Censorship and Silence, Umberto Eco

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THOSE OF YOU who are younger may think that veline are pretty girls who dance about on television shows, and that a casino is a chaotic mess.1 Anyone of my generation knows that the word casino used to mean "brothel" and only later, by connotation, did it come to mean "somewhere chaotic," so that it lost its initial meaning, and today anyone, perhaps even a bishop, uses it to indicate disorder. Likewise, once upon a time a bordello was a brothel, but my grandmother, a woman of the most upright morals, used to say, "Don't make a bordello," meaning "Don't make too much racket"; the word had completely lost its original meaning. The younger ones among you may not know that, during the Fascist regime, veline were sheets of paper that the government department responsible for controlling culture (called the Ministry of Popular Culture, shortened to MinCulPop—they didn't have sufficient sense of humor to avoid such an ambiguous-sounding name) sent to the newspapers. These sheets of thin copy paper told the newspapers what they had to keep quiet about and what they had to print. The velina, in journalistic jargon, therefore came to symbolize censorship, the inducement to conceal, to make information disappear.2

The veline that we know today—the television showgirls—are, however, the exact opposite: they are, as we all know, the celebration of outward appearance, visibility, indeed of fame achieved through pure visibility, where appearance signifies excellence—even that kind of appearance that would once have been considered unseemly.

We find ourselves with two forms of velina, which I would like to compare with two forms of censorship. The first is censorship through silence; the second is censorship through noise; I use the word velina, therefore, as a symbol of the television event, the show, entertainment, news coverage, and so on.

Fascism had understood (as dictators generally do) that deviant behavior is encouraged by the fact that the media give it coverage. For example, the veline used to say "Don't write about suicide" because the mere mention of suicide might inspire someone to commit suicide a few days later. This is absolutely correct—we shouldn't assume all that went through the minds of the Fascist hierarchy was wrong—and it is quite true that we know about events of national significance that have occurred only because the media have talked about them. For example, the student protests of 1977 and 1989: they were short-lived events that sought to repeat the protests of 1968 only because the newspapers had begun saying "1968 is about to return." Anyone involved in those events knows perfectly well that they were created by the press, in the same way that the press generates revenge attacks, suicides, classroom shootings—news about one school shooting provokes other school shootings, and a great many Romanians have probably been encouraged to rape old ladies because the newspapers told them it is the exclusive speciality of immigrants and is extremely easy to commit: all you have to do is loiter in any pedestrian passage, near a railway station, and so forth.

If the old-style velina used to say, "To avoid causing behavior considered to be deviant, don't talk about it," the velina culture of today says, "To avoid talking about deviant behavior, talk a great deal about other things." I have always taken the view that if, by some chance, I discovered that tomorrow's newspapers were going to take up

some wrong I had committed that would cause me serious harm, the first thing I'd do would be plant a bomb outside the local police headquarters or railway station. The next day the newspaper front pages would be full of it and my personal misdemeanor would end up as a small inside story. And who knows how many real bombs have been planted to make other front-page stories disappear. The example of the bomb is sonically appropriate, as it is an example of a great noise that silences everything else.

Noise becomes a cover. I would say that the ideology of this censorship through noise can be expressed, with apologies to Wittgenstein, by saying, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must talk a great deal." The flagship TG1 news program on Italian state television, for example, is a master of this technique, full of news items about calves born with two heads and bags snatched by petty thieves—in other words, the sort of minor stories papers used to put low on an inside page—which now serve to fill up three-quarters of an hour of information, to ensure we don't notice other news stories they ought to have covered have not been covered. Several months ago, the press controlled by Berlusconi, in order to undermine the authority of a magistrate who criticized the premier, followed him for days, reporting that he sat smoking on a bench, went to the barber, and wore turquoise socks. To make a noise, you don't have to invent stories. All you have to do is report a story that is real but irrelevant, yet creates a hint of suspicion by the simple fact that it has been reported. It is true and irrelevant that the magistrate wears turquoise socks, but the fact it has been reported creates a suggestion of something not quite confessed, leaving a mark, an impression. Nothing is more difficult to dispose of than an irrelevant but true story.

The error made by La Repubblica in its campaign against Berlusconi was to give too much coverage to a relevant story (the party at Noemi's house).3 If, instead, it had reported something like this—"Berlusconi went into Piazza Navona yesterday morning, met his cousin, and they had a beer together . . . how curious"—it would have triggered such a series of insinuations, suspicions, and embarrassments that the premier would have resigned long ago. In short, a fact that is too relevant can be challenged, whereas an accusation that is not an accusation cannot be challenged.

At the age of ten I was stopped in the doorway of a bar by a lady who said, "I'll give you one lira if you write a letter for me—I've hurt my hand." Being a decent child I replied that I didn't want any money and would do it simply as a favor, but the lady insisted on buying me an ice cream. I wrote the letter for her and explained what had happened when I got home. "Good Lord," said my mother, "they've made you write an anonymous letter.

