

Silence and Being: The Ontology of Silence in Theatre, Film, and Music

Silence, the lack or negation of speech or sound or the blank backdrop against which meaningful expression takes form, can be seen as absence. Yet the artistic practices used throughout theatre, film, and in certain avant-garde music performances, suggest that silence is not simply a 'lack' (of something) as I have stated earlier, but a phenomenon with its own structure and efficacy to convey equally as meaningful expression. In theatre, film, and in certain rare cases - music, silence does not simply provide a backdrop for meaning to be created around it (through speech or action), but often becomes the very medium through which meaning is created and in this way becomes a medium through which Being, or what really exists, to be explored and disclosed.

To further understand this account of silence, we must first turn to Bernard Dauenhauer's phenomenological analysis of silence in *"On Silence"*. Dauenhauer rejects the idea that silence is just muteness or a lack of communication. He insists instead that silence is a "positive phenomenon which shows itself in a multiplicity of profiles" (Dauenhauer, 1973, p. 9). He then goes on to distinguish at least three such profiles, which we can use to explore the ontological importance of silence in theatre, film, and music. Firstly, there is intervening silence which is the silence that occurs between or within words and helps punctuate the discourse. As an example, this can include the pause between sentences, the rest between musical phrases, or the gap in timing that allows a joke to land. The second type is Fore-and-After silence which is the silence that marks the beginning and end of speech, for example the stillness before the first word or note and the quiet after the last, which serves to frame the event or the expression as a whole. Lastly, there is deep silence which is not tied to any single utterance but pervades discourse as an enduring background, examples of which include: the silence of intimates, liturgical silence, and the "silence of the to-say" that grounds all speaking (Agich, 1985, p. 105). Just by looking at Dauenhauer's taxonomy of silence, we can see how silence can be structurally complex. Intervening and Fore-and-After silence are not separate beings from expression, they are constitutive of its temporal and rhythmic articulation and therefore are responsible for actively shaping expression, and thus actively affect the meaning of said expression. Deep silence is even more interesting as rather than actively shaping the form in which expression takes place, it acts as a dimension in itself in which discourse occurs. The phenomenological description I have provided further aligns with Max Picard's discourse in *"The World of Silence"*. Picard similarly insists that silence is "an autonomous phenomenon," not a mere negation of language but an "independent whole, subsisting in and through itself," even "creative, as language is creative" (Picard, 1948, p. xix). The absence of speech merely makes the presence of silence more evident. The relation is not that silence is produced by the cessation of language, but that language emerges from the fullness of silence and depends on it for its integrity. Such accounts invert the tendency, as suggested by Parmenides, to equate what is not with what cannot be thought or said (Nikulin, 2025). If non-Being is strictly inadmissible, then silence, construed as the absence of speech, would be nothing at all, and can then be argued to have no ontological status. Plato's revisal of non-Being in the Sophist, where non-Being is interpreted as difference rather than negation, opens up a conceptual space in which silence can be understood as other than sound without being nothing (Nikulin, 2025). Phenomenology radicalises this Platonic idea and takes it a step further by suggesting that silence not void but a way in which meaning itself, world, and Being show themselves. With this view in mind, silence is not just a property of situations or artworks but rather a mode in which Being is disclosed, and thus can be argued that it is an ontologically charged phenomenon (Nikulin, 2025). Dauenhauer suggests that silence can be both benign, peaceful, consoling, and "distressing...misery-laden" (Dauenhauer, 1973, p. 23) and Picard similarly notes that in a world saturated with noise, silence can be both feared and coveted (Picard, 1948). With these ideas in mind, silence can be seen as having confronts us with ourselves in an intimate and personal way and in this way it is bound up with the disclosure of subjectivity, understanding (of ourselves, or others, and of situations), and transcendence. If ontology asks how Beings are defined, then silence demands a place within ontology, not to be understood as mere background but as a phenomenon through which Being itself might reveal itself. This can be perfectly exemplified by looking at the arts and by analysing examples from theatre, film, and music, which have foregrounded silence as a central artistic choice. I will now turn to the works of Harold Pinter, Ingmar Bergman, and John Cage to provide further analysis

and showcase how silence does not simply articulate content, but it is part of this very content. Silence is used to interrogate and explore the nature of consciousness, the structure of individual existence, and the role of perception. These examples will show that silence can function as a mode of ontological interrogation.

