

Plate 6. *Epiphany*, by  
Marcus A. Vincent (1956–),  
oil on panel, 51" x 20",  
1989. Courtesy Museum of  
Church History and Art.

A woman, in a moment  
of silent enlightenment,  
begins to understand an  
eternal truth. Vincent  
paints the woman realisti-  
cally, juxtaposing her  
mortality against an  
abstract background  
symbolizing the  
world of the spirit.



# The Paradox of Silence in the Arts and Religion

*Through paradoxical silences, some artists convey their anguish over heaven's unresponsiveness in the face of evil. But in religion silence often conveys God's presence and sorrow.*

Jon D. Green

Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

—T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

## Introduction

T. S. Eliot's stanza captures an essential ingredient in the theme of this essay: the paradoxical relationship between the mute and the immutable, between silence and stasis. The jar is still (silent and unmoving), yet still moves (us) in its stillness (quietude). The word *still* suggests that both the mute and the motionless have continuous being, and silence is laden with messages that reach our emotions. The simple paradox of silence is that what is not said can be more expressive than what is said.

This paradox of silence has universal applications. In every culture and civilization, silence weaves its way through God's communication with his creations and throughout our attempt to communicate with the Divine and with each other, particularly through the arts. For the purposes of this paper, I am limiting my analysis to silence in three art forms—music, film, and painting—and to a discussion of silence in religion.



Plate 7. *Head VI*, by Francis Bacon (1909–1992), oil on canvas, 36 3/4" x 30 1/4", 1949. Courtesy Arts Council of Great Britain, The South Bank Centre, London.

The figure, isolated in a box, is a compelling combination of the body of a pope clothed in ceremonial robes with the shrieking face of a wounded nursemaid. The head of the figure explodes into a blurred vision of silent violence.

## Silence in the Arts

We experience the paradox of silence through both hearing and seeing. Aurally, silence is more than the absence of sound; it is a part of sound as well as a means of provoking an emotional response in the listener. Visually, we may perceive an object as silent and motionless. The suggestion of sound in the image creates tension, causing a reaction to a sound we do not hear. Indeed, the crux of the paradox within the arts lies in the palpable presence of a sensory experience virtually absent from the medium: silence in music; mute (visual) meaning embedded in the temporal-spatial complex of film; and motion suggested by static patterns in painting. A graphic way to illustrate silence in the arts is through the silent scream.

In Western arts, the silent scream emerges as a reaction to philosophical and religious anguish. Priest and scholar Raimundo Panikkar in *The Silence of God* defines the central dilemma of the modern age as the problem of God: "God seems ineffective, and deaf, or at least speechless, inasmuch as God permits all manner of holocaust, injustice, and suffering."<sup>1</sup> What Panikkar describes, however, are actually the consequences of the age-old problem of evil. If God is all-good and all-powerful, whence evil? One response to this problem, once Nietzsche announced the "death of God," was to shift the burden of such cosmic dilemmas from the divine to the human sphere. The cry for help as expressed by traditional religious invocation becomes in our century a scream of defiance in the face of existential despair. This core feeling of helpless (ineffable) anguish has given rise to depictions in recent art of silent screams.

These Western reactions stand in marked contrast to biblical evidence of God's intimate involvement in the affairs of his chosen people and to Eastern expressions of religious devotion. The impassively benign countenance on sculptures of Buddha attests to the superfluity of the very question of God, because "the answer can only be as contingent as the question."<sup>2</sup> The Buddha's answer is silence because the ultimate question is irrelevant. The human creature simply cannot leap over its own shadow by formulating contingent questions that will yield ultimate answers.

Thus, the cosmic silence as expressed by East and the West differs dramatically. The West suffers from fear of silence in part because the scientific mentality has tried to rationalize these ultimate questions and has ended up destroying the mystery and meaning of God. "Now," writes Panikkar, "they [the inhabitants of the West] find themselves wrapped in an absolute Silence beyond all possibility of redemption, rupture, or manifestation. Now it is the silence of absence, and this is all the more terrible and terrifying a silence."<sup>3</sup> Albert Camus perfectly expresses the mental condition of the primal scream when he writes, "The absurd arises from the confrontation between [the need for rational clarity] and the irrational silence of the world."<sup>4</sup>

Silence, which includes darkness, absence, and emptiness, is not solely the principle means of encoding the limitations of human consciousness, it is also the only direct method of rendering the numinous in art. Timothy Walsh argues that "conspicuous absence" in a work of art keeps it vital and prevents the work from becoming static. Absence in the work creates a fluid state where potential is "never completely fulfilled."<sup>5</sup> J. A. Ward comes to a similar conclusion about the function of silence in the works of certain American writers and painters who "suggest an eternal silence remote from commonplace experience," a silence that is clothed in a paradoxical form of expression: "The content of the expression must be the inexpressible."<sup>6</sup>

While most discussions of the "meaning" of silence occur within the context of written or spoken language,<sup>7</sup> there is also an expressive potential of silence within the domains of three non-literary arts:<sup>8</sup> music, film, and painting. In each of these three mediums, silence functions in a slightly different way.

Silence in music is an essential part of the medium along with organized sound, a fact self-evident, although not so obvious until it is pointed out, to anyone who can read music. There are notes, and there are rests.

Cinema was born in silence and remained a mute medium of pantomime with crude subtitles until the advent of the "talkies" in 1927. The sound track ended the great age of the silent stars by eliminating the need to convey meaning by gesture alone. Motion minus sound amplified both the tragic and comic significance of

the visual images in the era of silent movies by forcing the viewer to rivet full attention on vision as the sole source of meaning and emotion. In modern films, silence plays an even more significant role because it is unusual. We expect to hear a scream when one is portrayed on the screen. When there is none, the silence amplifies the implied presence of the scream.

Silence in the visual arts, however, is so obvious and self-evident that it is unnoticed (inaudible) by the viewer. By that very fact, an awareness of its cryptic presence expands the range of possible visual interpretations, particularly when the artist exploits its enigmatic impact for special expressive effects. This relatively recent possibility was already anticipated by the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé when he wrote, "Paint not the thing, but the effect it produces"<sup>9</sup> and was given indelible visual expression by Edvard Munch in his painting *The Scream* (1893).

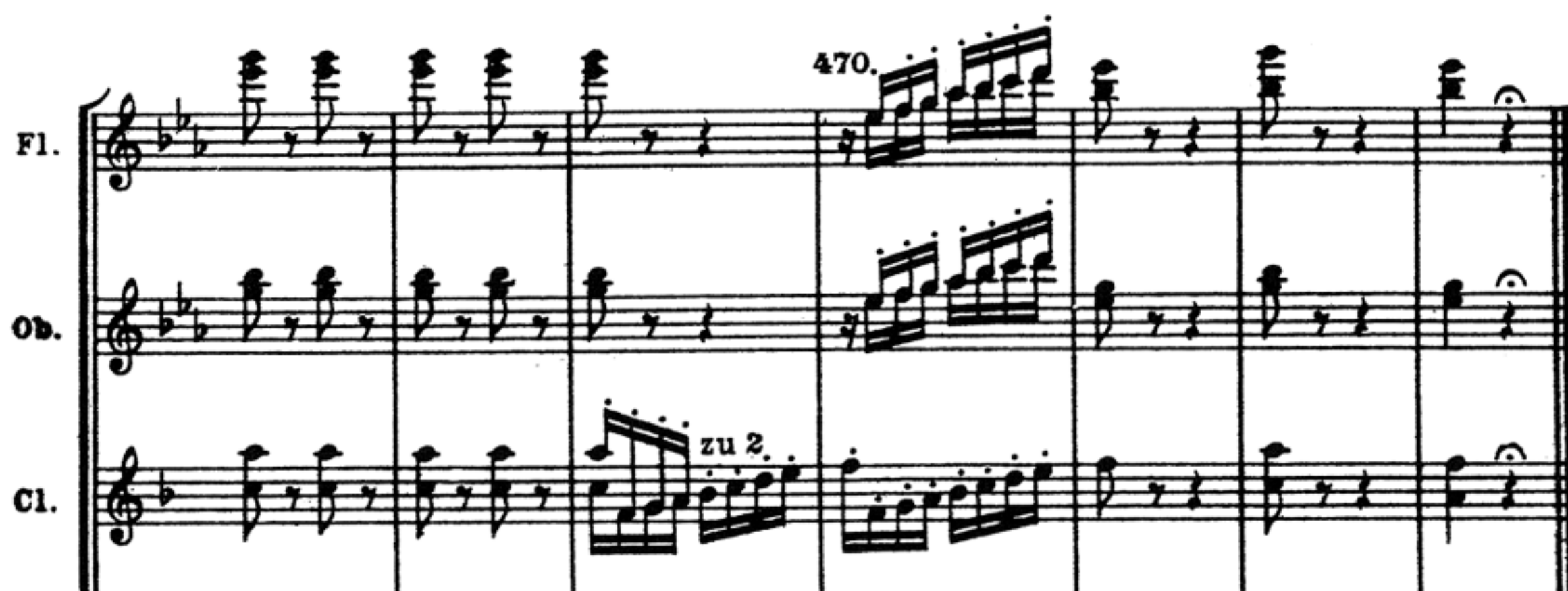
The West retreats from the word, not, as in the Orient, to ascend to the more profound silences of divine mystery, but to descend into the "unspeakable" confrontation with man's inhumanity to man. Pascal "is nearer the mainstream of classic Western feeling when he says that the silence of cosmic space strikes terror."<sup>10</sup> Van Gogh's *Starry Night* and Munch's *The Scream* come immediately to mind as silent, visual analogs to the relentless, reverberating angst suffusing the modern psyche. James Ingo Freed, Jewish architect of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., acknowledged that he wanted to create a place that could embrace the enormity of the nightmare. "I wanted to make a scream," he said about his Hall of Witness.<sup>11</sup> Silent screams provide the unifying motif for this discussion of silence in the arts.