Heaven knows what will happen to us when they find out!" "Look," I explained, "there's nothing terrible in that letter." In fact, it was addressed to a wealthy businessman, whom I also knew (he had a shop in the city center) and it said, "It has come to our attention that you intend to ask for the hand of Signorina X in marriage. We wish to inform you that Signorina X is from a respectable and prosperous family and is highly regarded throughout the city." Now, you don't usually see an anonymous letter that praises the subject of the letter rather than damning her. But what was the purpose of that anonymous letter? Since the lady who recruited me clearly had no grounds for saying anything else, she wanted at least to create unease. The recipient would have wondered, "Why should they send me such a letter? What does 'highly regarded throughout the city' actually mean?" I believe the wealthy businessman

would have decided in the end to postpone the idea of marriage for fear of setting up home with someone so gossiped about.

This form of noise doesn't even require that the transmitted messages be of any particular interest, since one message adds to another, and together they create noise. Noise can sometimes take the form of superfluous excess. A few months ago there was a fine article by Berselli in L'Espresso magazine, saying, Do you realize that advertising no longer has any effect on us? No one can prove that one soap powder is better than another (in fact they are all the same), so for the past fifty years the only method anyone has come up with shows us housewives who refuse the offer of two packets in exchange for their own brand, or grandmothers who tell us that this recalcitrant stain will disappear if we use the right powder. Soap companies therefore carry out an intensive and relentless campaign, consisting of the same message, which everyone knows by heart, so that it becomes proverbial: "Omo washes whiter than white," and so on.

Its purpose is twofold: partly to repeat the brand name (in certain cases it becomes a successful strategy: if I have to go into a supermarket and ask for soap powder, I will ask for Tide or Omo because I have known these names for the past fifty years), and partly to prevent anyone from realizing that no epideictic discussion can be made about soap powder—either for or against. And the same happens with other forms of advertising: Berselli observes that in every mobile phone advert, none of us actually understand what the characters are saying. But there's no need to understand what they say—it is the great noise that sells cell phones.

I think it is most probable that companies have jointly agreed to stop promoting their own particular brands and to carry out general publicity, to spread the mobile telephone culture. If you buy Nokia instead of Samsung, you will be persuaded by other factors, but not by advertising. In fact the main function of the publicity noise is to remind you of the advertising sketch, not the product. Try to think of the most pleasant, the most enjoyable piece of advertising—some are even quite funny—and to remember which product it relates to. It is very rare that you manage to remember the name of the product to which that advertisement refers: the child who mispronounces "Simmenthal," or perhaps "No Martini, no party" or "Ramazzotti is always good for you." In all other cases the noise compensates for the fact that there is no way to demonstrate the excellence of the product.

The Internet, of course, generates, with no intention to censor, the greatest noise that yields no information. Or rather: first, you receive information, but you don't know whether it is reliable; second, you try searching for information on the Internet: only we academics and researchers, after ten minutes' work, can begin to select the information we want. Most other users are stuck on blogs, or on a porn site, and so forth, without surfing too far, because surfing isn't going to help them find reliable information.

Looking further at cases of noise that do not presuppose any intention to censure, but nevertheless tend toward censorship, we should also mention the newspaper with sixty-four pages. Sixty-four pages are too many to give real prominence to the most essential information. Here again, some of you will say, "But I buy a newspaper to find the news that interests me." Certainly, but those who do that are an elite who know how to deal with information—and there must be some good explanation for the frightening drop in the number of newspapers being sold and read. Young

people no longer read newspapers. It is easier to find the La Repubblica or Corriere della Sera sites on the Internet—there, at least, it is all on one screen—or to read the free sheets at the train station, where the news is set out on two pages.

Therefore, as a result of noise, we have a deliberate censorship—this is what is happening in the world of television, in creating political scandals, and so forth—and we have an involuntary but fatal censorship whereby, for reasons that are entirely legitimate in themselves (such as advertising revenue, product sales, and so forth), an excess of information is transformed into noise. This (and here I am moving from communications to ethics) has also created a psychology and morality of noise. Look at that idiot walking along the street, wearing his iPod headphones; he cannot spend an hour on the train reading a newspaper or looking at the countryside, but has to go straight to his mobile phone during the first part of the journey to say "I've just left" and on the second part of the journey to say "I'm just arriving." There are people now who cannot live away from noise. And it is for this reason that restaurants, already noisy places, offer extra noise from a television screen—sometimes two—and music; and if you ask for them to be switched off, people stare at you as if you're mad. This great need for noise is like a drug; it is a way to avoid focusing on what is really important. Redi in interiorem hominem: yes, in the end, the example of Saint Augustine could still provide a good ideal for the world of politics and television.

It is in silence alone that the only truly powerful means of information becomes effective—word of mouth. All people, even when they are oppressed by the most censorious tyrants, have been able to find out all that is going on in the world through popular word of mouth. Publishers know that books do not become bestsellers through publicity or reviews but by what the French call bouche à oreille and the Italians call passaparola—books achieve success through word of mouth. In losing the condition of silence, we lose the possibility of hearing what other people are saying, which is the only basic and reliable means of communication.

And that is why, in conclusion, I would say that one of the ethical problems we face today is how to return to silence. And one of the semiotic problems we might consider is the closer study of the function of silence in various aspects of communication, to examine a semiotics of silence: it may be a semiotics of reticence, a semiotics of silence in theater, a semiotics of silence in politics, a semiotics of silence in political debate—in other words, the long pause, silence as creation of suspense, silence as threat, silence as agreement, silence as denial, silence in music. Look how many subjects there are to study concerning the semiotics of silence. I invite you to consider, therefore, not words but silence.

[Lecture given during the conference of the Associazione Italiana di Semiotica, 2009.]

The end