

DOMINIKA BUGNO-NARECKA

SILENCE AND MEDIA ENCOUNTERS IN NOAH HAWLEY'S *BEFORE THE FALL*

Abstract. Silence is enfolded with voice—the two phenomena are complementary. The presence of silence inevitably points to the presence of sound, and by extension, to the presence of meaning. Still, encountered silence can be meaningful in itself. The article explores interactions between different media (TV news, painting and black box recordings) and the corresponding silences in Noah Hawley's *Before the Fall*: the silence of the main protagonist and his avoidance of news reporters; the silence of catastrophic art voiced by the use of ekphrasis; and the silence recorded by the black boxes. The rhetoric of each medium in question and its interaction with the corresponding silence are investigated to show that silence “speaks volumes” in the novel.

Keywords: silence; media; TV news; ekphrasis; sound recording; representation; Noah Hawley.

INTRODUCTION

Noah Hawley (born in 1967) is an American screenwriter and TV producer, probably best known for the TV series *Fargo* and *Legion*. He is also the author of five novels and one non-fiction book to date. His most recent novel, *Before the Fall* (2016), tells the story of eleven people of different social status—from a prominent Wall Street banker and a TV-network owner and their families to an unknown painter, a security guard, and three members of the cabin crew with only seemingly unimportant backgrounds—who take a flight from Martha's Vineyard to John F. Kennedy International Airport. But their plane never reaches its destination—it crashes 18 minutes after take-off, permanently silencing nine protagonists. Two people survive the crash:

DOMINIKA BUGNO-NARECKA, PhD, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Institute of Literary Studies, Department of American Literature and Culture; e-mail: dominika.bugno-narecka@kul.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4230-3379>.

Scott Burroughs, an unsuccessful middle-aged painter, and JJ Bateman, the youngest passenger and the heir to a family fortune. In a silent heroic act, Scott swims several miles to the shore carrying JJ on his back. The official investigation starts immediately, but it takes weeks to find the bodies, retrieve the wreckage and establish the cause of the accident. The crash attracts a lot of public attention and several theories appear concerning its cause, from human error to a terrorist attack. In the meantime, the story of each passenger and each member of the cabin crew is presented in flashback chapters.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the interaction between different media represented in the novel and the silence(s) they are intertwined with. As the main types of media featured include TV news, paintings and black box recordings, there are three significant instances of the encountered silence: the silence of the main protagonist and his reluctance to share his side of the story with the news reporters; the silence of his catastrophic art voiced by the use of ekphrases; and the silence recorded by the black boxes on board the ill-fated plane. The rhetoric of each medium in question and its interaction with the corresponding silence will be examined to demonstrate that silence is not simply an absence of sound or noise, but it is an important part of communication process and hence “speaks volumes” in the novel.

TV NEWS VS. SCOTT BURROUGHS

To approach the first instance of silence encountered in the novel, that of Scott Burroughs, it is vital to understand the medium of television, especially the rhetoric of the news broadcast and the workings of the TV channel represented in *Before the Fall*. In the words of the former radio and television newswriter, Matthew Kerbel: “[w]e rely on television. Television helps us make sense of the world. It helps us figure out what's important. It helps us get close to people we would otherwise never meet. It shows us events that we would otherwise never experience” (xi). In the age of the Internet and social networking websites, television is still a popular source of information (cf. Schaap; Gunter). Many news channels nowadays also broadcast online to reach a wider audience and remain loud communication tool. On the positive side, TV news disseminates information which “can enlighten ordinary citizens, increase their involvement, knowledge, or understanding of what is important to know, and educate them into being rational voters” (Schaap 3). On the negative side, however, TV news might become “a dispenser of biased disinformation

and the prime instrument for keeping ‘the masses’ quiet” (Schaap 3) or even for destabilising society (Schaap 3). Unbiased and impartial reporting of events is an ideal that many journalists seem to abandon or to be forced to ignore for economic and popularity reasons. Being professionally familiar with the TV industry, Hawley is fully aware of its mechanism, which his narrator comments on in *Before the Fall*:

