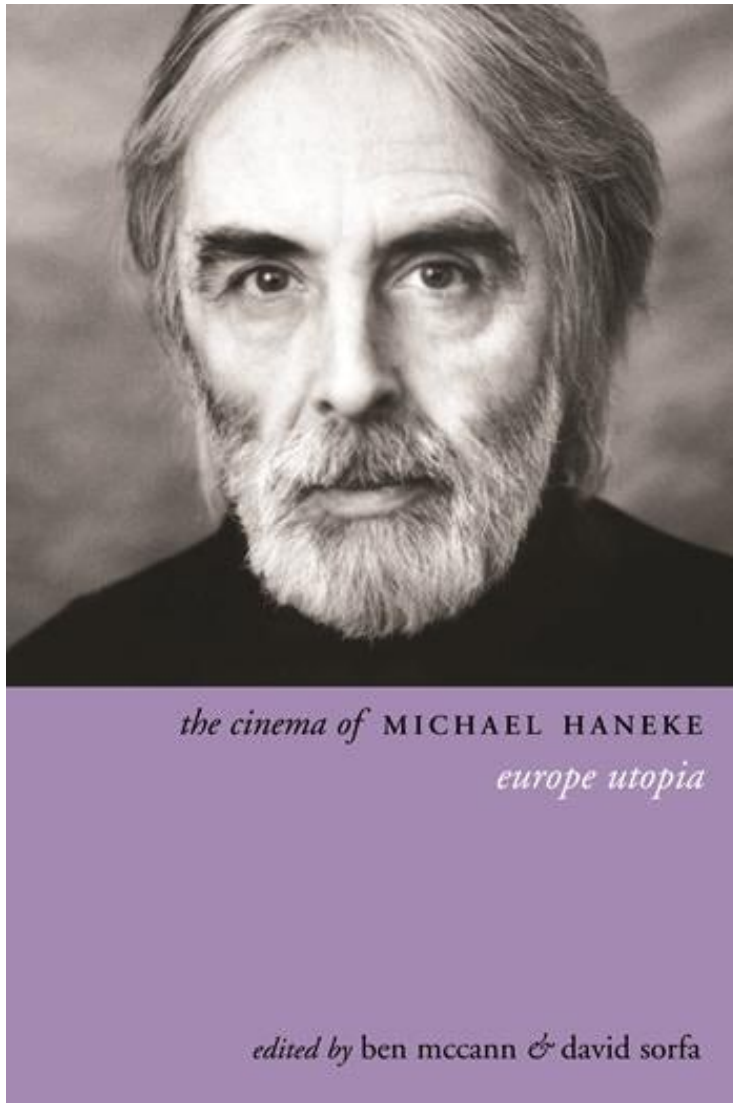


“This silence, which reigns around isolated words or sounds, imparts a particular new intensity to certain scenes...

Any silence makes us feel exposed, as if it were laying bare our own listening, but also as if we were in the presence of a giant ear, tuned to our slightest noises.

We are no longer merely listening to the film, **we are** as it were **being listened to by it** as well.” – **Michel Chion**

As Chion notes, “silence is never neutral emptiness. It is the negative of sound we’ve heard beforehand or imagined; it is the product of a contrast” (Audio-Vision 57).



