

WORKSHOP

GENDER AND SILENCE.

HUSHED (HI)STORIES OF POWER AND RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF MODERNITY.

LEUVEN, 7 NOVEMBER 2014

9-16h

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Organizers: IdeaLab Stille Wenken/ Silent Signs (ASL)
(<http://stillewenken.wordpress.com>)

Forum for Belgian Research in History of Women, Gender and Sexuality
(http://www.avg-carhif.be/cms/forum_genre_en.php)

Can silence articulate gender? It seems so insubstantial and eerie – the mere absence of sound. It is easy to forget that silence can consist of an active practice, which is being carried out consciously by numerous actors in the past as well as the present. Active silence has been enforced (“mulier taceat in ecclesia”), used as a means of protest (Turkey’s ‘standing man’s protests) and has been designated as an attribute of dignity or calm. In all those guises, active silence serves as a way to signal the non-speaker’s relation to power, and to underline the corporeal and performative nature of the distribution of (acoustic) authority: female silence in church signaled respect for religious discipline, the ‘standing man’ shows resilience in the face of violence, and dignified silence is a privilege reserved for adults.

The relation between gendered bodies and active silence is an ambiguous one to say the least. It seems intuitive to equate speaking with power and masculinity, and silent listening with feminine obedience – after all, women seem to have difficulties in making themselves heard socially and politically. According to philosopher Mladen Dolar, “there is something in the very nature of the voice which endows it with master-like authority”. Within such a framework, the female voice is necessarily improper and can be easily represented as gossipy, nagging, or frivolous or disturbing, as the feminist voice has endeavored to be. However, “the voice as authority is one part of the story. On the other hand it is also true that the sender of the voice, the bearer of vocal emission, is someone who exposes himself, and thus becomes exposed to the effects of power which not only lie in the privilege of emitting the voice, but pertain to the listener” (Dolar). Moreover, practices of silence and vocalization throughout modernity belie the easy dichotomy between vocal power and silent obedience: much like the nation-state can be ‘sung’ in many ways, depending on who is singing it (Butler & Spivak), femininity and masculinity can be articulated through many sounds, and many silences.

Rather than simply assuming a ‘master’s voice’, modern men struggle to balance voice and silence in the face of expectations of rationality and a-corporeality. Which is why, as Ian Biddle

notes, the male singing voice is so rare in modernity: the “vocal fetish is resolutely sexist”. The association between vocality and (corporeal) exposure is of particular salience for modern subjects who base their individuality/autonomy on their ability to not become objects of either gaze or close listening. Remaining silent can, to an extent, hide the gendered body. On the other hand, numerous philosophies of the voice show that silence can also be a performance embracing the body. Most notably, perhaps, the figure of Echo – a responsive sounding practice couched in embodied silence - has been ascribed to female corporeality (Cavarero). Conversely, Gayatri Spivak’s call to ‘give woman to Echo’ is a particularly corporeal incitement to grant female bodies a place where they can choose between silence and speech.

This workshop aims to explore the ambiguous relation between practices of silence and gendered identities. Rather than assuming an association between voice and power, and silence and obedience, it seeks to encourage a nuanced analysis of the different ways in which silence has been mobilized or can be mobilized in shaping gendered bodies and behaviors. In teasing out hushed (hi)stories, participants are invited to focus on the perspective of the active non-speaker.

Selected Bibliography:

Ian Biddle, ‘Caught in the Silken Throat: Modernist Investments in the Male Vocal Fetish’, in: Biddle and Gibson (eds.) *Masculinity and Western Musical Practice*, Ashgate, 2009.

Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, Seagull, 2007.

Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Stanford University Press, 2005.

Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, The MIT Press, 2006.

Gayatri Spivak, ‘Echo’, *New Literary History*, 24, 1993, 17-43.

We welcome papers that address issues including (but not limited to) the following:

- Gendered modes of contemplative silence (monastic or otherwise), discourses and practices of silence and gender in religion and devotion
- Active silence in contexts of protest, and its gendered meanings and implications
- Silence as protection (e.g. rapevictims, practices of ‘passing’)
- Silence and compliance (enforced silence, institutional silence)
- Representations of gender and silence in literature, art, theatre, (audiovisual) media...
- Silence and gender in music

Abstracts and papers can be sent in Dutch, English or French. We require participants to hold their oral presentation in English during the workshop.

Interested participants can send an abstract of max.300 words and a short biographical outline **by 1 July** to josephine.hoegaerts@arts.kuleuven.be