TV newsmen tried so hard to appear objective when the truth was, they were anything but. CNN, ABC, CBS, they sold the news like groceries in a supermarket, something for everyone. But people didn't want just information. They wanted to know what it meant. They wanted perspective. They needed something to react against. I agree or I don't agree. And if a viewer didn't agree more than half of the time,... they turned the channel. (ch. 6)

Apart from simply being informed about an event or occurrence, viewers on both diegetic and extradiegetic level require to know what that particular event or occurrence means globally for the country and the world, and individually for themselves. They need an explanation of the world and of the things happening around them. News programs communicate that meaning by means of the different story types they create and report: from hard news to soft news, from good ones to bad ones (cf. Gunter), from reporting international affairs to accounting for local occurrences (cf. Langer). However, the process of communicating the news contains a trap connected with providing people the credible explanation they expect, since the fundamental rule of television states that “[i]t is a pretend medium” (Kerbel 19). When it comes to preparing any news report, “[r]aw ‘events’ have to be reconstructed in ‘message form’” (Langer 16), and the representation of events is not the same as their reflection, for “[i]t implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already-existing meaning, but the more active labour of making things mean” (Hall 64). Hence, there is a strong possibility that the public will be manipulated and that what is offered by news channels is far from the objective and impartial reporting of plain facts. In other words, news providers may craftily persuade one to believe what the facts and their meanings are by means of specific visual and aural signs that offer the providers’ preferred meaning. The language of TV news is “a specialised and ritualised form of speech” (Langer 39) with a narrow set of vocabulary that conveys an intended essence and produces a desired effect (Langer 39). The image that accompanies the verbal account reflects the subject matter and is constructed by

means of technical measures, such as framing, composition, lighting, camera movement and others (Langer 37), which can also be modified and manipulated to match and support the verbal content. As a result, a large part of the reported event might be passed over in silence and remain untold in such a media discourse.

Hawley's novel lavishly illustrates the ruthlessness of contemporary news reporting. One of the victims of the plane crash, David Bateman, is the owner of ALC News, a fictional 24-7 news channel whose agenda is to shape the events of the day. Bateman understands that, in order to be ahead of the other news stations, his channel cannot merely respond to and comment on the news, as its competition does, but has to make the news. He expresses this idea explicitly in a conversation with the billionaire who later sponsors the launch of ALC News:

What saved them was that they were no longer slaves to the events they covered. No longer held hostage by the action or inaction of others.... "All these other networks," he [David] said, "they react to the news. Chase after it. We're going to Make The News." What that meant, he said, was that unlike CNN or MSNBC, ALC would have a point of view, an agenda. Sure, there would still be random acts of God to cover, celebrity deaths and sex scandals. But that was just gravy. The meat and potatoes of their business would come from shaping the events of the day to fit the message of their network. (Hawley, ch. 6)

Consequently, ALC News is a news channel that literally creates the news and guides the viewers in their reception of the presented news to make a particular sense of that news. The leading news anchor, Bill Cunningham, is "the raging voice of common sense, the sane man in an insane world" (Hawley, ch. 6) and someone who is bold enough to say out loud what the public always felt in their hearts (Hawley, ch. 6).

When the plane crashes and the Batemans die, ALC News and its lead make it a point of honour to get to the heart of the case. They spin various—more or less plausible—stories and tell the viewers what to think about the plane crash. Unfortunately, soon there is virtually no material trace or piece of information that could make the news: no bodies are found, and hence there are no funerals to attend; there is no wreckage to bear witness to the event and to confirm any of the possibilities presented to the viewers. To make matters worse, the key witness and survivor stubbornly keeps quiet and refuses to talk to the media about the incident. TV news encounters the persistent silence of their person of interest.