## Silence in Music

What is the function of silence in music? All music exists in and derives meaning from a background of real or imagined silence, just as forms in the visual arts acquire their formal articulation against the background of negative space. Every musical performance is framed by silences: the pregnant silence poised on the threshold of the opening bars of a piece and the resonant silence

following the end of the piece, full of the reverberating echoes of the sounds and emotions generated during the performance—the aural equivalent of “afterimage” in dance criticism, namely, the vivid memory sensation that remains in the mind after the performance is over.<sup>12</sup> Beethoven, for example, places a fermata over a quarter-note rest at the end of the fourth movement of his Third (“Eroica”) Symphony to underscore the fact that the final silence was an integral part of the piece. In addition, stage theorist Max Picard identifies a third dimension of silence within the span of the fore-silence and after-silence of a musical piece, namely, an “intervening silence.”<sup>13</sup>

In a very literal sense, therefore, silence is an indispensable part of the fabric of music, as the musical symbols for silence (the rests) pepper the pages of any musical score by internally punctuating, sometimes dramatically, the meaning and impact of the music on the listener. An exhaustive and insightful treatment of the function of silence in music can be found in Zofia Lissa’s study, “Aesthetic Functions of Silence and Rests in Music.”<sup>14</sup> One of her major points is the paradoxical relationship of silence in a sound medium: the positive power of the negative example. “In its constructive form,” she says, “silence (which never appears in absolute form) is



Excerpt of the finale of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major (“Eroica”), Op. 55, 1803. Ludwig van Beethoven, *First, Second, and Third Symphonies* (New York: Dover, 1976).

The last rest, prolonged by a fermata, demonstrates the final silence the composer intended as an integral part of the piece. The conductor’s arms remain elevated for a moment before the applause may begin.

capable of provoking response not only in music but in any form of art involving the elements of temporal development.”<sup>15</sup> The dramatic tensions created by Beethoven’s pauses, for example, carried over into later romantic usage in works from Chopin, Brahms, Bruckner, and Mahler to Bartok and Prokofiev. Particularly significant, she claims, are the pauses and silences found in Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* and Bruckner’s Second Symphony, subtitled the “Pausen-Symphonie.” In other words, each musical period exploits the expressive effects of silence somewhat differently.

Probably the most memorable and widely known instance of “intervening silence” is found in the closing bars of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” from the *Messiah*. The crescendo repetitions of the word “Hallelujah” are suddenly left hanging in the air by a half-measure rest, followed by the final “Hal-le-lu-jah.” The impact of this block of silence results from the fact that Handel has suddenly forced the listener to become aware of the soundless space in the music, which we normally attend to only, as mentioned above, in the silent anticipation of the opening bars and in the breathless pause before the final applause.

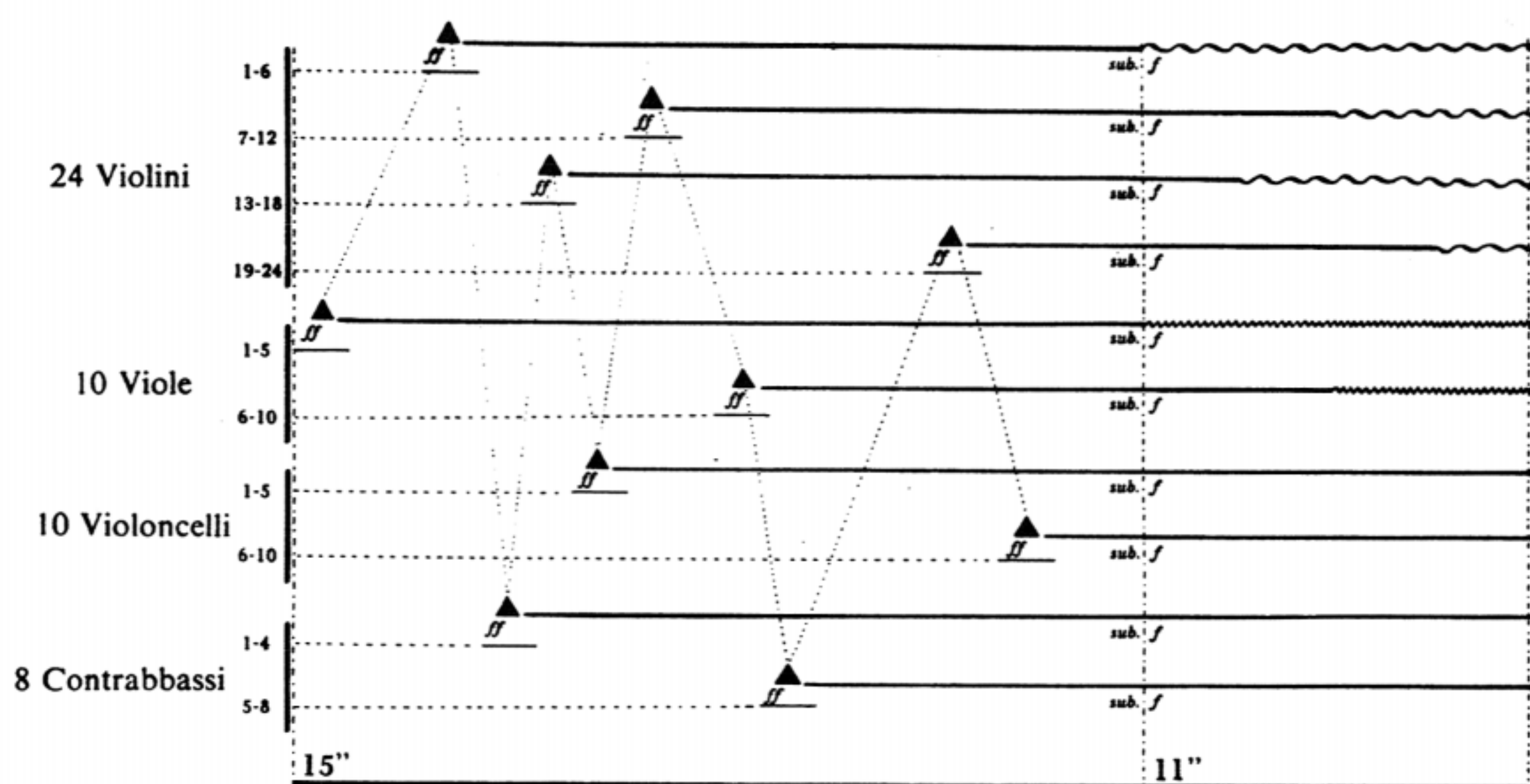
Of course, there is no true silence in the pauses at all, especially when the music is experienced in a live performance—a fact that John Cage’s “Silent Sonata” effectively demonstrates. The “performer” comes on stage, sits before a piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, and then leaves the stage. The audience quickly discovers that silence is filled with a myriad of sounds that normally, and probably rightfully, escape our conscious attention. These previously unperceived sounds are enhanced when the silence is allowed to continue unabated for four or five minutes and when the audience is carefully attentive, keenly anticipating hearing something ostensibly worth listening to. It would be difficult to imagine an equally evocative sequel to such a piece of planned silence. And yet, for all his chicanery, Cage has taught us something important about the meaning of silence in music. By reversing the relative role sound and silence play in a musical performance, Cage is inviting all sound to take on a significance worthy of our undivided attention, even the trivial sounds that permeate our environment, that provide the buzzing backdrop to our daily lives. In his essay on silence, he notes, “There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time.”<sup>16</sup>

Such a stunt was anticipated fifty years earlier by none other than Claude Debussy. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, “I have made use (quite spontaneously, moreover) of a means that seems to me rather rare, namely of silence (don’t laugh) as an agent of expression and perhaps the only way of making effective the emotion of a phrase.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately for Cage’s idiosyncratic musical aesthetics, it is nearly impossible not to laugh (let alone scream in silence) at the prospect of listening to an audience listening to itself: feet shuffling, chairs squeaking, stomachs growling, etc. But there is at least one composer of our century who captures the raw power of these extraneous, unmusical silences in our lives with the gripping force of a cosmic scream: Krzysztof Penderecki (1933–).

Two potent influences created the compelling immediacy and universal relevance of Penderecki’s musical style: religion and social injustice. Of his hometown of Debica, Poland, Penderecki said that “the [Catholic] church was absolutely the center of life. People would kiss the shoulder of the priest as he walked by.”<sup>18</sup> The Nazi destruction of the Jewish ghetto in Debica during the Second World War cruelly awakened his social conscience at a very impressionable age. “This traumatic experience was subsequently to become crystallized in a corpus of works beginning with the *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* (1959–61)”<sup>19</sup> and including his *Dies Irae* (Auschwitz Oratorio, 1967).

The *Threnody* evokes haunting tonal images of the horror of utter destruction. Penderecki’s unconventional musical syntax creates this aura of atomic annihilation by a kind of “controlled aleatoricism”<sup>20</sup> made up of long sustained dissonances in the fifty-two strings (playing a “chord” of fifty-two different pitches simultaneously), punctuated by monotonous rhythmic figures and interspersed with large blocks of near breathless silences. Gradually one becomes aware of sirens and finally the suggestion of the lonely drone of bombers receding into the distance. The most unsettling sound of all is the sudden barrage of piercing dissonance that begins the work—a macabre collage of human screams drowned in the menacing electronic vibrations of atomic destruction.<sup>21</sup> As one critic describes this first section, “We seem to hear a gigantic structure ripped apart by tiny bits, as though a slow-motion



Beginning of Penderick's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, 1961. Krzysztof Penderecki, *Threnody To the Victims of Hiroshima* (Melville, N.Y.: Belwin Mills, 1961).

The notation instructs the fifty-two strings to play fifty-two different pitches. The broad wavy lines in the violin part indicate a very slow vibrato with a quarter-tone frequency variation; the narrow wavy lines in the viola part indicate molto vibrato.

earthquake were in progress.”<sup>22</sup> This experience is followed by an abrupt silence, which only gradually gives way to the distant wail of a siren.

The seemingly haphazard placement of silences throughout the piece makes the listener more vulnerable to the next wave of wrenching dissonances. The dense fifty-two-pitch “chord” recurs again in section IV, beginning as a roar but gradually subsiding to a “pitiful knotted murmur at the end.”<sup>23</sup> The expressive gravity of silence in this piece gains in significance when we discover that Penderecki was composing his *Dimensions of Time and Silence* (1962) for mixed chorus, string instruments, and percussion at virtually the same time as the *Threnody*.

*Dimensions of Time and Silence* exploits the extremes of vocal and instrumental ranges (from the highest to the lowest possible notes), producing sounds of indefinite pitch as well as quarter-tone dissonances and dynamic extremes from sudden fortissimo sforzandos to virtually inaudible triple pianissimos. In such works,

silence is like a gigantic black hole expressing the extremes of non-sound out of which all sound, from natural to musical, emerges, and into which all sound eventually disappears. Another example is the work *Stabat Mater*. About it reviewer Tom Carlson notes, “Employing a condensed version of the Latin text, succeeding syllables of words are passed from one chorus to another, one or more vocal lines are used as pedals simultaneously, and even silence assumes an importance nearly equal to the production of sound itself.”<sup>24</sup>

But perhaps no contemporary composer (even John Cage) has so brilliantly drawn upon the continuum of vocal and instrumental sound possibilities as has Penderecki, who moves from silence to noise to tonal sound and from pure monophony to jarring dissonant tone clusters and gliding glissandi. The sudden gaps of silence that punctuate Penderecki’s music act as aural anchor points from which his strange timbres are heard and against which the dramatic contrasts are measured.

