

SEM16. The grammar of silence: Cross-disciplinary, transmedia echoes

16A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, S8 Moro

16B 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, S8 Moro

Convenors

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Abstract

"Nor was the Silence and Emptiness of the Streets so much in the City as in the Out-parts, except just at one particular time, when, as I have mention'd, the Plague came East; and spread over all the City"
(Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*).

During the coronavirus pandemics, perceptions of silence and sound changed forever. They embodied a sonic dystopia in which the two etymological meanings of the lemma 'silence' – the Latin verbs *silēre* and *tacēre*, denoting now the absence of sound (*silēo*), now the absence of speech (*tacēo*) – interplayed. Silence may be reticent, dissembling, or imposed by others. Voluntary or enforced, it might be the silence of women, of marginalized social and religious groups, of communities that are denied the right to speak. With these considerations in mind and moving from the recent experience of Covid19, this seminar aims to reconceptualize the historical, textual and literary forms of silence, including the silence of individuals and cultures, of the physical voice or the written word and of information erased from the page.

We invite proposals addressing the many voices of silence, including erasure, reticence, pauses, ellipses, discretion, *omertà* in the Anglosphere from conterminous vantage points. The period considered is from 1700 to the present days. Proposals using multimodal, Film Sound and Media Studies approaches are also welcome.

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SEM16. Papers

16A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, S8 Moro

- *"The music you make has always been in your own power": voice, silence and the human in Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Voice"* (Sidia Fiorato, Università di Verona)
- *Silenced voices and echoes of tyranny: Delhi Calm and the trauma of the Indian Emergency* (Michela Canepari, Università di Parma)
- *Unveiling the unsaid: Exploring the grammar of silence in Robert Graves's poetry* (Adriana Marinelli, Università degli Studi di Napoli Parthenope)
- *Silence, alienation and subversion in Tennyson's Geraint and Enid* (Lucrezia Scarpa, Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara)

16B 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, S8 Moro

- *The seduction of the unsaid: Silent gods in exile in E. M. Forster's short stories* (Paolo Bugliani, Università di Pisa)

- *Reticent narrators in Virginia Woolf's novels and Rachel Cusk's Outline Trilogy* (Luca Pinelli, Università degli Studi di Bergamo / Università di Verona)
- *"A shapeless whirl of nothings": Silence and the exhausted writer in George Gissing's New Grub Street (1891)* (Angelica Belloli, Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara)
- *From sound to silence – A diachronic comparison* (Edward Andrea Sheldon, Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti-Pescara)

SEM16. Abstracts

"A shapeless whirl of nothings": Silence and the exhausted writer in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891)

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In the competitive Victorian literary market of the late 19th century, language risks becoming a commodified surplus, while critical reflection and slowness are pushed to the margins. In *New Grub Street* (1891), George Gissing responds to this crisis by portraying silence not as absence or failure, but as a space charged with desire, labour, and rejection. This paper argues that silence in the novel functions not only as a personal or economic defeat, but as a structural system to the demands of literary production and as a form of resistance. The analysis traces how narrative strategies of silence unfold across three interrelated dimensions: thematically (through unfinished books and aborted letters), formally (via narrative stasis, ellipses, fragmentation), and affectively (through the psychosomatic symptoms of non-productivity – neurosis, exhaustion, burnout).

The refusal to produce, the embrace of slowness and incompleteness, become ways of thinking critically against a system that accelerates and empties meaning. Rather than offering closure, Gissing's novel deepens its tensions, transforming silence into a medium for critical reflection in a culture that devalues intellectual labour. In this tension between speech and withdrawal, productivity and block, *New Grub Street* anticipates modernist and postmodern critiques of intellectual work and its perceived obsolescence, suggesting that the most radical gesture may not be to speak, but to remain deliberately, critically silent. It further dismantles the romantic myth of the solitary genius, proposing silence – deliberate, structural, and resistant – as a space where critical thought endures.

Finally, the article approaches silence not as what the novel omits, but what it insists on: a quiet that demands attention rather than eludes it.

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The seduction of the unsaid: Silent gods in exile in E. M. Forster's short stories

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My paper explores E. M. Forster's fantastic short stories as a privileged space where the author could transcend the constraints of realist narrative and experiment with more elusive, metaphysical themes. In particular, it focuses on the recurring figure of the "god in exile," a mysterious and often silent presence that interrupts the everyday with uncanny intensity. Inherited through the aesthetic lineage of Walter Pater's refined sensualism, this divine figure becomes, in Forster's fiction, a vehicle for epiphanic disruption—an emissary of the unsaid, the ungraspable, the sacred repressed by modernity.

A key example is *The Story of a Panic*, where the presence of Pan—never named but unmistakably evoked—manifests through a young boy’s sudden and violent transformation. The divine operates not through direct action but through an atmosphere of disquiet, triggering a crisis that reveals the limits of rational perception. My analysis reads these moments as articulations of spiritual exile and narrative silence, staging the return of an ancient, ineffable force into a desacralized world, one that often is, although tacitly, equated with homoerotic desire.