Harold Pinter's plays have become paradigmatic for an aesthetics and ontology of silence in the theatre world. Critics such as Martin Esslin and James Hollis have long emphasised that Pinter's "pauses" and "silences" are not just stage directions used for timing, but carry a meaning in their own right. Esslin describes Pinter's drama as a "comedy of menace", in which ordinary conversations become saturated with anxiety, threat, and unarticulated desires that emerge precisely in what is not said (Mhayyal, 2018, p. 96). Hollis further speaks of a "*Poetics of Silence*" in which silence is the medium through which the incommunicable aspects of human existence are staged and believes that 'Pinter employs language to describe the failure of language; he details in forms abundant the poverty of man's communication; he assembles words to remind us that we live in the space between words' (Mhayyal, 2018, p. 98). On Dauenhauer's account, Pinter's pauses can be read as instances of intervening silence. They punctuate dialogue, but not just to provide breathing space, but rather to alter the rhythm and temporal structure of the scene in ways that make the unsaid press upon the said. In *The Birthday Party* or *The Caretaker*, ordinary phrases such as: "What do you mean?", "I don't know", are followed by pauses that stretch beyond the "habitual way of discoursing" (Dauenhauer, 1973, p.12). When the duration of intervening silence departs from the expected pattern, the relation between what has been said and what is anticipated is transformed. The pause suggests that what has just been spoken is inadequate, or that a different response is possible but withheld. The silence thereby "bears the senses of both surrounding sound phrases" while also bearing its own sense, marking the discourse as peculiar to these characters in this charged situation. Ontologically speaking, these silences disclose a dimension of Being that is not assimilated by propositional content. The pauses expose power relations, for example one character's silence may function as a refusal to respond, a withholding of recognition, and thus an assertion of dominance. Esslin notes how Pinter's characters often use silence to intimidate or destabilise others, so that the stage becomes a field of inarticulate struggle for control and self-definition. Silence, in this sense, is not absence but a specific mode of being-with-others in which Dasein, to use Heideggerian terms, comports itself toward others and reveals or conceals itself. Heidegger "posits that silence is not simply the negation of noise but rather a state that allows for deeper understanding and reflection (The Pilgrim, 2025). Heidegger can be interpreted as arguing that authentic discourse does not merely consist in saying, it also involves the capacity to keep silent (Mazouji and Jahromi, 2021, p. 39). "Keeping silent authentically is possible only in genuine discoursing," and the one who keeps silent "can 'make one understand' more authentically than the person who is never short of words" (Heidegger, 1926, p. 208). Inauthentic idle talk, by contrast, fills every space with chatter, covering over the fundamental questions of Being (Mazouji and Jahromi, 2021, p.39). Pinter's theatre stages this distinction in a secular, domestic setting. His characters oscillate between vacuous talk and charged silence. The pauses mark moments where something more fundamental presses for articulation but is held back, either out of fear, shame, or the impossibility of adequate expression. Nevertheless, these previously mentioned Heideggerian ideas on silence, and its power for us to "engage in a dialogue with ourselves, fostering a deeper connection with our thoughts and feelings (The Pilgrim, 2025) permeate not only throughout Pinter's plays, but also as we will later see in the works of Ingmar Bergman, and John Cage. Dauenhauer's notion of deep silence provides another ontological layer. Deep silence is not tied to specific utterances as it "pervades discourse" (Dauenhauer, 1973, p. 22), especially in contexts such as the silence of intimates or liturgical silence. In Pinter, relationships between characters, whether of intimacy, hostility, or mutual dependence, are often sustained less by what is said than by a kind of enduring, unresolved silence that runs through their interactions. The stage becomes a space where deep silence structures the entire dramatic world. Pauses and silences then function as local irruptions of this deeper dimension involving unacknowledged trauma or existential unease, making the underlying ontological situation momentarily palpable. From an ontological perspective, Pinter's plays suggest that silence is integral to the way human beings exist as beings-who-speak. It is in silence that the limits of language become most apparent. The pauses disclose that there is always more to Being than can be captured in available words. Pinter's use of silence is thus not simply a part of his aesthetic style, it is also used to stage the ontological condition of finite subjects whose existence outruns what they can say.