Penderecki’s *Ecloga VIII*, written especially for the King’s Singers, is a musical setting of the second part of Virgil’s Eighth Eclogue, in which a woman is described as resorting to witchcraft in order to bring her man back from “town.” Here Penderecki plays with the tonal possibilities of the text so that often whole lines, words, even syllables seem to have disappeared into thin air; “this, together with all the current *avant-garde* armoury of word-setting (deep-breathing, humming, sliding, singing-through-the-teeth, whispering, ‘falsetto-ing,’ speaking, laughing, hissing, shouting, gibbering—Oh! and yes, singing), makes it a truly hair-raising experience.”<sup>25</sup> The grunts and hisses dribble off into silence in the middle of the piece.

The paradoxical suggestion of silence emerging from natural sounds is probably nowhere more effectively displayed than in Penderecki’s *St. Luke Passion*, where the expressive capacity of the human voice is stretched to the breaking point in voiceless hissings and whisperings. One movement ends with the whole chorus simply breathing in unison, more and more slowly, until only silence remains. Whispering—or breathing, in this instance—approximates a kind of relative silence standing for the unsounded, aspirated human voice. The presence of whispering suggests the absence

of audible speech. When movement stops, there is silence; when breathing stops, there is death—the inverse of God’s life-giving act of filling Adam’s nostrils with “the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7). Penderecki’s music evokes primordial images of life and death as it echoes from a silent vacuum signifying utter annihilation.

This piece of music is eerily reminiscent of Thomas Mann’s description in *Doctor Faustus* of the closing passage of Adrian Leverkühn’s “Ode to Sorrow”—a nightmarish inversion of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” from the Ninth Symphony. Mann’s description of the ending of Leverkühn’s piece is also virtually the ending of the novel:

For listen to the end, listen with me: one group of instruments after another returns, and what remains, as the work fades on the air, is the high G of a cello, the last word, the last fainting sound, slowly dying in a pianissimo-fermata. Then nothing more: silence, and night. But that tone which vibrates in the silence, which is no longer there, to which only the spirit hearkens, and which was the voice of mourning, is so no more. It changes its meaning; it abides as a light in the night.<sup>26</sup>

Mann plays with the paradox of double negatives: the vibrating silence, no longer there, *is* there as a “light in the night.” Darkness gives birth to light, silence to a new sound.

Given the whole new range of nonmusical sound components, it is understandable that Penderecki’s new musical language created the need for a new musical notation. Perusing the pages of one of his scores reveals the visual approximations of the vacuous silences in his music—pages of bar lines without notes, large blank spaces between bar lines, thin wedge-shaped crescendos growing to wide, black strips that entirely obliterate the bar lines. By exploiting the expressive dimensions of silence, Penderecki redefines the role of music’s negative dimension (silence). His scribbled manuscripts represent a silent, macabre fever chart of modern existential angst.

## Silence in Film

Those of us entranced by the inimitable performances of the great silent comedians like Chaplin and Keaton can justly lament the passing of the art of silent cinema. Some film scholars, most

notably Rudolf Arnheim, believe that the new art form was dealt a fatal blow by the introduction of sound to film in 1927. “From its very silence,” Arnheim writes in *Film as Art*, “film received the impetus as well as the power to achieve excellent artistic effects.”<sup>27</sup>

His provocative thesis argues that the peculiar virtue of film as art lies in the creative exploitation of its medium limitations: the absence of sound, color, and three-dimensional perspective. The great silent film makers were on their way to creating a distinctive new art form when mechanical advances in sound halted them in their tracks. Arnheim’s radical thesis—his contention that the absence of sound forced the artist to more expressively convey his meaning by indirection and paraphrase—makes a lot of sense because it conforms to an aesthetic principle underlying most great classic art: less is more.

This principle has something to do with the relative importance of artist and audience in the trade-off between what the artist leaves unsaid and what the audience can catch that finally generates “aesthetic closure”—a tricky relationship that, when fully operative, creates the key catalyst in the collaboration necessary to make an art work succeed.

Walter Kerr, in discussing the expressive opportunities offered to both film makers and audiences by the silent camera, observes that not only do deletions, pushed to an “evocative minimum,” take the artist closer to the core of what he is doing, but they open the door to the viewer’s imagination:

Audiences are rarely aware of how active they become in the presence of work that is created by nuance, by incomplete statement. With their own imaginations forcibly alerted, they move forward to meet the imagination of the man who has composed what they are watching. There is a journey and a greeting, an exchange of experience, a handshake on truth. The two make the image together.<sup>28</sup>

A similar collaboration emerged from the ancient Greek dramatic convention of the “messenger” who rushed onto the stage and reported some gruesome event that had just happened off stage (like the blinding of King Oedipus). The human imagination paints a more indelible picture of events than could ever be achieved by the pyrotechnics of contemporary film wizardry.

Christopher Marlowe understood this principle of audience imagination and artistic economy when he chose to describe Helen's beauty simply by its effects rather than in a conventional verbal description: hers was "the face that launched a thousand ships."<sup>29</sup> There is a memorable scene from Josef von Sternberg's silent film *The Docks of New York* (1928) in which a gunshot is "illustrated" by its effect—a rising flock of birds. Arnheim concludes that "a positive artistic effect results from [this visual] paraphrase. . . . And this [understated] indirectness is shockingly impressive [because] the suddenness, the abruptness of the rising birds, gives *visually* the exact quality that the shot possesses *acoustically*."<sup>30</sup> Sternberg's scene beautifully illustrates Mallarmé's previously quoted dictum—"Paint not the thing, but the effect it produces"—and raises an important point regarding the relationship between two mediums and their attendant senses: when one medium approximates the effects rightfully belonging to another, the absence of the second medium (sound) greatly magnifies the impact of the former (sight). The unique expressive power of silent films seems to bear this out.<sup>31</sup>

Sergei Eisenstein filmed the most graphic and memorable silent screams in the history of cinema: the screams of the two female victims in his classic *Battleship Potemkin* (1925): the scream of the defiant mother who watches helplessly as her son is shot down by the advancing soldiers in the Odessa Steps sequence; and the nursemaid with pince-nez who screams in pain as she is shot in the right eye. The mother's anguish is caught by a travel shot as the camera approaches her, "clutching her head in desperation, and it almost enters the black hole of her open mouth. The entire effect is . . . based on the fact that we do not hear her scream."<sup>32</sup> The pain and horror is greatly magnified by the impossibility of hearing the sound effects.

But what of the impact of silence in films where sound is possible? The presence of sound in cinema has, in some dramatic instances, led to overkill, where the sound and the image compete in overwhelming the viewer. Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) is a case in point. Sounds (whether musical or natural) are ubiquitously present throughout this "anatomy of violence." Noise reverberates at very high decibel levels; dialogue is

shouted rather than spoken. Kubrick virtually attacks the audience aurally with a noise “as violent in its intensity as the dramatic events of the movie.”<sup>33</sup>

In contrast, however, as we have already discovered with music, protracted silence in a sound context can carry, by contrast, even greater expressive potential than the silence of the silent cinema. For example, in *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), Dorothy McGuire plays a young girl who has lost her voice. She attempts to recover it in front of a mirror, but all she can generate is a fog of breath that completely covers the reflection of her mouth, a frightening image underscoring her helplessness—her inability to speak on the telephone or scream for help when pursued by the killer.

In the *Pawnbroker* (1965), Rod Steiger walks out of his shop and leans over the body of his slain assistant. In a 1991 interview, Steiger admitted:

“I open my mouth and put my head back to scream. Now, this all happens in a millionth of a second. My intellect said to my instinct, ‘Don’t make a sound.’ I have won money, I have people who say, ‘You screamed in that scene,’ and I’d say, ‘I bet you \$10 I didn’t scream in that scene.’ It’s a very powerful moment.”<sup>34</sup>

What makes it powerful is the violation of the expected, which amplifies the effect by negation. The audience instinctively fills in the rest with even greater effect.

The films of Alfred Hitchcock perhaps best illustrate the uncanny force of silence in a film context where we expect to hear piercing sound. Hitchcock’s often-stated goal, according to Elizabeth Weis in her book on Hitchcock’s aural style, appropriately entitled *The Silent Scream*, “was to hold the audiences’ fullest attention.”<sup>35</sup> One overlooked technique he employs repeatedly to achieve this goal is manipulating tensions between the visuals and the sound track. Over the years, he uses several ongoing aural motifs: “silence, screams, and language as manifestations of human feelings.”<sup>36</sup> Weis contends that screaming is the one “thematic constant” in the evolution of Hitchcock’s aural film style. The very first image in the film Hitchcock himself considered his first personal picture, *The Lodger* (1926), is a close-up of a girl screaming. This “maiden shot” of his career is a perfect paradigm, according to

Weis, of Arnheim's point that "visualized sound in a silent film can be more effective than real sound in a talking film."<sup>37</sup>

A more visceral (and musical) instance of Hitchcock's screaming motif occurs in *Psycho* (1960), in which Janet Leigh's bathtub scream is taken over by Bernard Hermann's film score, wherein the shrieking glissando arpeggios in the highest register of the violins express pure terror—her terrified scream gives way to the inhuman wail of horsehair vibrating catgut.

But perhaps the most gripping of all Hitchcock's filmic effects is the one achieved by combining silence *and* screams, which, brought together, convey a state of emotional paralysis precipitated by unspeakable horror:

The adjective *unspeakable* is made literal in *The Birds* when the hero's mother [played by Jessica Tandy] discovers a dead neighbor whose eyes have been gouged out by the invading birds. As she runs out of the house and opens her mouth to speak, no sound comes out. Then she drives home and confronts her son with her mouth agape, but she is still unable to speak of what she has seen.<sup>38</sup>

Silent screams stand for the outer limits of inexpressible horror. In the context of sound cinema, the shock of silence is even greater, because we expect not only sound, but rhapsodic background music as well. The absence of both in the enlarged visual presence of a screaming mouth paradoxically raises the level of intensity to an unbearable emotional pitch.