Silenced voices and echoes of tyranny: *Delhi Calm* and the trauma of the Indian Emergency

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This paper critically examines Vishwajyoti Ghosh’s powerful graphic novel *Delhi Calm* (2010), which provides a compelling chronicle of the 21-month state of national Emergency (1975-1977) in India, a period during which the Prime Minister, ostensibly acting to protect democracy, suspended civil liberties, suppressed fundamental rights (including press and personal freedoms), and arrested activists, dissidents, and members of the opposition. This paper therefore examines how Ghosh exploits the graphic novel form to reveal how the central government – operating within a democratic framework – transitioned into a tyranny under Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay, thus creating an oppressive system characterized by censorship, violence, slum clearances, and forced sterilizations that echoes other historical tyrannies. The central aim of this paper, therefore, is to analyze how *Delhi Calm*’s narrative depicts the enforced silence imposed in India during the Emergency, and how – through the use of caricature typical of graphic novels (Agarwal, 2016) – it depicts the dehumanizing effects of power and terror, visually representing how the pursuit of absolute power and the experience of suffering distort human features, reducing individuals to grotesque versions of themselves.

While acknowledging scholarly arguments that trace the origins of the Indian graphic novel to Western comic book traditions (e.g., Corey K. Creekmur, 2015), this paper argues that India’s deep-rooted history of visual storytelling and iconography has provided a crucial foundation for the medium to serve as a platform for marginalized voices. Recognizing the growing significance of the graphic novel in the Indian subcontinent, this research therefore explores how the text’s multimodality articulates the silenced cultural, political, and identity issues of the time through its unique blend of visual and textual elements.

Through a detailed analysis of the graphic novel, this paper explores the intricate interplay between verbal and visual language, including color, typographical choices, and semiotic resources such as speech balloons and visual metaphors, to bring to the fore the text’s meaning-making process and its capacity to convey the complexities of the Emergency.

The paper argues that *Delhi Calm*’s effective juxtaposition of images and words frames India’s Emergency in a way that underscores the present’s ongoing engagement with the past, and that – by focusing on the disruption of individual lives – the graphic novel strategically blends realism with political commentary and fantastical elements, effectively employing Rothenberg’s (2000) concept of ‘traumatic realism’ to depict the era’s profound democratic decline through the unique lens of the graphic novel medium.

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“The music you make has always been in your own power”: voice, silence and the human in Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Voice”

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Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Voice” (1997) underlines the gendered construction of fairy tales and the social constraints that lead the protagonist to renunciate her voice and her identity. The story’s source, Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid”, presents the loss of the voice as a condition for the acquisition of humanity, as well as of a body which discards monstrous attributes, and which moves in constant pain in order to inscribe itself in the human world.

Traditionally voice and agency are connected to the wicked characters in fairy tales, while contemporary retellings stage the reappropriation of the protagonist's female voice, both as a character and as a narrator. This takes place also through the structure of Donoghue's collection, which first seems to frame the narration – also typographically, and then disrupts it, by passing the power of the voice to the reader to continue the storytelling process. The paper aims at investigating the tales' focus on the presence and absence of the voice, including the communicative potentialities of silence.



Unveiling the unsaid: Exploring the grammar of silence in Robert Graves's poetry

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In his essay *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (1965) the British poet Robert Graves (1895-1985) draws upon classical motifs to highlight the concept of the afterlife through literary and classical lenses. Focusing on the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Graves emphasises Orpheus's enduring presence even after his death, thus embodying the triumph of his poetic voice over the inevitable silence of mortality. As is characteristic of his huge oeuvre, classical mythology serves as a foundational framework as well as source of inspiration for Graves's literary output.

Within this context, the theme of silence related to the struggle for immortality emerges as particularly significant. This paper focuses on the multifaceted dimension of silence in the poetry of Robert Graves, exploring its role as a profound engagement with mortality, thematic counterpoint to classical mythology and ultimately as an "artistic choice". Specifically, a close reading of some key points – "A Last Poem", "Leaving the Rest Unsaid", "To Evoke Posterity" – will foreground the ways in which Graves employs death as epitome of silence. However, silence itself is strictly related to the poetic of "the unsaid", a powerful dimension which is increasingly relevant in his later work, reflecting his growing interest in the unspoken complexities of poetic experience of love.

Starting from the comparison with classical motifs, I will demonstrate how silence results as a complex and dynamic force with its own distinct "grammar" – a system of omissions, allusions, and unspoken implications that shapes meaning. Reconstructing Gravesian "grammar of silence" will underscore his unique poetic voice in his complex human experience of which poetry serves as his lasting testament. Moreover, its understanding offers a compelling perspective on how the multifaceted dimension of silence contributes to the enduring legacy of Graves as a love poet across time.