While Pinter's plays reveal the ontological force of silence in interpersonal relations, Ingmar Bergman's films extend this to questions of subjectivity and transcendence. Bergman's films share a thematic cluster involving sparse soundscapes, prolonged quiet, and intense close-ups of silent faces. These techniques do not serve to simply build atmosphere, but also to raise fundamental existential questions. In *Persona*, the central theme of the film is that of the relationship between a mute actress, Elisabet, and a talkative nurse, Alma. Elisabet's silence is initially framed as a result of choice, she has stopped speaking even though there is nothing medically wrong with her. As the film progresses, her muteness, and her reasoning for it, becomes ambiguous. Tanya Shilina-Conte, drawing on Deleuze and the clinical category of "elective mutism", argues that such mute characters can be understood as engaging in a "critical-clinical mode of experimentation" with existence (Shilina-Conte, 2021). In *Persona*, Elisabet's silence may be read as a withdrawal from the inauthentic roles she is expected to perform, both as an actress and as a mother and woman, an attempt to inhabit a different mode of being (Shilina-Conte, 2021). From a phenomenological standpoint, Elisabet's silence disrupts the ordinary communicative structure between two individuals as Alma is forced to fill the silence with her own speech, confessions, and projections, which leads her to gradually lose her sense of self as she is absorbed into Elisabet's opaque presence. The film's visual strategy relies on tight close-ups, long takes, and moments of near complete quiet to force the viewer into a kind of shared silence which serves to intensify this ontological destabilisation. Stijn Raeymaekers, emphasises that cinematic silence is never simply the absence of sound but is rather shaped by framing, duration, and context, and therefore functions as an expressive element in its own right. In *Persona*, silence becomes an atmosphere in which boundaries between self and other, image and reality, begin to dissolve (Raeymaekers, 2014). Bergman's work repeatedly confronts the place and importance of silence in the world. In *The Silence* and *Winter Light*, Bergman stages a world in which traditional religious language has lost its power, and prayers go unanswered. In *Winter Light*, the priest protagonist experiences the liturgy as an empty ritual, spoken into a void. The most devastating moments are not his sermons but the silences - the pauses between words where his doubt and despair become palpable. Silence here functions as an index of divine absence or at least of the collapse of previously meaningful forms of discourse about God. In this way, silence is used as a direct tool to explore philosophical questions (in this case relating to questions surrounding God, which I will not delve into here). However, this can be used as an example to clarify Dauenhauer's idea of liturgical silence, which is not a break between spoken prayers but an open space in which the worshipper awaits God's action. Bergman's films can be seen as secularised explorations of such liturgical silence. The camera techniques employed aid this by lingering on quiet faces and spaces where one might expect a divine response but none comes (another example of this would be *The Seventh Seal*). The silence is experienced as both oppressive and revelatory as it reveals the human longing for transcendence. Shilina-Conte's "elective mutism" in "minor cinema", which I mentioned earlier, suggests that silence can be a mode of protest or resistance (Shilina-Conte, 2021). Although her primary examples are films made by political minorities, where mutism becomes an act of defiance against the dogma, a similar logic can be discovered in Bergman's refusal to give his characters easy metaphysical answers. The choice to let silence stand where theological or philosophical discourse might be expected can be read as an ontological statement that Being exceeds the categories and narratives within which we attempt to enclose it (Shilina-Conte, 2021). From this angle, Bergman's silences are events in which Being manifests itself as mute, inaccessible, or indifferent. This manifestation is not negation, because it transforms the entire world of the film by having relationships and personal understanding take on a certain ontological weight in the presence of silence, be it silence from a character which is normally expected to speak or silence from God, who is normally expected to answer. Silence thus functions as a way to understand both ourselves and the world around us. It reveals a world in which human beings must assume responsibility for meaning in the face of an unresponsive or absent transcendent Other, or simply due to a lack of answers.

On the other hand, capturing silence is music becomes harder to analyse due to music naturally being defined through its sound. Of course, analysing the sound, or lack of sound, namely pauses between movements remains an option. However, I chose instead to focus on something else completely here. Something that challenges the very definition of what constitutes music through silence. John Cage's *4'33"*, challenges this directly. The piece consists of three movements in which the performer does not intentionally produce any sound on any instrument. Instead, the ambient sounds in the performance space, such as the coughing and whispering of the audience, the buzz of electrical appliances, the shuffling of people in their seats, or even the

traffic outside, become framed as the 'music'. The piece functions by evoking silence in its primary structure. The performer's deliberate lack of sound creation and deliberate abstention to conform to the expectation of sound acts as a performative kind of silence. Whether intended by John Cage or not, silence becomes the medium through which the music is produced. It is this very silence, this lack of 'musical' sound, that allows a new form of 'music' to emerge, music that emerges from the cacophony of sounds created by the audience which inadvertently fill the silence. This silence allows space for a certain type of sound to exist in the forefront, a type of sound (audience based noises) that would normally be only existent in the background of a typical musical composition. This showcases exactly how silence becomes the very medium through which meaning is created, as stated earlier in the introduction. As the audience creates the sound, they too create the meaning and the Being of the piece, and this is all facilitated through the initial silence. This piece can be read as an exploration of this surrounding silence, or fore-and-after silence, that has been suggested by Dauenhauer (Dauenhauer, 1973, pp. 10-18). A traditional piece of music begins and ends against a background of quiet. The music is the foreground and the silence the background. In Cage's piece, this is flipped entirely on its head. The three movements, with their specific durations, establish a temporal structure (opening, duration, closing) that mirrors that of conventional compositions but is now occupied by silence and its intrusions. The audience's anticipation of sound, disappointment, curiosity, boredom, and eventual attunement to ambient noise unfolds within the framed silence (Dodd, 2018). By making silence itself the focus of attention, Cage draws listeners into the world of silence, inviting them to perceive what normally goes unnoticed. Silence thus also functions as a medium of transformation, it reveals the dichotomy between music and environment, performer and audience, and intentional sound and unintentional sound. The boundary between 'artwork' and 'world' is blurred (Picard, 1948). The ontological question surrounding 4'33" also forces reflection on the being of musical works. If a piece can consist of deliberate silence, then a musical work cannot be defined simply as an ordered sequence of pitched sounds. It must be understood more broadly. Silence, in this context, is not nothing. It is a determinate way in which time is articulated and experience is structured. This piece thus supports the idea that silence is a positive ontological phenomenon.