With the silent image of a screaming girl in his 1926 silent film, *The Lodger*, Hitchcock introduced at the start of his career the double nature of his films—"his interests will be both sensational . . . and metaphysical"<sup>39</sup>—and linked his style to the great expressionist tradition in art, for which Munch's *The Scream* (1893) has become a virtual icon as the most recognized primal scream in the history of painting. Hermann Bahr, the famous turn-of-the-century Viennese critic and playwright, "singled out the shriek as the chief characteristic of Expressionism."<sup>40</sup>

## Silence in Painting

As mentioned earlier, the suggestion of sound in a silent medium like painting creates an uncanny tension between the viewer's

expectations and the medium's limitations. One of the most controversial silent screams of antiquity is found on the face of Laocoön, the Hellenistic statue of the Trojan priest being crushed to death by a sea serpent for distrusting the Greek's gift, the Trojan Horse. In *Laocoön* (1766), his famous essay on the limitations of painting and poetry, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing argues that the priest's scream is visually subdued, not because of any Greek notion that screaming was inconsistent with a noble soul, but because the Greeks believed it was inappropriate to depict overt expressions of pain or ugliness in the graphic permanence of a static visual medium like painting or sculpture.<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately for Lessing's thesis, modern artists clearly do not share his concerns about medium limitations. On the contrary, they seem to revel in pushing their psychic expressions beyond the natural limits of a medium's boundaries into the nether realm of the surreal. In an effort to overcome the natural limitations of one medium, the artist pushes into that twilight zone where the natural borders of two mediums merge and sometimes overlap or even reverse roles. The unexpected effect can magnify the impact of the work.

The magnified impact of the visual by the absence of the aural takes on a curious tone in Goya's later works, due to an ear affliction that caused a continual buzzing sensation which eventually cost him his hearing and, finally, his sanity. Sir Kenneth Clark attributes the explosive visual power of *Execution of the Third of May, 1808* (1814-15) to Goya's lost hearing:

Gesture and facial expression, when they are seen without the accompanying sound, become unnaturally vivid; that is an experience we can have any day by turning down the sound of television. Goya had it for the rest of his life. The crowds in the Puerto del Sol were silent to him; he could not have heard the firing squads on the third of May. Every experience reached him through the eye alone.<sup>42</sup>

Incipient insanity accounts as much as any other explanation for the haunting visual dissonance created by Munch's *The Scream* and qualifies his late works as pure, visual analogs of existential angst. Reinhold Heller devotes a whole book to this one painting. In it he observes that "through his paintings, Munch at one and the same time attempted to retreat protectively into the reality of his

own existence and totally to reveal the precarious existential state of his personality.”<sup>43</sup> Sources of Munch’s unstable psyche were rooted in his childhood:

“Disease and insanity were the black angels on guard at my cradle,” [he] wrote. . . . At the age of five he watched his mother, ill with tuberculosis, die of a hemorrhage. Thereafter he was raised by a strict and threatening father: “When he punished us,” Munch recalled, “he could become almost insane in his violence.”<sup>44</sup>

While in Nice on January 22, 1892, Munch recorded a pivotal, personal event that had taken place earlier in Norway:

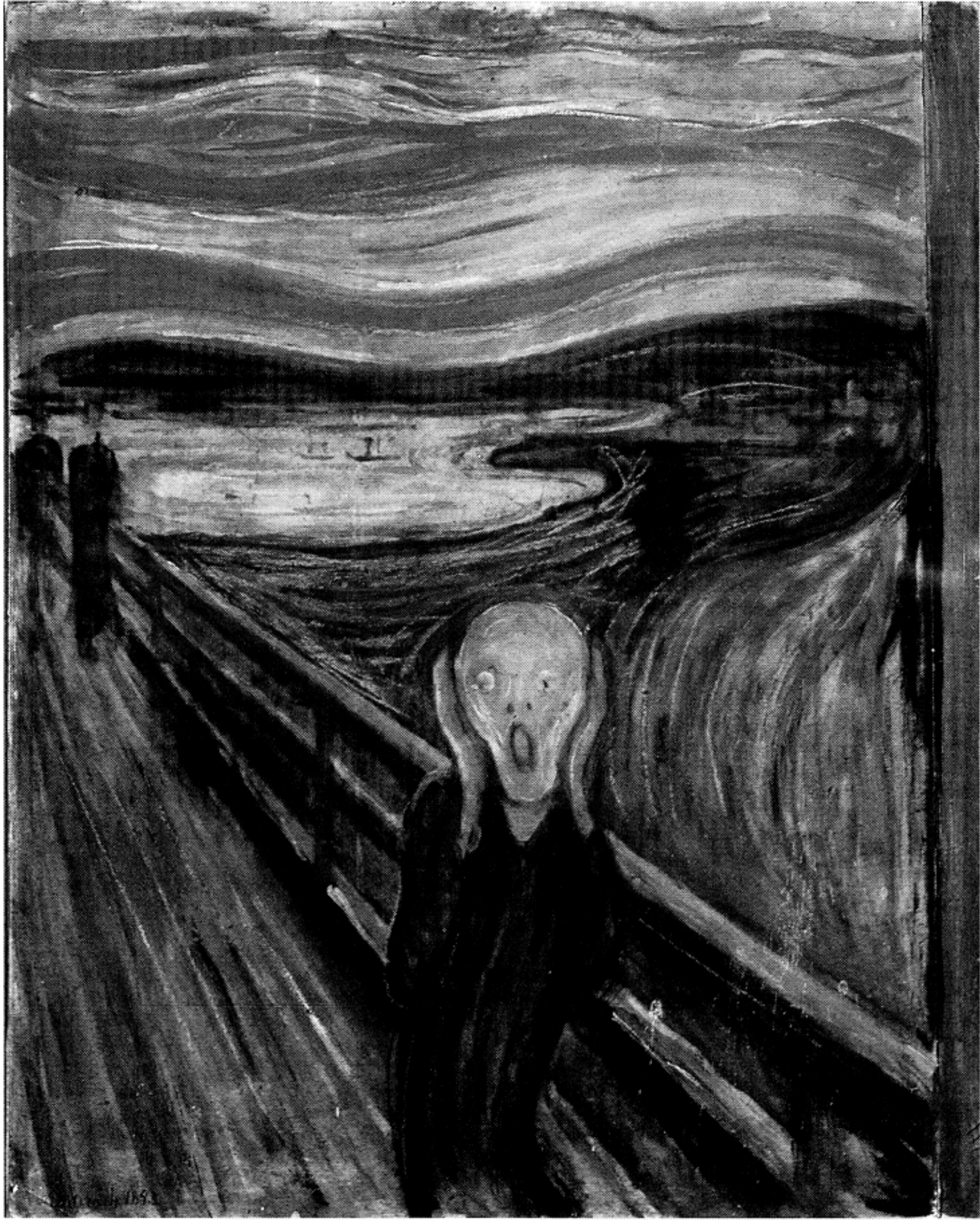
I was walking along the road with two friends. The sun set. I felt a tinge of melancholy. Suddenly the sky became a bloody red.

I stopped, leaned against the railing, dead tired, and I looked at the flaming clouds that hung like blood and a sword over the blue-black fjord and the city.

My friends walked on. I stood there, trembling with fright. And I felt a loud, unending scream piercing nature.<sup>45</sup>

His first visual expressions of this unsettling experience were some pencil and charcoal sketches and a painting, variously titled *Mood at Sunset*, *Deranged Mood at Sunset*, and *Despair* (1892). The problem of painting his psychic reaction to nature’s ominously silent scream was not totally resolved for Munch in this first painting of *Despair*. His decision to have the figure turn away from the landscape and face the viewer in *The Scream* (1893) resulted in a drastic change in the nature of the scene depicted, because now his memory of the disembodied scream in nature is given a frighteningly frontal expression.

Munch exaggerates the aural dimension of his inner fear by depicting a ghostly, skull-like face, with mouth agape (reminiscent of the screaming figures in Eisenstein and Hitchcock), with ears covered by thin, snake-like hands, shielding him from the piercing sound, which penetrates his soul like a sword, yet eerily emphasizing the “silent sound” of the scream. Adding to the macabre quality of the scream is the strangely distorted anamorphic “ear” shape that extends above and to the right of the screaming head, creating a centripetal suction effect, as if the figure is being drawn into a whirlpool of blackness.



*The Scream*, by Edvard Munch (1863–1944), tempera and pastel on plate, 36" x 29", 1893. National Gallery, Oslo. Courtesy Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.

*The Scream* is Munch's deeply personal expression of the soul-searing anxiety that suddenly overcame him while he was watching a blood-red sunset: "I felt a loud, unending scream piercing nature."

Munch employs some ingenious visual devices to bring off his “silent scream.” The most obvious one is the linear patterns, creating parallel concentric circles around the screaming figure of Munch at the lower right, suggesting the sonic reverberations of the scream itself. But, contrary to what concentric circles normally do (radiate out from the point of impact like a pebble in a pool), these turn in on the screaming head in a threatening, serpentine manner, checking the expressive release of fear that the scream symbolizes.