In terms of news material, Scott's story qualifies as a combination of a typical victim story and an especially remarkable story (cf. Langer). On the one hand, he is an injured party in an aviation accident, but on the other, he is a common citizen with an unusual achievement—he survived the crash and did an extraordinary thing by swimming with the boy to the shore, saving not only his own life but also the boy's. Thus, Scott is a perfect candidate for a catchy news story. His silence as the silence of the key witness to the tragic events, however, leaves the media no additional point to enter the story, which is a problem for the news makers, and for Bill Cunningham in particular:

But as the days went on, even the back-channel leaks began to seem false. Could there really be no new leads on the location of the wreckage? And now that all the other outfits had the Kipling story—the Times ran a six-thousand-word piece on Sunday that showed in minute detail how his firm had laundered billions from North Korea, Iran, and Libya—Bill became less interested in digging for dirt there. He was reduced to opinion pieces, to going over old ground—pointing at time lines, yelling at maps. (Hawley, ch. 18)

To be ahead of the competition and to keep the viewers' attention by manifesting trust and care, Cunningham resorts to the illegal activity of tapping into the phones of the victims' relatives and using their private conversations to get information to "make the news". He cunningly manipulates fragments of private calls thus acquired to insinuate "scandalous" behaviour by the people tapped and to fuel outrage in his viewers. Cunningham wants to use Scott's silence in the media against him, forcing Scott to speak by confronting his silence with the image created by out-of-context fragments of private conversations. Cunningham's actions are determined by the fact that he has no defamatory scoop about Scott to release since Scott's silence entails both his avoiding the media and reporters, and his not having a mobile phone or a computer. Hence, it is a digital silence that leaves little or no trace of his existence, which is unusual for a person living in the twenty-first century:

"And what about ... the long-distance swimmer?" ...

"Nothing."

"Whaddya mean, nothing? It's two thousand fifteen."

"What can I say? He's a throwback. No cell phone, doesn't text, pays all his bills by mail." (Hawley, ch. 18)

Scott's digital silence is a manifestation of a specific way of life he has consciously adopted, a way of life which is free from heavy dependence on

material objects, especially electronic devices or media platforms. Scott also understands how the media work, and his silence denotes his refusal to contribute to the spectacle of sensational news. Scott does not want to be part of a scheme in which, with one simple statement, his status may change from that of a hero to that of a villain or a target of jokes. He verbalises this thought in the following reflection: “A statement becomes a pronouncement when delivered to the crowd. Random observations become part of the public record to be replayed for all eternity, Auto-Tuned and memified” (Hawley, ch. 19). Furthermore, Scott’s silence results from and points to his reluctance to accept the fact that due to his extraordinary deed the public calls him a hero:

A hero. They are calling him a hero. It is not a word he can handle right now, being so far outside his own sense of himself, the narrative he has created that allows him to function—a broken man with modest ambitions, a former blackout drunk who lives moment-to-moment now, hand-to-mouth. (Hawley, ch. 19)

Scott does not accept the extra-ordinariness of his deed. He believes he behaved as anyone else would have in a similar situation, emphasising the authenticity and obviousness of his conduct. He also needs time to come to terms with his new situation and figure out what to do with the attention he has been receiving so that he will not look opportunistic or pushy, which he believes he is not. Consequently, another reason for Scott’s silence stems from the quality of the questions the reporters ask on behalf of the public. They are the questions to which Scott does not have simple answers and to which he does not want to respond hastily:

... their questions are too important to answer in the moment, to define in passing, simply to meet some kind of arbitrary deadline. What was the experience like? Why did it happen? What does it mean going forward? These are subjects for books. They are questions you meditate over for years. (Hawley, ch. 19)

Scott realises the gravity of these questions and does not want his answers to be too brief or too general and thus to allow them to be distorted by the media and misunderstood by the masses. His silence, however, is used with a different communicative intention by the media and results in his becoming “a subject of rumor and speculation” (Hawley, ch. 19). Cunningham broadcasts material full of inadequate and imprecise information about Scott: “A story that resembles his own, but isn’t. Born in the wrong hospital, attended a different elementary school, studied painting in Cleveland instead of Chicago” (Hawley, ch. 19). Cunningham tries to convince the public that Scott is