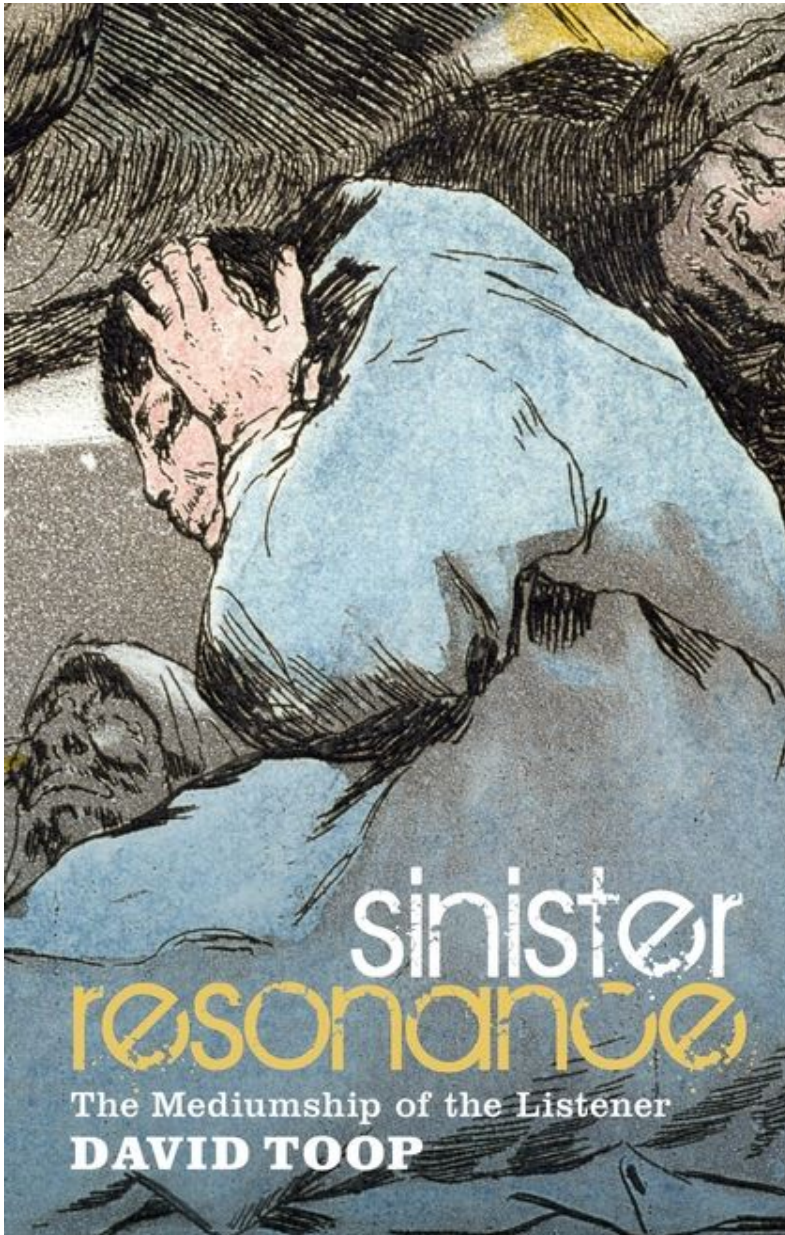
“But more than the rupturing of sound, it is in the silences themselves that **we find the loudest call to listen** and strongest imperative to interrogate, contemplate, and resonate. [...]

Silence is not, then, the absence of sound but its essence, and the body of the subject is its origin and end point.” – **Lisa Coulthard**



“Silence is the artist’s ultimate other-worldly gesture; by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world, which appears as patron, client, audience, antagonist, arbiter, and distorter of his work.” – **Susan Sontag**

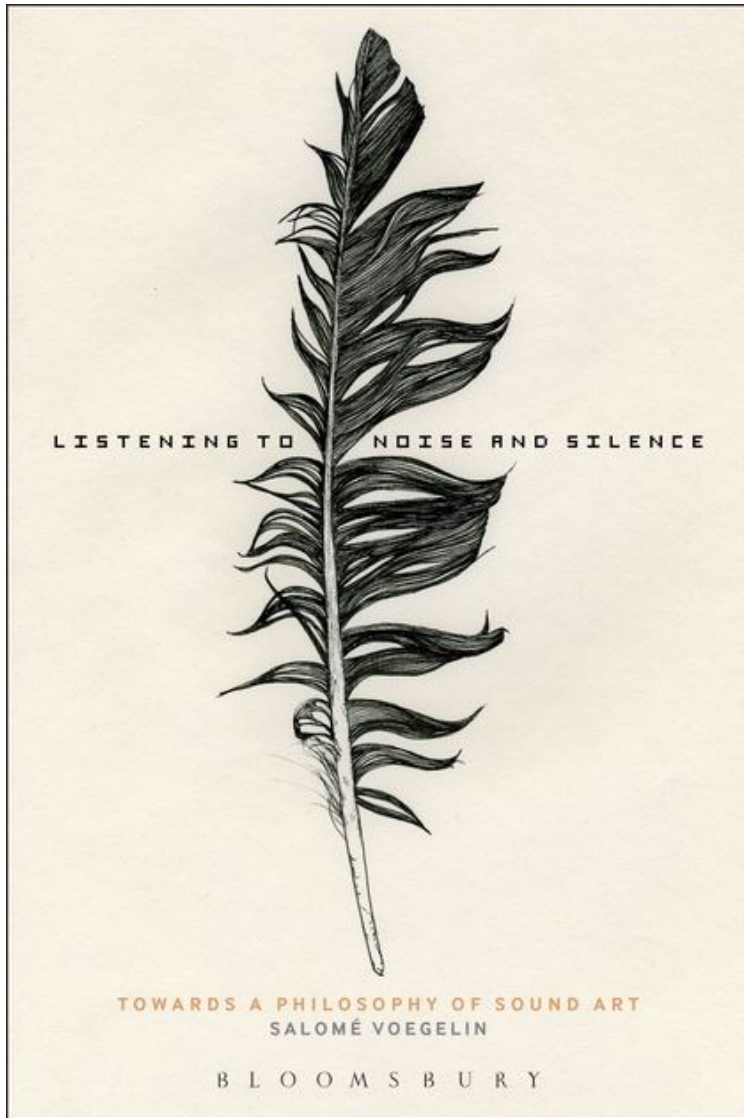
“Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.”