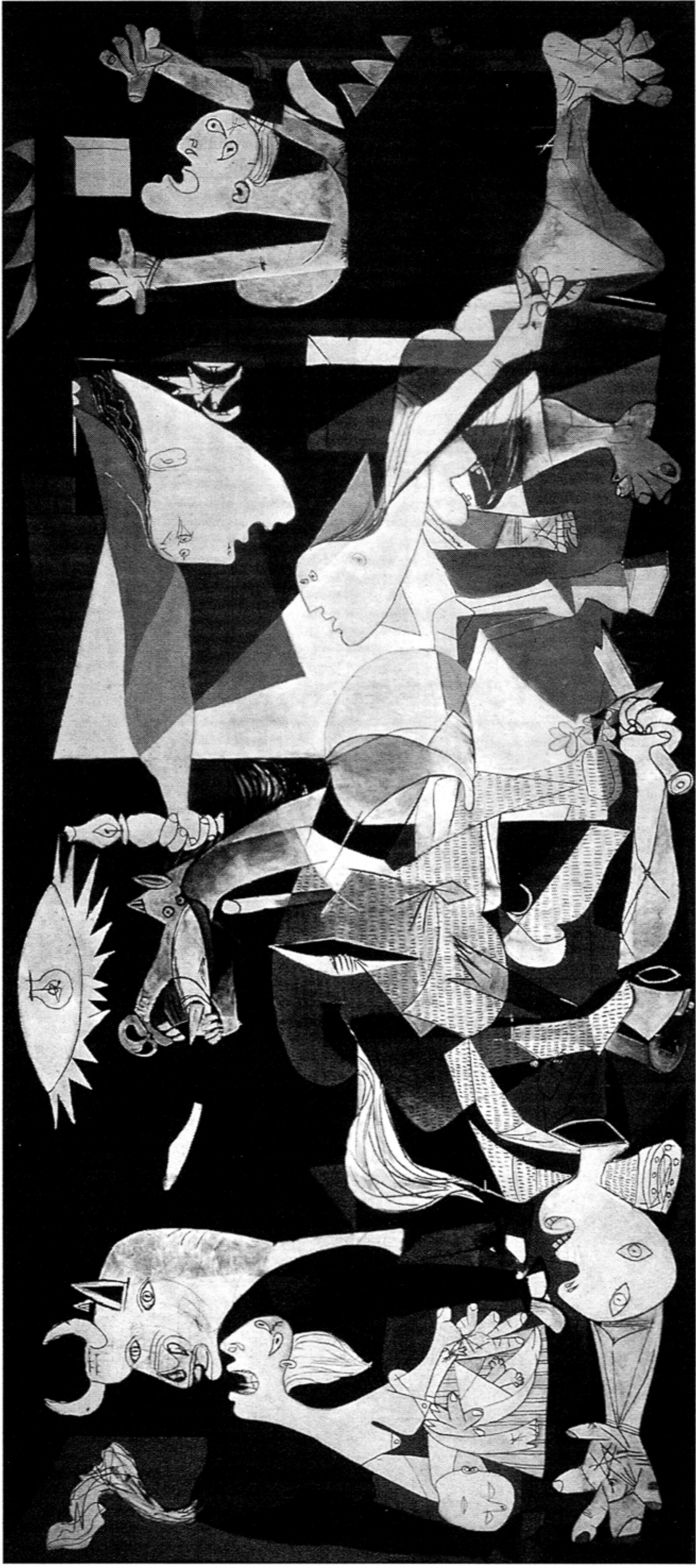
Such linear patterns are characteristic of many of Munch’s other works. Sinewy lines often represent women’s hair seductively entwining men’s necks and smothering their forms, evoking the fear of being engulfed in a hostile, female-dominated world. In view of these precedents, the total absence of hair in the figure in *The Scream* connotes a kind of personal emasculation, a harbinger of death (love and death were closely linked in Munch’s mind and subject matter).

Sunsets normally inspire serene meditation on the beauty of nature and the beneficence of God. But for Munch, the vivid redness of this sunset conjured up visions of blood and violence. His friend, Christian Skredsvig, with whom he was spending his time in Nice when he described nature’s scream, recorded his memories of that time in his own journal:

For some time Munch had been wanting to paint the memory of a sunset. Red as blood. No, it actually *was* coagulated blood. . . . He talked himself sick about that sunset and about how it had filled him with great anxiety. He was in despair because the miserable means available to painting never went far enough. “He is trying to do what is impossible, and his religion is despair,” I thought to myself but still advised him to try to paint it—and that was how he came to paint his remarkable *Scream*.<sup>46</sup>

In a later version of his 1892 account of nature’s scream, Munch adds the following statement: “I painted that picture, painted the clouds as if they actually were blood. *The colors screamed*.”<sup>47</sup>

According to Heller, on one of the red stripes of his *Scream*, Munch penciled the words: “Only someone insane could paint this!” Heller notes the distinction between two types of screams: the Trojan priest in the Laocoön screams because the pain is inflicted by an outside source; Munch screams because the pain is internal and spiritual.<sup>48</sup>



*Guernica*, by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), oil on canvas, 11'6" x 25'8", 1937. Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, on permanent loan from the Museo del Prado. Courtesy Art Resource, N.Y. The open mouths of Picasso's tortured figures silently scream their protest against the horrors of war.

Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Francis Bacon's series of "screaming" variations of Velasquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1949–1953) perpetuate the twentieth-century fixation on screaming heads as emblems of our collective psychic disorientation in the face of modern genocide and existential angst.<sup>49</sup> *Guernica* was not only the last great history painting, it was the last modern painting of major importance intended to influence how people thought and felt about the abuse of power, the last in a long line of images of battle and suffering that runs from Uccello's *Rout of San Romano* through Rubens to Goya's *Third of May*.<sup>50</sup>

Ironically, *Guernica*'s rectangular horizontality is organized as a medieval triptych, with a screaming horse occupying the central panel as victimized Christ-figure, and the narrow side panels framing two female figures representing two extremes of human suffering: physical agony (death by fire) on the right; and bereavement (suffering for a loved one) on the left, the former suffering in mute (closed-mouth) agony, the other hurling a Cassandra-like scream into the face of an impassive bull, the personification of despotic brutality.<sup>51</sup> Here again, the screaming mouths are mute reminders of the unspeakable horrors perpetrated on innocent civilians by the technology of modern warfare.

The spiked tongue of the "Pieta" figure on the left and the sharp point of the missile protruding from the horse's mouth in the center accentuate the penetrating sharpness of the silent sound, linking it to the high-pitched whine of Stuka dive bombers—reminiscent of Munch's metaphorical association of the piercing scream with a piercing sword. The mouth of the burning figure on the right is ambiguously mute because Picasso's cubistic rendering in profile creates a vacuous space between nose and chin that first appears as a gaping mouth. However, closer scrutiny reveals a tight-lipped mouth clenched shut.

Two other figures have open mouths: the lamp-bearing classical female rushes in, transfixed in open-mouthed shock at the scene of carnage, while the fallen, fractured portrait bust of a warrior with broken sword lies petrified in death. All of the figures in *Guernica* direct their screams upward toward the impassive bull's face or toward heaven, suggesting the ultimate futility of resistance and outrage. The horror of these imagined sounds, prompted

by the powerful visual cues of Picasso's screaming figures, magnifies the sobering impact of *Guernica*'s central message: man's inhumanity to man.

Francis Bacon, the contemporary English painter of grotesquely flayed human images, seems, at least on the surface, to perpetuate and intensify the visual portrait of twentieth-century physical violence prompted by psychological alienation. But Bacon resists this kind of simplistic pigeonholing, notwithstanding the fact that he was conditioned by the horrors of World War II and the vivid memories of his troubled childhood in revolution-torn Ireland. Bacon makes a distinction between this "mirrored" violence (as in *Guernica*), which he strongly opposed and called "illustrational," and the mode by which he feels that violence enters his paintings:

But this violence of my life, the violence which I've lived amongst, I think it's different to the violence in painting. When talking about the violence of paint, it's nothing to do with the violence of war. It's to do with an attempt to remake the violence of reality itself. And the violence of reality is not only the simple violence meant when you say that a rose or something is violent, but it's the violence also of the suggestions within the image itself which can only be conveyed through paint.<sup>52</sup>

The result of Bacon's attempts to generate violent "suggestions within the image itself" is a series of nightmarish images more visceral even than Picasso's:

As for Picasso, his screaming mouths and dart-shaped tongues looked by comparison as general as Giotto's mourning angels. Bacon's mouths were bewilderingly unrhetorical and despite their pseudo-old-masterishness, they could not be returned to art. Nothing could be attributed to them which would transcend their particular presence.<sup>53</sup>

The mouth has been a prominent feature in Bacon's figures from the beginning. As critic Dawn Ades observes, "Speech may be the sign of human intelligence, eyes the window to the soul, but the cry, *visibly speechless*, is an instinctive spasm of the body."<sup>54</sup>

There are other specifically artistic sources for Bacon's preoccupation with the gaping mouth motif: the screaming figures in Picasso's *Guernica* (Bacon admitted that his exposure to Picasso's works in the Rosenberg Gallery provided the initial impetus for

his becoming a painter<sup>55</sup>); the wounded, screaming nursemaid depicted in the Odessa Steps sequence of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*; the desperate mother in Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents* (which he considered "probably the best human cry in painting"<sup>56</sup>); and perhaps even Caravaggio's *Medusa*. Bacon recognized the early impact Eisenstein's film had on him: "It was a film I saw almost before I started to paint, and it deeply impressed me. . . . I did hope one day to make the best painting of the human cry. I was not able to do it and it's much better in the Eisenstein."<sup>57</sup>

The other visual sources for Bacon's screaming mouths can be traced to newspaper and magazine photographs of topical events that cluttered his Kensington studio, a graphic "image bank" of the shameful events and unsavory figures associated with the atrocities of war. Prominent among these is a photograph of Joseph Goebbels delivering a speech with finger wagging and mouth agape.<sup>58</sup> The varied sources of his screaming figures—diseased mouths, snarling animals, terrorized humans, mad tyrants—bespeak a paradoxical mix of contradictory impulses that gruesomely illustrate the de-humanizing tendencies he saw in modern society.

The one artistic image Bacon returns to again and again, however, is Velasquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650). He admits to being obsessed with photographs of this painting, because, he says, "I think it is one of the greatest portraits that have ever been made."<sup>59</sup> Through an uncanny visual linkage, Bacon has combined these two seemingly unconnected but obsessive images—Eisenstein's screaming nursemaid and Velasquez's pope—into his well-known motif of the "screaming Pope," a series of macabre variations on Velasquez's portrait. In spite of the fact that he seems to dismiss them as "very silly,"<sup>60</sup> they possess a frightening visceral power that exceeds any of the previous silent screams we have encountered in the arts.

One reason for their intense expressive power becomes clear when comparing Bacon's *Head III* (1949) with *Head VI* (1949; see color plate 7), his first "variation" on Velasquez's portrait, and then placing these against the picture of Eisenstein's nursemaid and Velasquez's papal portrait. The dark beady eyes of *Head III* look at us through a pince-nez, recalling Eisenstein's nursemaid, yet the

mouth is gripped tightly shut as in Velasquez's pope. *Head VI* is eyeless, revealing only a gaping mouth above clerical vestments, combining the screaming nursemaid's mouth with the pope's attire. The two heads capture two stages of a crisis—the intense build-up of pressure and the subsequent explosion. The Velasquez portrait and the Eisenstein photograph reveal an analogous process of psychological tension and release.