“[m]uscling his way into the spotlight, playing the humble knight” (Hawley, ch. 18). Instead of authenticity, Cunningham insinuates Scott’s deliberate performance aimed at gaining publicity and celebrity. A highly manipulative interview with JJ’s uncle and false accusations against Scott are the last straw—Scott breaks his silence and attends an interview during which Cunningham accuses him of being a liar. To support his argument, Cunningham plays fragments of Scott’s private conversations, but he is left speechless when Scott first addresses Cunningham’s illegal conduct and then reveals crucial information concerning the plane crash to successfully avert Cunningham’s and public attention from his private life, which is irrelevant to the truth about the cause of the accident. Having no previous access to the details concerning the cabin crew disclosed by Scott on air, Cunningham is effectively silenced during his own live program. Consequently, Scott’s confrontation with the media ends with the latter becoming silent upon suddenly learning what actually happened on board the plane. The chiasmic exchange of roles, that is, from silent witness to one presenting the facts and from news blusterer to silenced anchor, points to the constant tension between silence and voice/sound in the novel and to smooth transitions from one to the other.

SCOTT’S ART—SILENT FIGURES AND OBJECTS VOICED

Scott may not be the most talkative protagonist, but he expresses his thoughts and voices his opinions by means of an allegedly silent medium, namely, a painting. He paints a series of photorealistic scenes representing various catastrophes. These include train and traffic accidents, natural disasters and plane crashes: “Scott paints disaster scenes from the news—train wrecks, building collapses, and things like monsoons” (Hawley, ch. 17). Five of his works are elaborately described in the novel in separate chapters. The description of a painting, known in literary studies as ekphrasis, is a rhetorical and literary device that, by means of language, evokes and gives voice to an otherwise silent object (cf. Heffernan). Often defined as a “double representation” that uses one system of signs to represent another, ekphrasis is regarded to “speak” for the object silenced by the visual art and to make the absent object present, that is, to re-mediate the object by means of words.

What ekphrases describing Scott’s paintings communicate is the protagonist’s personal experience: “He was a disaster survivor in that he had

survived the disaster that was his life. And so that's what he painted.... *There is no separating yourself from the things you make*, he thought" (Hawley, ch. 8). Hence, ekphrases concerning his catastrophic art "may also be understood in an interpretative play as *mise en abyme* or complex argumentative technique beyond the surface description" (Führer and Banaszekiewicz 70). What happens to Scott on the narrative level, that is, having a miserable life and surviving a plane crash, is reflected in his art and its descriptions. The sense of the protagonist's grim fate is enhanced by a re-framing mediatisation known as ekphrasis. In other words, ekphrasis intensifies the tragic element in the main character's life.

Moreover, his artworks mostly represent the same victim of a traumatic event—a female figure depicted in various settings: the sites of an impending disaster or scenes immediately following one. The woman portrayed is Scott's sister who drowned in Lake Michigan at the age of sixteen. By painting her, Scott attempts to come to terms with her death. He struggles to express emotions which might otherwise be inexpressible in words. He pours his grief onto the canvas, trying to bring her back to life by means of art (cf. Pitkin). Scott also tries to understand the world and convey to his audience that accidents and disasters can unexpectedly happen to anyone at any time: "The universe is filled with things that don't make sense. Random coincidences.... These things happen every day, and none of us is immune" (Hawley, ch. 42).

To further problematise the encounters with paintings in the novel, let us consider the following ekphrastic passage:

If all you looked at was the center frame, you could convince yourself that nothing was wrong. That the girl in question—eighteen perhaps, with a wisp of hair blown across her eyes—is just out for a walk in a cornfield on an overcast day. She is facing us, this woman, having only seconds before emerged from a tight labyrinth of towering green. And though the sky atop the cornfield is a somewhat ominous gray, the woman and the front row of corn behind her is lit by a feverish sun, febrile and orange, so much so that she is squinting through her hair, one hand rising, as if to make out an object in the distance. It is the quality of light that draws you in, makes you ask—*What combination of colors, applied in what order, with what technique, created this thunderstorm glow?*... It is then you see what this girl has just now noticed. The tornado. That swirling devil's clot, that black maelstrom of cylindrical majesty.... Viewed from any place in the room, it appears to be coming right at you, and when you see that you take a step back. (Hawley, ch. 14)

