

Silent Dinner in Lahore

By Herman B. Mendolicchio, 2017

Silence is one of talk's ways of being and as such it is a definite way of expressing oneself about something to others.

Heidegger, TALK, XX, 368.

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Attending a Silent Dinner is like traveling. Every journey -and every dinner- is a different experience that changes according to its specific context. The place, the people, the conditions and the surrounding atmosphere deeply influence the travellers' -and diners'- experience.

Expectations, fantasies, excitements and anxieties run fast in the mind and transmit a shiver that runs through the whole body.

Taking part in a silent dinner means dealing with that shiver and, paraphrasing Bertrand Russell, we could say that: "Even if the open windows of art at first make us shiver... in the end, the fresh air brings vigor, and the great spaces have a splendor of their own".

Digging even more, we could say that a silent dinner can be an act similar to a short pilgrimage: a pilgrimage to the interior of yourself, to a world of emotions and rituals, free from the modern world trends.

As for a pilgrimage, you prepare yourself for an inner journey whose destination remains mysterious and unpredictable. When you walk the last mile -or when you walk out the door- you are not the same human being as when you first stepped in. Suddenly a light turns on and illuminates those hidden sides that have been obscured for far too long. The humanity around you changes colour, it is revealed anew through the revitalized iris of your own perception.

__Way to Lahore - Lahoris terrace

The aesthetics of hosting, and the invitation to silence, started downstairs. I was playing my first role at the entrance of a beautiful building, apparently abandoned, facing the majestic Badshahi Mosque of Lahore. In the New Food Street Fort Rd, where all the ancient brothels have been converted into restaurants and teahouses, a typical chalkboard announced the silent dinner.

I quickly made myself familiar with the context. A man, seated on his desk in the street, just beside the access to the building, became my immediate reference. He

probably runs the space, he knew everyone and everything that was happening in that area. I'm introduced to other people, I shake hands, and my presence there was becoming real and visible. The man is open to support and assist, he is excited about the silent dinner, but never asked a direct question about it. We talk, but I'm sure we are exchanging much more with our imagination, figuring out who we really are. His calm presence and his warm smile became a perfect introduction for that night.

Some participants begin to arrive and I start playing my role of initial host and gatekeeper: Welcoming, inviting in, shaking hands, showing the way and greeting with a silent gaze, deeply focused at the centre of the eye. The play has started and people's behaviours and perceptions begin their process of transformation. When I go upstairs about 60 people are all seated. The first glance is stunning. A silent human setting was on the top of the intrinsic and noisy chaos of the city of Lahore. The composition -that initial picture - somehow delivered a message, perhaps reclaiming a different condition for the whole of humanity.

The Silent Dinner in Lahore was definitely calm, full of intense peace. The act of observing was diffused across the space. Observing silence. Observing our own silence. Observing others' silence. Observing the different layers of silence, its virtues, effects and consequences. Silence turns out to be the door to different layers of spirituality: contemplation, meditation, devotion, concentration and prayer. The vision of the Badshahi Mosque -dominating the view all over the terrace- reminded us of the presence of Islam, which considers silence the gate to wisdom.

In this concentrated context, time flew away very quickly. The individual experience -with silence, food, context, meaning and atmosphere- was greater than the collective one. Moments and spaces for collective empathy remained somehow limited. The energies were unceasingly flowing in multiple directions. The open-air space and numerous manifestations - between reality and imagination - were captivating the attention. Colourful tracks crossing the roads; blinking red signs; the majestic presence of the mosque in the fascinating hazy atmosphere of the night; the soundscape; the discrete, but firm presence of the waiters; the smell of food and the music of its preparation; the moon and all the surrounding apparitions created by our imagination, had somehow agitated the consciousness of the group, which was caught in-between intense concentration and sudden distractions.

Nevertheless, intense gazes took place through the smoke of a cigarette, the queue for food and the search for bright details in the Lahore view. After holding the breath of the voice for a couple hours, people dispersed quickly and started dealing with that new inner space and sensation that still has no name.

The Silent Dinner pushes the way to other forms of knowledge, and it questions our presence and connection as humans, here, there, now and forever.