To recall an earlier point: Bacon was firmly opposed to illustrative violence in art. For him, the violence comes out of "suggestions within the image itself." In the first place, a figure is usually located within a vacuous, planar surface. In other words, there is no illusion of real space for the figure to exist in: "the body is isolated in its own localized space."<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, the figure is caught in a distorted netherworld between abstraction and full figuration. In this, according to Ades, Bacon destroys appearance in order "to convey a presence beyond likeness."<sup>62</sup> How does he do so? First, he uses "non-rational marks" that have no representational relationship with the areas of the face they are intended to depict. He describes these involuntary marks as a graph within which there are enormous possibilities for "planting facts" like the mouth or eyes. Second, he suggests veils or screens through which we look at the portrait "as through a glass darkly." For Bacon, this method has a philosophical dimension: "We nearly always live through screens—a screened existence. And I sometimes think, when people say my works look violent, that I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens."<sup>63</sup>

Andrew Forge calls attention to the function these regular striations serve in Bacon's portraits: "They introduce a formal register against which the threat of formlessness is steadied. They bring the skin sometimes to the very surface of the canvas. At others they set up a cage or screen behind which lips or the sliding plane of a cheek can be made out."<sup>64</sup>

A similar part is played by the mysterious circles and ellipses that often hover in front of Bacon's heads. Their prototype is the shattered pince-nez of Eisenstein's nursemaid: "They have gathered other affinities, with mouths, nostrils, cameras, watchglasses, muzzles and the sectioned tubes of the viscera."<sup>65</sup>

Curiously, what seems most obvious in interpreting Bacon's rectilinear and curvilinear overlays—that the parallel lines visually trace the sound vibrations of the pope's scream—is left unsaid throughout critical observations about Bacon's *Screaming Pope* series. Further, Bacon's conversations with David Sylvester reveal the notion that

the friction between opposites is essential to him [Bacon] and that unless an issue can be felt to be grinding between these either/ors it has no vitality for him. Everything must be loved or loathed. . . . [In fact], "friction" is too weak—it is the incompatibility of opposites that counts.<sup>66</sup>

One of these incompatibilities grows out of the strange juxtaposition of a screaming nursemaid and a poker-faced pope.<sup>67</sup> Ades explains the macabre matching by suggesting that "perhaps [Bacon's] idea was to test one of the greatest portraits ever painted, of a man set highest above his fellow men (the archetypal father, verging on the divine) in the grip of a feeling so intense that the only expression of it brought him close to the beasts."<sup>68</sup> However, one of the strongest unresolved tensions at work in Bacon's "mouth" portraits seems to be the collision of mediums which Bacon exploits so subtly and paradoxically—these suggested sounds of silent screams, which, uncannily magnified by visual vibrations, dramatically increase the potency of Bacon's visual-aural medium mixtures.

### Silence in Religion

Traditionally, at least in the Western world, silence has been saddled with mainly negative connotations: the absence of sound in the presence of death and futility. However, these connotations neglect the meaningful affirmative dimensions of silence. The role of silence has long been accorded central importance within such disciplines as philosophy and religion.<sup>69</sup> In Eastern thought, silence serves the efficient ends of discourse, action, and desire. In Taoism, for example, "authentic speech is one with authentic silence, and, in their oneness, they are the most efficacious of human achievements."<sup>70</sup> In Buddhism, silence is "the ground of the Buddha's entire message, from the silence of meditation to the silence

of *nirvana*.”<sup>71</sup> But in the West, silence betrays an ambiguous relationship with discourse: silence and speech are viewed as both determinate and nondeterminate; both sometimes reveal and sometimes conceal. One solution to the dichotomy rests in faith, in the divine discourse of silent prayer.<sup>72</sup>

In scripture, silence connotes at least two fundamental relationships between the human and the Divine. On one hand, it indicates worshipful humility and wonder: “Let all the earth keep silence before him” (Hab. 2:20) and “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). But silence also defines the just condition of the sinner—“For the Lord our God hath put us to silence, and given us water of gall to drink, because we have sinned against the Lord” (Jer. 8:14)—as well as heaven’s sorrow in the face of sin—“For all flesh is corrupted before me, . . . which causeth silence to reign, and all eternity is pained” (D&C 38:11, 12).

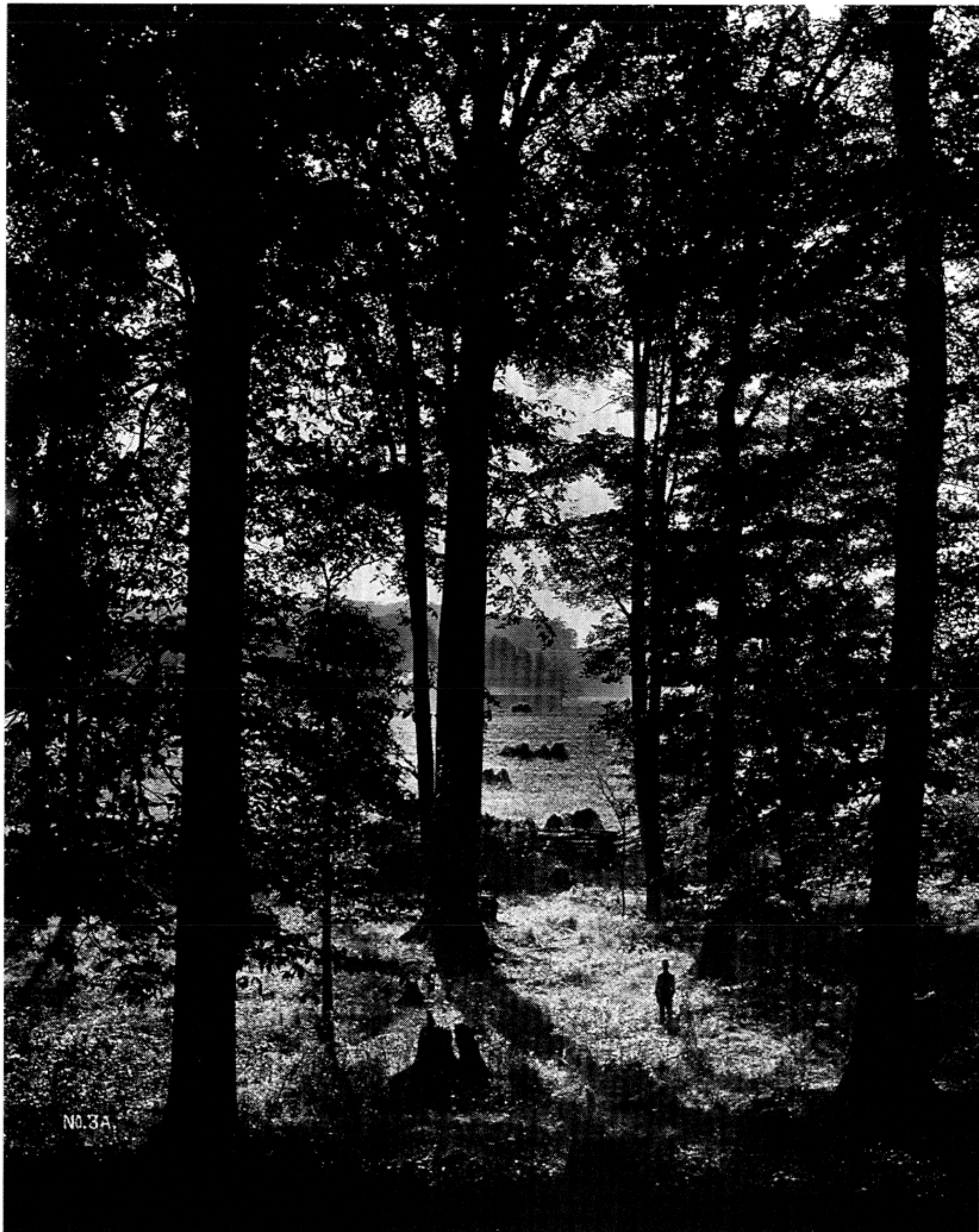
Revelation stops and silence reigns when people or nations are in a state of iniquity. Because of the sins of the priests and people in the time of Samuel, the heavens fell silent and “the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision” (1 Sam. 3:1). On the other hand, the scriptures repeatedly inform us that when righteousness reigns, the heavens open:

Yea, he that repenteth and exerciseth faith, and bringeth forth good works, and prayeth continually without ceasing—unto such it is given to know the mysteries of God; yea, unto such it shall be given to reveal things which never have been revealed. (Alma 26:22; see also D&C 42:61; 76:5–10)

Silence that reigned for a thousand years was broken when Joseph Smith exercised his faith in the Sacred Grove, as expressed in George Edward Anderson’s *The Sacred Grove, near Palmyra, New York*.

The phenomenon of silence plays other roles in the Bible, according to Jewish scholar A. D. Neher, “be it divine silence, human silence or cosmic silence.” Cosmic silence is expressed in Psalm 19:2: “There is no speech, there are no words, neither is their voice heard.” Human silence is expressed in Psalm 62:2: “Only for God doth my soul wait in stillness.”<sup>73</sup>

Divine silence reigns, albeit temporarily in a probationary period, in the preparations for the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham (Gen. 22), and in the book of Job, where thirty-five of its forty-two



*The Sacred Grove, near Palmyra, New York*, by George Edward Anderson (1860–1928), photograph, gelatin silver print, 24" x 20", 1907. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

The silence of heaven was broken when God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to the young Joseph Smith in response to his prayer offered in a quiet grove of trees near the Smith family farm.

chapters are permeated with divine silence. Neher asserts that divine silence is unique to Jewish scripture: "Not giving an answer is characteristic of the originality and uniqueness of Israelite prophecy, for in the prophecy of the ancient Middle East, including Greece, there is no oracle which does not answer."<sup>74</sup>

One response to Neher's assertion is that there is a difference between "the silence during which the prophet awaits an answer [as in Jeremiah's ten-day wait] and the silence that originates in God's decision not to answer at all (as in the days of Saul). Then too there is the silence that is itself God's reply. Just as He can answer in fire He can answer in silence."<sup>75</sup>