The above fragment of an extensive ekphrasis "invites [the reader] to an intensified mental experience of imagery encompassing events, objects or

concepts" (Führer and Banaszkiwicz 48): the event of a tornado, a girl in a cornfield as the subject of the artwork, and the concepts of the brush strokes and paint application that form the image and contribute to the final effect. The reader is led to enter the scene evoked by the narrator and "see" the drama unfolding on canvas thanks to *enargeia*, that is, the evocative power of a descriptive passage. "Ekphrasis is irrevocably linked with the rhetorical ability to evoke an immediate image in the audience's mind and thus to provoke the intended emotional response" (Führer and Banaszkiwicz 50), like the reported response that on seeing the painting we want to step back from it because the painted tornado is coming at us.

The above seems to be true not only on the extradiegetic level of the reader, who can imagine the works of art due to their precise and elaborate descriptions, but also within the world presented. The paintings containing "images focused on large-scale transportation accidents" (Hawley, ch. 23), especially "a large passenger plane crash" (Hawley, ch. 23), are so disturbing to other characters that they become material evidence in the official plane crash investigation. To some investigators, the silent scenes painted by Scott seem to suggest his possible involvement in causing the accident. Without Scott's clear statement concerning his work, the silent images combined with his having been in the wrong place at the wrong time, that is, on the fatal flight and surviving the crash, might make a false impression of Scott's having carefully planned the accident in order to take advantage of the situation and become a celebrity artist. The FBI gets a warrant to seize all Scott's work, which is transported to the hangar where the official investigation takes place. This manoeuvre turns the site of investigation into a kind of museum space that houses the remains of the past event and turns the gathered evidence into works of art:

He stands now with a multi-jurisdictional team of agents and representatives from the airline and aircraft manufacturer, studying the paintings—not for their artistic pedigree, but as evidence. Is it possible, they ask themselves, that within these paintings are clues to the erasure of nine people and a million-dollar aircraft? It is a surreal exercise, made haunting by the location in which they stand. In the middle of the space, folding tables have been erected, upon which technicians have laid out the debris from the crash. With the addition of the paintings, there is now a tension in the space—a push/pull between wreckage and art that causes each man and woman to struggle with an unexpected feeling—that somehow the evidence has become art, not the other way around. (Hawley, ch. 34)

The presence of silent artworks transforms the space of the hangar into an art gallery, converting the gathered evidence into items of aesthetic value connected with particular qualities of feeling. Against the logic of forensic science that requires rational semiotics, the investigators attempt to find an explanation of the crash among the aesthetic qualities of paintings that were created before the tragic event and have nothing to do with the accident.

THE SILENCE OF BLACK BOXES

The third medium conveying silence in the novel is a flight recording which captures the sound of events in the cockpit of the plane.

The cockpit voice recorder, with microphones in each pilot's headset and another overhead between the pilots, records all flight crew conversation and other ambient cockpit noises. Potential sounds of interest include engine noise, warning alarms, cabin decompression noise, landing gear extension and retraction, and other clicks and pops. (Bibel 6)

Analysis of the recorded sounds allows detection of mechanical failure as a possible cause of the accident (Bibel 6). What is more, a flight data recorder registers over 88 different parameters which can be thoroughly analysed by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) in case of an aviation accident (Bibel 6).

In Hawley's novel, it takes time for the NTSB specialists on the investigation team to reconstruct and decode what happened in the final moments of the disastrous flight. But when they do, what can be heard on the recording at the beginning of the final phase of the flight is silence. The crash is preceded by a deadly silence, which indicates moral deliberations of the copilot. During the quiet moment Charles Busch is alone in the cockpit, he considers his life, feeling rage and disappointment as well as the pain of his most recent (and unfair, in his view) rejection by the flight attendant. It is in the silence of the cockpit that the copilot makes the horrific decision, finally breaking the silence:

That fucking bitch.

...The copilot, Charles Busch, is alone in the cockpit, and he is muttering these words under his breath. And then, louder, he says:

No.

