

BOOKSHELF

‘Silence’ Review: The Rest Is Noise

Silence is seemingly neutral but can be used as both a punitive tool and a liberating practice. Its meanings are lost in an era of nonstop sound.



The Abbey of Gethsemani, in rural Kentucky, where the Trappist monk Thomas Merton practiced silence. PHOTO: ALAMY

By Christine Rosen

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The colonization of silence has been going on for years. Muzak piped into elevators and shopping malls seems almost quaint, now that televisions and video screens are everywhere—in waiting rooms, restaurants and taxis—and every stroll down a store aisle is accompanied by a pop soundtrack. Even pumps at the gas station blare music and weather updates, and earphones make it possible to go through an entire day listening to podcasts, phone conversations or a playlist of tunes. Our eagerness for nonstop sound suggests that mere quiet is an uncomfortable experience for many people.

Thus Jane Brox’s “Silence: A Social History of One of the Least Understood Elements of Our Lives” couldn’t come at a better time. A wonderfully evocative writer with a knack for the illuminating detail, Ms. Brox explores the history and cultural meaning of silence through the story of a prison and a monastery: Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia and the Abbey of

Gethsemani in rural Kentucky.

Silence

By Jane Brox

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It is an unusual and useful approach. Both the monastery and the prison are what sociologists call “total institutions”: Since their inhabitants are cut off from the rest of society, they can fashion rules and inculcate norms within a closed social system. By focusing on how silence was enforced in these institutions in the past, Ms. Brox raises questions about our understanding of

silence in the present.

Approved for construction in 1821 and opened in 1829, Eastern State Penitentiary was designed by British architect John Haviland, who took as one of his inspirations Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, a design that allows for constant inmate surveillance. At Eastern State, however, administrators introduced a new and, at the time, progressive intervention: Prisoners were kept in individual cells, never to interact either with their fellow prisoners or with guards. “It’s not only that they couldn’t speak,” Ms. Brox writes. “They couldn’t hear one another. All they had to listen to was the heat through the vents, the wind in the chinks, the feed slots opening and promptly closing.”

The silence was meant to be total. Prisoners were made to wear hoods when they first entered the prison, and guards muffled the sounds of their shoes and meal carts, all in an attempt to disorient and isolate prisoners. The silence and solitude, coupled with a rule that only the Bible would be allowed as reading material, were meant to prompt penitence. Instead, they drove some prisoners insane. One man, Ms. Brox writes, “beat his head against the walls of his cell until he was bloodied and so gravely battered that he eventually lost an eye.” It goes without saying that the prisoners never formed communal bonds.

By contrast, Ms. Brox cites the initial response of monk Thomas Merton (1915-68) to the communal silence of the Abbey of Gethsemani: “The silence with people moving in it was ten times more gripping than it had been in my own empty room.” Like many monastics before him, Merton left behind the chaos and noise of modern life to seek a space for contemplation. Ms. Brox, having visited the monastery herself, notes that “silence and the breaking of it are considered sacred, and the days are interwoven with silences of varying purposes and

duration.”

Even as Merton’s role as a public intellectual encroached on the abbey’s isolation, he continued to value silence. “Silence itself is a human value,” he wrote. It is also, as Ms. Brox implies in her portrait of Merton, a necessary one, since silence is a handmaid to thought and to the act of listening. By contrasting the lives of prisoners and monastics, Ms. Brox shows how something as seemingly neutral as silence can be used as both a punitive tool (solitary confinement) and a liberating practice (monastic reflection).

At times, Ms. Brox meanders from her principal narrative. While some of her tangents are illuminating—such as her exploration of how space conspires to give a particular character to silence (the more confined the space, the more oppressive it becomes)—others are a distraction, such as when she detours to discuss ducking stools, scold’s bridles and other efforts to silence women.

Ms. Brox seems to share the view of the Swiss philosopher Max Picard—the author of “The World of Silence” (1948)—who argued that silence “stands outside the world of profit and utility.” Yet market forces, in different ways, have encroached on both of Ms. Brox’s central examples. The Abbey of Gethsemani, no doubt boosted by Merton’s fame, supports itself in part through a brisk online trade in Trappist-branded goods and offers silent retreats for visitors. Eastern State Penitentiary is now a museum with guided tours and a gift shop. It trades on its notoriety by hosting an elaborate Halloween attraction—“Terror Behind the Walls”—featuring actors in costume and deafening music punctuated by bloodcurdling screams. People pay for the privilege of being loudly frightened in a prison once known for its silence.

“I live in a world where there is never any need to be alone,” Ms. Brox observes, “never any need to listen to the surrounding silence.” Yet it is an echo of the sacred silence of the monastery that modern people seek when they jet off to expensive retreats or download the latest meditation app. A culture that supports a market for high-end noise-canceling headphones while also embracing the endless tweeting, chattering and live-streaming of the online world is a culture that hasn’t thought seriously enough about the value of silence. As Picard wrote: “Silence is as much a part of history as noise.” Despite a few limitations, Ms. Brox’s engaging book offers readers an opportunity to explore a few crucial moments of that history and, in the process, to ponder what silence—or its absence—tells us about the world we are making every day.

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