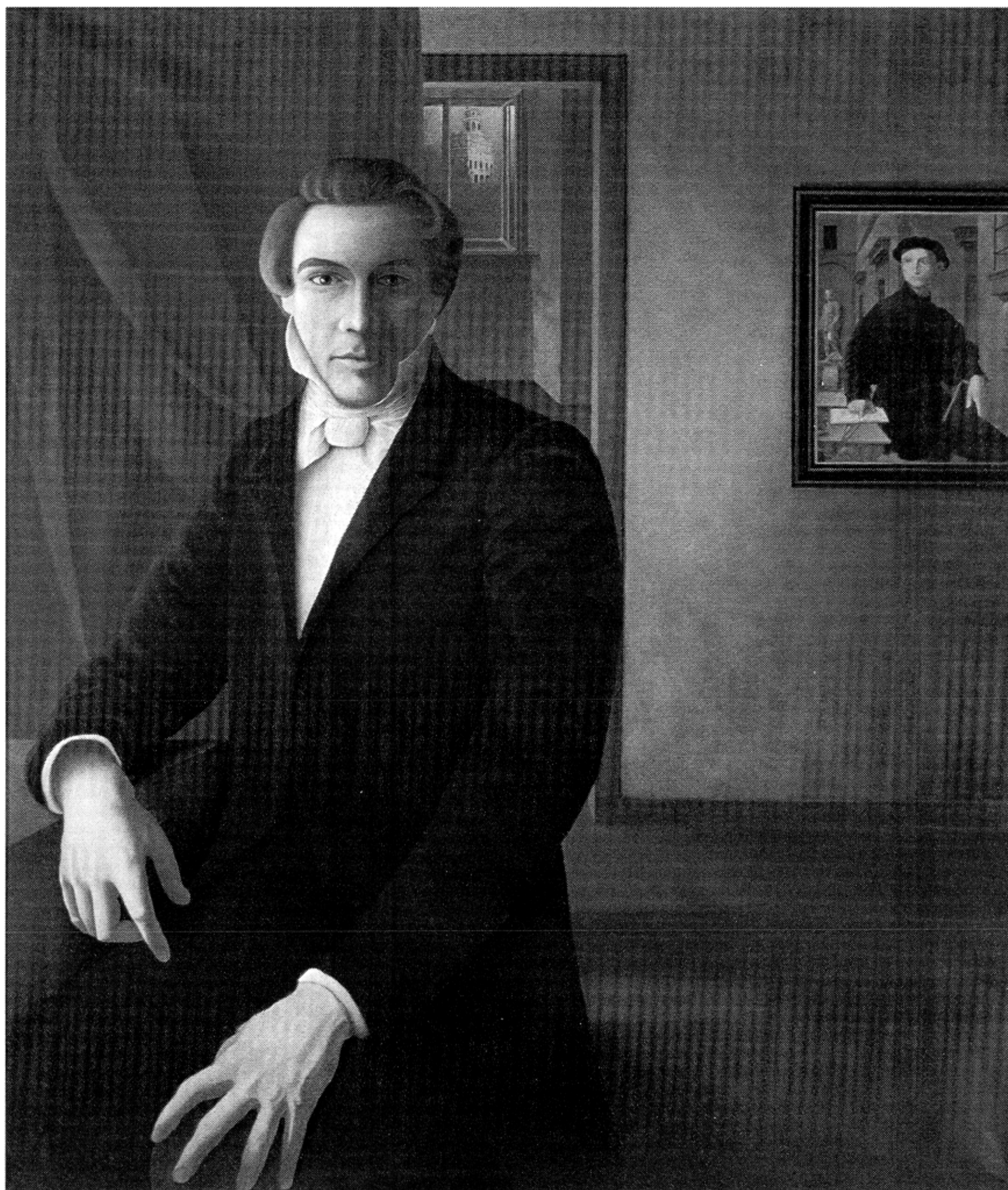
Christ, in eloquent silence, refused to step into the trap set for him by the scribes and Pharisees when they brought to him the woman taken in adultery. Instead of responding to their questions on the law, he "stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not" (John 8:6). Continuing to ignore their questions, he made one simple statement that compelled the woman's accusers to walk away in shamed silence (John 8:6-9).

Christ also answered at least one of his own accusers in silence. According to Luke's record, Christ, who had spoken a brief reply to both Caiaphas and Pilate, remained silent before Herod. "And when Herod saw Jesus . . . then he questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing" (Luke 23:8-9).

As far as we know, Herod is further distinguished as the only being who saw Christ face to face and spoke to Him, yet never heard His voice. For penitent sinners, weeping women, prattling children, for the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the rabbis, for the perjured high priest and his obsequious and insolent underling, and for Pilate the pagan, Christ had words—of comfort or instruction, of warning or rebuke, of protest or denunciation—yet for Herod the fox He had but disdainful and kingly silence.<sup>76</sup>

Matthew's account tells us that Jesus also refused to answer to the charges made against him by the false witnesses brought in by Caiaphas. Peter explains that in Christ's silence, the Savior set an example for all who suffer for righteousness sake:

But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should



*Monday, 24 June 1844, 4:15 A.M.: Beyond the Events*, by Pino Drago (1947–), oil on canvas, 56" x 47", 1987. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

Captured in a silent contemplative moment shortly before his martyrdom, Joseph Smith gazes intently into eternity, following the Savior's example of suffering in silence. Peace is juxtaposed with tension, light with shadow, God's word with human knowledge.

follow in his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously. (1 Pet. 2:20-23)

The Book of Mormon also reveals God's "silent answer" in response to the pained and silent reaction of the righteous to evil when Amulek pleads for Alma to call upon God to save the innocent from the flames. But Alma was "constrained" from stretching forth his hand "that the judgments which [God] shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just." Their only consolation (and Amulek's own family may well have been among the victims) was the promise that the silence would be broken when the blood of the innocent would "cry mightily against them at the last day" (Alma 14:11). God's silence continued as Alma and Amulek answered nothing to the judges and lawyers who smote them. For many days they suffered as captives, repeatedly answering nothing in the face of mocking accusations. Their silence was evidence of their faith, their patience, and their trust in the Lord to render judgment. God's silence ended with the thundering contrast of the great noise of the fall of the prison (Alma 14:14-29).

In a manner analogous to the pregnant silences in music, silence also punctuates the pivotal points in the spiritual history of the earth. Just prior to the advent of Christ in the New World, "there was silence in all the land for the space of many hours" (3 Ne. 10:2). When the seventh seal is opened at his second coming, "there [will be] silence in heaven for the space of half an hour" (Rev. 8:1). Thus silence seems to serve God's need to bring his people to reflection, to allow them to contemplate the state of their existence, to ponder on the past, and to be ready for instruction, admonition, or for an epiphany—some dramatic event or insight that bears directly on salvation. After experiencing the power of God, Jonah was given time for silent meditation in the belly of the fish.

Members of the LDS Church are offered silent time for contemplation as well as expression of reverence while they approach or address God through the ordinances of the gospel: the seconds of silence under water during baptism; the reverent silence

observed with bowed head during confirmation, blessings, and prayers; the thoughtful silence observed during the sacrament; and the peaceful silence experienced in the temple.

The world itself bears silent testimony: “All things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator” (Alma 30:44). The Lord had already taught Moses that “all things are created and made to bear record of me” (Moses 6:63). This theme was reiterated in modern revelation to Joseph Smith: “Any man who hath seen any or the least of these [earth, sun, moon, and stars] hath seen God moving in his majesty and power” (D&C 88:47).

In *Temptation of Christ in the Desert* (see back cover), the Creator himself is pictured in the midst of his handiwork. Here nature silently testifies of the expanse of his power while paradoxically dwarfing his mortal body.

## Conclusion

In view of the fact that the arts of modernism have forsaken the Divine as a valid source of certainty, the perceived silence of heaven has driven some modern artists, consciously or instinctively, to express this untenable breach between humanity and God in a silent scream, an image fraught with paradox and frustration.

To gloss T. S. Eliot’s stanza from the introduction:

Only by the form, the pattern [of the silent scream],  
Can words or music [or film or painting] reach  
The [paradoxical] stillness [of existential angst] as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

The image of a scream *sans* sound in the major media of our century rivets our attention on a world both overwrought with the power to annihilate the human race and overcome by the presence of evil in the absence of God. It is almost as if our artists are unwittingly repeating Augustine’s earnest, but futile, supplication: “Here are my ears, God speak to them!”<sup>77</sup> Thomas Mann offers a veiled and paradoxical hope in the previously quoted line from

*Doctor Faustus*: “It [the tone vibrating in the silence] abides as a light in the night.” And Ricardo Molina’s “Answers” are even more hopeful, reminding us of the Biblical witnesses that assure us of His presence even in His silence:

What if  
in the very questions the answer hid?  
What if  
in the divine silence were heavenly acquiescence?  
What if  
the inquiry itself were our salvation?<sup>78</sup>

A particularly poignant witness to God’s presence in silence is the simple poem written on the wall of a basement in Cologne, Germany, discovered by allied troops at the end of the war and later used by Michael Horvit as a text for a deeply touching song.<sup>79</sup> It had been written by someone hiding from the Gestapo.

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.  
I believe in love even when feeling it not.  
I believe in God even when God is silent.

Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 11:15). Jesus’ statement indicates that silence is not absolute, that the responsibility to hear and interpret lies within the listener.

The pivotal artists of our time in music, film, and painting, who have lived throughout the political and psychological eruptions of the past hundred years or so, have pushed the expressive capabilities of their mediums to the threshold of the abyss, reducing their voices to the mute horror of a silent scream in the face of a nonexistent God. The interpretations of silences in the scriptures stand in stark contrast to those images in the arts. Powerful silences in the scriptures and in religious contexts, by contrast, are used to convey another message: *God is*.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Raimundo Panikkar, *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Mary Knoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), xx.

<sup>2</sup>Panikkar, *Silence of God*, 150.

<sup>3</sup>Panikkar, *Silence of God*, 166.

<sup>4</sup>Panikkar, *Silence of God*, 231 n. 128, quoting Albert Camus, *Il mito di Sisito*, p. 21, quoted in Friedman, *Problematic Rebel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 469.

<sup>5</sup>Timothy Walsh, "The Cognitive and Mimetic Function of Absence in Art, Music and Literature," *Mosaic* 25 (spring 1992): 73, 76, 77.

<sup>6</sup>J. A. Ward, *American Silences: The Realism of James Agee, Walker Evans, and Edward Hopper* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), xv, 15.

<sup>7</sup>Max Picard perceives silence as the backdrop of all human discourse, the ground from whence verbal discourse arises and into which it disappears. "Great poetry," he says, "is a mosaic inlaid into silence." Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Bodman (Chicago: Gateway Books, 1952), quoted in Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 134. Both Picard and Dauenhauer define "discourse" broadly enough to embrace the fine arts: "In keeping with my large definition of discourse as including music, gesture, and the visual arts, I would make comparable claims about silence and the poetic manifestations in each of these modes." Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 209 n. 68.