And switches off the autopilot. (Hawley, ch. 42)

Thus, the recorded deliberate silence communicates the contemplation of one's life and indicates the moment of hesitation before the ultimate decision. Combined with the expectations of the investigation team listening attentively for any clue to why the plane crashed, that is, anything that might indicate system malfunction, mechanical failure or human error, silence here builds suspense before the moment which will unambiguously reveal the cause of the plane crash. Hawley compares this situation to watching a carefully framed scene in a horror film in which the protagonist leaves the room but the camera does not follow him or her, remaining "focused on nothing—an innocuous doorway perhaps, or a child's bed" (Hawley, ch. 42). With a growing sense of dread, the viewer looks around the silent room for some clue to what will happen next: "And so, with a creeping fear, we begin to search the room for something unusual, to strain against the silence for whatever whispers live beneath the ordinary" (Hawley, ch. 42). It is interesting to observe that silence and sound are presented here in combination with a moving image. The prolonged silence is compared to and linked with the visual uncanny, that is, the familiar object in a movie scene that becomes frightening. By analogy, silence recorded by the cockpit voice recorder and combined with the uncertainty of what will happen next evokes the feeling of dread and horror in the leading investigator:

It is this feeling that comes over Gus Franklin.... The silence in his car has a crackle to it, a hiss that fills the recycled air. It is machine noise, impenetrable, but unignorable. Gus reaches over and turns up the volume, the hiss becoming deafening. And then he hears whispering, a single word, whispered over and over again. (Hawley, ch. 42)

The uncanny silence is ultimately broken by the information everybody, including the reader, has been anticipating throughout the novel—the final sounds in the recording reveal the reason the plane crashed. In a highly dramatic and cinematic way, the moment the third kind of silence encountered in the novel is broken coincides with Scott's interview on TV in which he breaks the first kind of silence mentioned. The movement of the plot in relatively short passages from TV studio to Gus's car creates the impression of parallel actions happening at the same time, thus linking these two instances of breaking the silence.

CONCLUSION

Representations of different media—TV news, painting and black box recordings—interact with the corresponding instances of silence on the pages of Hawley’s novel *Before the Fall*. Silence is enfolded with voice—the two phenomena are complementary and bound by unresolvable tension. The presence of silence resonates with the presence of sound, and by extension, points to the presence of meaning. At the same time, silence might be an expression of a powerful rhetoric. It can invite manipulation and lead to the invention of a plausible but false version of events, as in the case of media coverage concerning Scott Burroughs. Silence may also communicate hesitation, reflection and deliberate choice, as in the cases of the main protagonist and the copilot, and can be the source of the uncanny feeling of dread that builds novelistic suspense. At the same time the distinction between the silent subject or object and the voiced one is not stable—what was silent might speak out and that endowed with voice might be silenced at any moment.

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KIEDY MEDIA NAPOTYKAJĄ CISZĘ – ANALIZA INTERAKCJI
W *PRZED KATASTROFĄ* NOAH HAWLEYA

Streszczenie

Cisza/milczenie jest nieodłącznie związane z dźwiękiem/głosem i często bywa nośnikiem znaczenia. Oba zjawiska uzupełniają się, a obecność ciszy wskazuje na obecność dźwięku i odwrotnie. Artykuł analizuje interakcje między różnymi mediami (wiadomości telewizyjne, obraz malarski i nagrania z czarnej skrzynki) a odpowiadającą im ciszą/milczeniem w powieści *Before the Fall* (Przed katastrofą) Noah Hawleya. Pod uwagę wzięte zostało milczenie głównego bohatera i unikanie przez niego kontaktu z mediami, milczenie dzieła sztuki wyrażone za pomocą ekfrazy i cisza zarejestrowana przez czarne skrzynki. Retoryka każdego omawianego medium i jego interakcja z odpowiadającą mu ciszą wskazują na znaczącą rolę ciszy w omawianej powieści.

Słowa kluczowe: cisza; media; wiadomości telewizyjne; ekfaza; nagranie z czarnej skrzynki; reprezentacja; Noah Hawley.