“Sound is absence, beguiling; out of sight; out of reach. What made the sound? Who is there? Sound is void, fear, wonder. Listening, as if to the dead, like a medium who deals only in history and what is lost, the ear attunes itself to distant signals, eavesdropping on ghosts and their chatter.

(...) **Sound is a present absence; silence is an absent present.** Or perhaps the reverse is better: sound is an absent presence; silence is a present absence?” – **David Toop**

sound is **absence**



“Silence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening...”

This is listening as a generative process not of noises external to me, but from inside, from the body, where my subjectivity is at the centre of the sound production, audible to myself.

Silence reveals to me my own sounds: my head, my stomach, my body becomes their conductor.” – **Salomé Voegelin**



silence is ...abnormal

- There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot. (John Cage)
- Even in a hypothetically 'silent' room with no [ambience](#) or reverb (known as an [anechoic chamber](#)), you would still hear your own blood pumping.
- To recreate the contradictory silence of our world, sound designers often have to use perceived silence instead of literal silence.

silence can be
...awkward



sounds are ...comfortable

sound is like a comfort layer that we all take for granted, you know? It helps us figure out which way to turn if we hear a car coming... when you remove that, it's like a huge safety net that you're removing.





relative silence

Contrasting loud and silent sounds can really immerse us in a story.

why filmmakers use **silence**

- Sound is integral to film, **but sometimes the absence of sound says it all.**
- **A moment of silence, however brief, can completely command our attention.** Film is able to combine the visual and sonic characteristics that we associate with silence.
- **No other art can reproduce silence**, neither painting nor sculpture, neither literature nor the silent film could do so. (Bela Balazs)

silence in context

- **'Perceived Silence'** is what you might be hearing if you are sitting in a quiet room reading this article.
- In a feature film, these **'silent' moments** give the audience time to breathe; a time to sink into the picture.
- They often work well as downtime following a BIG and LOUD scene.



The absence of **non-diegetic composition** can give an extra level of “**realness**” to a scene.

conveying a sense of
isolation



isolation in the silence of space



Martin Scorsese's use of silence

silence finishes our stories

“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof
one must be silent.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein

- Wittgenstein claimed that whereas **language is limited**, **thought is unlimited**. When language, which is both logical and representational, can no longer cover thought, linguistic silence takes over.
- Barring dialogue, **sound can often function as the language of film**, representing emotions, intentions, or actions. **When these sounds are removed**, we are inclined to explore our infinite thoughts uninhibited.
- **Silence frees us to fill empty space with emotions and ideas**, to interpret and infer. In a counter-intuitive way, we find that instead of having no meaning, silence in film becomes a blank canvas on which we are invited to paint with our endless thoughts.