<sup>8</sup>By nonliterary, I mean that words don't figure as the primary means of communication in the medium, even though in all three media words can and do play a role (in vocal music, in screenplays, and in textual inclusions in paintings). Since the advent of sound, films have used spoken dialogue, but the verbal is subordinate to the visual as primary mode, as anyone can see who has ever tried to read a screenplay. This subordination is partly the result of what Susanne Langer has called the "principle of assimilation." Where two art forms are combined, one always takes over: music swallows words; dance assimilates music; the visuals supersede the words. Susanne Langer, "Deceptive Analogies: Specious and Real Relationships among the Arts," in *Modern Culture and the Arts*, ed. James B. Hall and Barry Ulanov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 29. Thus, in the three arts represented here, we are concerned with the silences that intrude into or amplify the primary (nonverbal) realm of the medium: the sounds of music and the visual framework of films and paintings.

<sup>9</sup>Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé*, trans. Anthony Hartley (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), 9, quoted in Steven L. Bindeman, *Heidegger and Wittgenstein: The Poetics of Silence* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 8.

<sup>10</sup>George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 13.

<sup>11</sup>Cathleen McGuigan, "He Built a Space of Terrible Beauty," *Newsweek*, April 26, 1993, 51.

<sup>12</sup>Arlene Croce, *Afterimages* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

<sup>13</sup>Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 134.

<sup>14</sup>Zofia Lissa, "Aesthetic Functions of Silence and Rests in Music," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 22 (summer 1964): 443-54.

<sup>15</sup>Lissa, "Aesthetic Functions," 444.

<sup>16</sup>John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 8. On the other hand, C. S. Lewis fears this move toward all sounds (noise) intruding into the domain of music when he has Screwtape exclaim, "Music and silence—how I detest them both! How thankful we should be that ever since our Father entered Hell—though longer ago than humans, reckoning in light years, could express—no square inch of infernal space and no moment of infernal time has been surrendered to either of those abominable forces, but all has been occupied by Noise—Noise, the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is exultant, ruthless and virile—Noise which alone defends us from silly qualms, despairing scruples and impossible desires. We will make the whole universe a noise in the end." C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Collins, 1942), 113–14.

Experiments in physics demonstrate that on earth humans cannot experience silence, except in the case of those who are profoundly hearing impaired. In an anechoic chamber, a sound laboratory designed to minimize echo and external sound, one can still hear low-frequency sounds and internal body sounds.

<sup>17</sup>William W. Austin, ed., *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 135. The letter was written to Ernest Chausson and dated October 2, 1893.

<sup>18</sup>Ray Robinson in *Krzysztof Penderecki: A Guide to His Works* (Princeton, N.J.: Prestige Publications, 1983), 1, quoting Krzysztof Penderecki, interview, *Newsweek*, March 17, 1969.

<sup>19</sup>Ates Orga, *Krzysztof Penderecki: Canticum Canticorum Salomonis*, EMI Electrola, Köln, West Germany, 1976, notes on slipcover.

<sup>20</sup>Orga, *Penderecki*, notes on slipcover.

<sup>21</sup>Unlike the visual arts, it is virtually impossible for music to convey a silent scream, just as it is not possible for paintings to depict the verbal expression "The man is not here."

<sup>22</sup>William Thomson, *Music for Listeners* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 177.

<sup>23</sup>Thomson, *Music for Listeners*, 179.

<sup>24</sup>Tom Carlson, *Krzysztof Penderecki*, MACE Records MXX 9090, notes on slipcover.

<sup>25</sup>Kenneth Elliott, *The King's Singers: Contemporary Collection*, EMI Records Ltd. OC061, notes on slipcover.

<sup>26</sup>Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of a German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1948), 491.

<sup>27</sup>Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 106.

<sup>28</sup>Walter Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 4.

<sup>29</sup>Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus*, ed. Louis B. Wright (New York: Washington Square Press, 1959), 71.

<sup>30</sup>Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 107, 108. Arnheim's emphasis.

<sup>31</sup>It is possible that we, who have been weaned on sound films full of dialogue, natural sounds, and background music, cannot experience silent films with the same responses as our pre-1927 ancestors. Those silences are likely

more intrusive to us than to them, even given the fact that most silent films of that era were not really silent: a pianist or organist accompanied each showing with appropriately dramatic background music. In fact, the impact of sustained silence in contemporary films (especially evocative foreign films like those directed by Ingmar Bergman) is greatly magnified by our programmed expectations of continuous realistic sound accompanying the moving image. Bergman's silences rivet our attention on the visuals and often endow his films with a certain macabre, surrealistic quality.

<sup>32</sup>Slavoj Zizek, "Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears," *October*, no. 58 (fall 1991): 50.

<sup>33</sup>Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 177.

<sup>34</sup>Hillel Italie, "Steiger on Health and Family and Screen Moments," *The Provo (Utah) Daily Herald*, June 1, 1991, sec. A, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup>Elizabeth Weis, *The Silent Scream: Alfred Hitchcock's Sound Track* (London: Associated University Presses, 1982), 14.

<sup>36</sup>Weis, *Silent Scream*, 25.

<sup>37</sup>Weis, *Silent Scream*, 166.

<sup>38</sup>Weis, *Silent Scream*, 155.

<sup>39</sup>Weis, *Silent Scream*, 161.

<sup>40</sup>Walter Sokel, *The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth-Century German Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 4.

<sup>41</sup>Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), 17.

<sup>42</sup>Sir Kenneth Clark, *Looking at Pictures* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 123.

<sup>43</sup>Reinhold Heller, *Edvard Munch: The Scream* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 56.

<sup>44</sup>John Rowan Wilson, *The Mind* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1971), 150, quoting Edvard Munch.

<sup>45</sup>Edvard Munch, Diary, January 22, 1892, quoted in Heller, *Edvard Munch*, 65.

<sup>46</sup>Christian Skredsvig, *Dager og nætter blandt kunstnere*, 3d ed. (Oslo, 1943), 152, quoted in Heller, *Edvard Munch*, 66.

<sup>47</sup>Edvard Munch, Diary, quoted in Heller, *Edvard Munch*, 109; italics added.

<sup>48</sup>Heller, *Edvard Munch*, 87.

<sup>49</sup>"Social Realism" was a major international art movement in the 1930s, represented in the Western hemisphere by Ben Shahn, Diego Rivera, José Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose *Echo of a Scream* (1937) surrealistically amplifies an infant's crying face amidst the wreckage of war. This stark monochromatic portrait of innocent suffering creates a chilling reminder that sixty years has done little to alter the human condition.

<sup>50</sup>Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 110-11.

<sup>51</sup>Jon D. Green, "Picasso's Visual Metaphors," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19 (winter 1985): 61-76.

<sup>52</sup>Francis Bacon, interview by David Sylvester, in David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon, 1962-1979* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 81-82.

<sup>53</sup>Andrew Forge, "Bacon: The Paint of Screams," *Art News* 62 (October 1963): 39.

<sup>54</sup>Dawn Ades, "Web of Images," in Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon*, ed. Dawn Ades and Andrew Forge (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), 13; italics added.

<sup>55</sup>Francis Bacon, interview by Hugh Davies, in Hugh Davies and Sally Yard, *Francis Bacon* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 12.

<sup>56</sup>Bacon, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 34.

<sup>57</sup>Bacon, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 34.

<sup>58</sup>Sam Hunter, "Metaphor and Meaning in Francis Bacon," in *Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 28.

<sup>59</sup>Bacon, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 24.

<sup>60</sup>Bacon, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 37.

<sup>61</sup>Ades, "Web of Images," 9. Bacon's gaping mouths invite comparison with cosmic black holes, which consume all positive elements in a vortex of nothingness. Not only are Bacon's hollowed-out, shapeless figures lacking in substance, "the paint itself, has holes in it, if it is not wiped out, effaced, or simply absent." Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>62</sup>Ades, "Web of Images," 10.

<sup>63</sup>Francis Bacon, quoted in Ades, "Web of Images," 10; see also Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, 82.

<sup>64</sup>Andrew Forge, "About Bacon," in Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon*, ed. Dawn Ades and Andrew Forge (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), 29.

<sup>65</sup>Forge, "About Bacon," 29.

<sup>66</sup>Forge, "About Bacon," 24-25. In his interview with Sylvester, Bacon acknowledges that his paintings were primarily "concerned with my kind of . . . exhilarated despair" (Bacon, *Interview with Francis Bacon*, 83), an oxymoronic expression appropriate to the paradoxical ambiguity of his aesthetic purposes.

<sup>67</sup>Bacon's ambivalent attitude toward mouths surfaces in his exchange with Sylvester, when he admits that part of his obsession stems from a fascination with "the glitter and colour that comes from the mouth, and I've always hoped . . . to be able to paint the mouth like Monet painted a sunset." Bacon, *Interview with Francis Bacon*, 50. The visceral effect of Bacon's mouths, however, is much closer to Munch's sunsets than Monet's and recalls the classical association with a line from Aeschylus' *Oresteia* that haunted Bacon. As the Furies pursue Orestes, their leader says: "The reek of human blood smiles out at me." Ades explains that this image, like Bacon's mouths, shocks because of "the clashing of disgust ('reek') and joy ('smiles'), but more because of the extraordinary synaesthesia of the metaphor: the wound gapes in the flesh like a smile in the face." Ades, "Web of Images," 17.

<sup>68</sup>Ades, "Web of Images," 15.

<sup>69</sup>Muriel Saville-Troike, "The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication," in *Perspectives on Silence*, ed. Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1985), 3.

<sup>70</sup>Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 138.

<sup>71</sup>Panikkar, *Silence of God*, 167.

<sup>72</sup>Max Picard as referenced in Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 188. Dauenhauer's central thesis regarding the ontological significance of silence reads as follows: "Both man and world are syntheses of two irreducible, but non-self-standing, components which are not contraries of one another. Rather, these components are

simply other than one another. . . . The components of this synthesis, this dyad, are appropriately named the 'determinate' and 'nondeterminate.' This dyad, this synthesis, cannot, at least with the resources available to philosophy, be resolved into a perfect finished Whole or One." Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 142-43.

<sup>73</sup>A. D. Neher, *Speech and "Silence" in Prophecy* (Jerusalem: Merkaz, 1969), 1-2 (Neher's translation).

<sup>74</sup>Neher, *Speech and "Silence,"* 5.

<sup>75</sup>Comment by Dr. Anat in Neher, *Speech and "Silence,"* 14.

<sup>76</sup>James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 636.

<sup>77</sup>Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 90, quoting Augustine, *Confessions I*.

<sup>78</sup>Ricardo Molina, "Respuestas," quoted in Panikkar, *The Silence of God*, 177.

<sup>79</sup>*Even When God Is Silent* (New York: Transcontinental Music, 1993).