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Reticent narrators in Virginia Woolf's novels and Rachel Cusk's *Outline Trilogy*

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Virginia Woolf's invaluable contribution to the early twentieth-century intellectual history is often framed in terms of giving voice to the lived experience of women, for she, as a 'daughter of an educated man' (Woolf, 2015, p. 91 and *passim*), managed to shed new light on the connection between authorial voice and gendered experience. Her remark on having found her 'voice' after writing her third novel, *Jacob's Room* (Woolf, 2023, p. 232), points to the importance of an aural/oral mark on her writings which could reflect her own sense of authorship, and in her essays (e.g. "Montaigne", "Modern Fiction") she often thought of literature as a sort of technology that allows authors to capture an evanescent and elusive entity called life. In a similar vein, her work in life-writing testifies to the enduring legacy of her father, Leslie Stephen, in her oeuvre, as well as her creative and, in today's terms, feminist engagement with the lives of the obscure, anonymity, and silence, in stark contrast to the lives of great men that tended to dominate (institutionalised) literary biography in the nineteenth century.

In more recent times, Rachel Cusk has suffered the consequences of an all-too-candid representation of her own life in writing, especially after she published her memoirs on motherhood, Italy, divorce and separation and received vitriolic attacks – not to mention a lawsuit – from the public. Her subsequent trilogy – interestingly translated as the 'listening

trilogy' in Italian ('Trilogia dell'ascolto') – has been praised, among other things, for the convincing representation of a reticent narrator, Faye, who mostly limits herself to registering what other people say to her. Defined as a sort of 'recording device or processing machine' in newspapers and magazines (Julavits, 2017), Faye as a reticent narrator makes an interesting contribution to the subversive potential and literary value of women's silence in writing, as recently highlighted by Mary K. Holland (2023).

This paper intends to explore the potential of reticence as a hermeneutical category in narrative texts. Building on the recent turn to neo- or metamodernism as a useful term that brings closer together modernist writers like Woolf to contemporary authors like Cusk, this contribution will focus on the narrators who also feature as characters in Woolf's work (the biographers of *Jacob's Room* and *Orlando*, Bernard in *The Waves*) as well as on Cusk's Faye, so as to highlight the formal and structural continuities and differences between the two women writers. Broader philosophical and political questions related to the gender of reticence and silence will be addressed.

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Silence, alienation and subversion in Tennyson's *Geraint and Enid*

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Tennyson's Victorian re-elaboration of Geraint and Enid's story was first published in 1857 with the title *Enid*. It is just in the 1873 edition of the *Idylls of the King* that the story is presented as divided into two consequent parts: *The Marriage of Geraint* and *Geraint and Enid*. This change in the title seems to suggest Tennyson's intention to shift the focus from the character of Enid alone to Geraint's perspective and relationship with Enid.

The present paper, focusing on *Geraint and Enid*, aims to study the disruptive force of silence in the marriage between them and especially how silence affects the character of Geraint, alienating him from the exterior world. The quest that stands at the core of the narrative originates from silence: both the silence of Enid, who is unable to tell her husband the rumours which are circulating about his alleged loss of masculine attributes, and of Geraint, who, after misinterpreting part of Enid's monologue, is unable to face her and ask her the meaning of the words he overheard.

Silence is also what Geraint imposes on his wife to prove her loyalty. Enid, however, cannot obey: in the middle of the wilderness, Geraint's wrathful absorption in his doubts becomes alienation from the outside world and its dangers and it is Enid's voice, disobeying the rules she had been imposed, that prevents Geraint from being slayed. From this perspective, silence functions as an enchantment that isolates the knight from his surroundings and blinds him to the perils of the quest. It is the damsel, a figure that traditionally is the one who should be saved from the dangers posed by the outside world, who breaks the spell with her voice and who eventually saves the knight. In short, the alternation of silence and speaking in this idyll activates a negotiation between gender roles, overturning the expectations and problematising both characters.

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From sound to silence – A diachronic comparison

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The phenomenon of silent letters (Ranbom & Connine, 2010), regarded as graphemes that remain unpronounced in speech yet are present in English spelling, dwells into the historical relationship between orthography and phonology. Silent letters are the result of long-term linguistic processes, including phonological reduction, spelling standardisation and sociolinguistic influence. This paper investigates the development and sociolinguistic significance of the consonant cluster ‘gh’ during the period of Early Modern English (Nurmi, 2017), when many words were added to English from other languages due to the event of the Chancery Standard. For instance, in the term ‘night’ the cluster ‘gh’ was initially pronounced, yet, in the period from 1500 to 1700, it became silent. The two consonants ‘gh’ will be the testers for a qualitative analysis in order to examine their phonological and phonetic characteristics, morphological function and historical transformation in depth. Preliminary findings suggest that the cluster ‘gh’ has been shaped not only by its phonological, phonetic and morphological variations, but also by extralinguistic factors such as prescriptive norms, educational reform, cultural prestige and language contact (Heitner, 2024). To this end, this study is based on a diachronic corpus-based comparative analysis within a historical sociolinguistic framework. The objective is to gather information on how the selected cluster has adapted to, or resisted, language transformation in response to both internal and external factors, such as linguistic development and social influences. Finally, the paper proposes a multidimensional framework to understand how the consonant cluster ‘gh’ both reflects and shapes broader patterns of linguistic and social variation.

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