NomarAnabumz

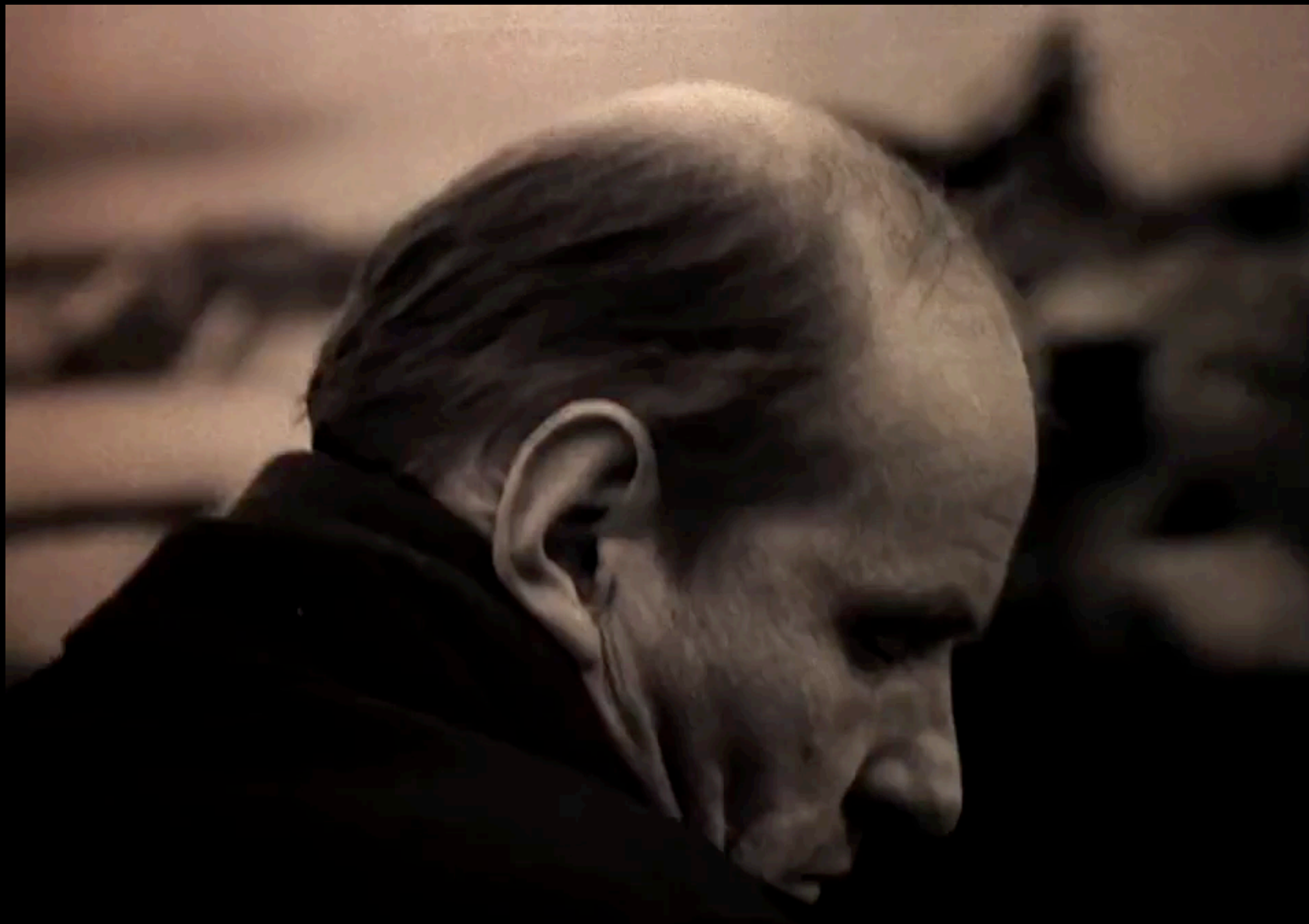
add emotional depth

sound design
as
silence

- when sound design is done well, you don't notice it.
- **impressionistic** silence



Ingmar Bergman: a Silent God



Stalker (1979)

silence now

silence in contemporary cinema





quiet is the new loud

the **new**
silent era



silence never sounded so terrifying

silence never sounded so terrifying | A Quiet Place (2018)

minimalism's
radical quiet

Have we sacrificed noise for silence? ...not in terms of silence as a 'violence to being', but in terms of noise and rhythm as a compensation for the **failure of language**, asking what feminist statement can be realised through these modes of presence?



chantal akerman's | jeanne dielman



noise and rhythm as a compensation for the failure of language



The Fountain (2006)

silence and field recording



“**My ear**, still very much a part of me, became an extension into and through the environment itself. **A wandering membrane, equipped with its own feet** – ones that allowed me to move beyond my own immediate and confined position, and back again.

At last I had found a walking that resonated with me: personally, politically and situationally.

It was not in freedom or pleasure, defiance or counter-strategy, but in the pain and restriction of my own experience.” – **Mark Peter Wright**



Everybody should be quiet
near a little stream and listen

emptiness

silence is the sound of listening

“If we have a hope of improving the acoustic design of the world, it will be realizable only after the recovery of silence as a positive state in our lives. Still the noise in the mind: that is the first task—then everything else will follow in time” – **R. Murray Schafer**

“Conversely, if I were to hazard a definition of **silence** I would describe it as the **particular equilibrium of sound** and quiet that **catalyzes our powers of perception**. [...] What’s unknown, then, is the world around us; what’s missing is our awareness that we do not know. **Silence as a state of expectancy**, a species of attention, is a key back into the garden of innocence.”
– **George Prochnik**

review

- what is the sound of silence?
- absolute silence
- 4'33" – John Cage – all sound is music
- isolation
- relative silence
- impressionistic silence
- metaphysical silence
- Quiet is the New Loud – the new silent cinema

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