Dauenhauer's analyses of intervening, fore-and-after, and deep silence show that silence has a distinctive temporal structure. In Pinter, the interval of silence between lines can be the space in which a threat ripens or a realisation takes shape. In 4'33", the entire piece consists of such intervals, forcing listeners to dwell in a temporality where nothing happens in a conventional musical sense, yet everything is happening in the domain of expectation and awareness. Ontologically, such intervals reveal that Being is constituted in absences, delays, and gaps. The analyses of Pinter, Bergman, and Cage that I have provided showcases how silence is a positive phenomenon and how it can serve us to explore what is Being in ourselves and in the world around us. These works exemplify the Heideggerian notion that "silence for...Heidegger is the essential basis for an important transition...from Being-with-others to authentic being" (Mazouji and Jahromi, 2021). The three artistic works examined in this essay can be read as performative realisations of this Heideggerian insight, each staging silence as a mode through which Dasein (human Being) confronts itself and discloses the fundamental structures of its existence. At the same time, silence retains a relation to nothingness that should not be overlooked. Pinter's and Bergman's silences often evoke the threat of meaninglessness, the emptiness of routinised roles, or the absence of God. Cage's 4'33" confronts listeners with the possibility that music might be indistinguishable from noise, that the distinction itself might be conventional rather than ontologically grounded. Silence thus brings Being and non-Being into a tense proximity. Yet the lesson of phenomenological and artistic explorations of silence is that this proximity cannot be understood within a simple opposition of presence and absence. Silence is not pure non-being; it is the way in which being sometimes shows itself as withdrawn, withheld, excessive to articulation.

Throughout this essay, I have argued that silence is not merely the absence of sound or speech, but a positive ontological phenomenon fundamental to how Being is disclosed particularly by looking at examples from theatre, film, and music. Dauenhauer's phenomenological taxonomy, establishes that silence operates across three distinct yet interconnected dimensions: as intervening silence that structures temporal rhythm and meaning, as fore-and-after silence that frames expression, and as deep silence that pervades discourse as an enduring background.

Picard's conception of silence as an autonomous, creative phenomenon reinforces this view, challenging the Parmenidean equation of non-being with absolute negation and revealing silence as integral to the manifestation of meaning itself. The analyses of Pinter's theatre, Bergman's cinema, and Cage's 4'33" have illustrated how these artists employ silence not just as a stylistic device but as a mode through which fundamental ontological questions are interrogated and disclosed. In Pinter's pauses, we witness how silence becomes a medium for revealing power dynamics, existential vulnerability, and the inadequacy of everyday language to capture human complexity. In Bergman's sustained quiet and close-ups of mute faces, silence discloses questions of subjectivity, divine absence, and the opacity of the Other. In Cage's piece, silence transforms the very definition of music and art, revealing how Being is constituted not only in intentional presence but in the ambient, unintentional, and unexpected. Each work shows what Heidegger identifies as authentic silence, not mere muteness, but a deliberate keeping-silent that discloses depths concealed by inauthentic chatter, which serve to reveal the authentic Being. While silence retains a relation to nothingness by evoking meaninglessness, absence, and the limits of articulation, it is not pure non-being. Rather, silence is the way in which Being sometimes shows itself. My ultimate point is that silence, or the idea of silence, or how we interact with silence, is a fundamental mode of Being's self-manifestation. In our noisy, saturated world, attending to silence in art offers more than aesthetic pleasure, it offers access to the essential structures of existence itself. By foregrounding silence, Pinter, Bergman, and Cage have created works that do not simply represent Being but invite us to confront ourselves, our finitude, and the profound mystery of what it means to exist in this very world.

3660 words

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