



Silence as a Metaphor in the Polish Radio Reportages during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Aneta Wójciszyn-Wasil

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland)

e-mail: aneta.wojciszyn-wasil@kul.pl

Abstract. Silence became one of the important aspects of the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article discusses how this social experience was presented in radio reportages, for which silence is not only a topic but also an element of the construction of the message. The reports of the Polish Radio, produced in lockdown conditions, document silence in a double perspective: the transformation of the broadcast sphere of large metropolises and the private sound space of the characters. Silence, as a phonic phenomenon, functions as a universal metaphor for fear, threat, “curse of isolation,” but also hope. Experiencing silence goes beyond the individual feeling thanks to a metaphoric line through which the recorded stories gain a universal context. The analysis of audible materials shows the mechanism of the constitution of these meanings, as well as selected media functions of silence as a tool for modelling content and managing the recipients’ attention.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, radio reportage, sound, silence, metaphor.

Introduction

Radio broadcast is an uninterrupted stream of sound. Different types of sounds: voice, music, acoustic effects constitute a semantic structure proper for the aforementioned medium. Silence is a unique element in the audible framework, which is used rarely but represents at the same time its strongest component. The communicative and aesthetic potential of silence is most fully exploited by artistic radio genres, including sound reportage. The said audible form combining journalism and art is a record of authentic events and, at the same time, an orderly arrangement of sound elements, precisely organized by means of editing technology. In no other media does silence constitute such a strong means of communication as in the radio broadcast due to its non-visual character.

During the COVID-19 threat, silence became one of the common social experiences. The transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020) since the 11th of March 2020, forcing people to implement restrictive measures to limit their social activity and functioning in public space. As a result of the lockdown, noisy metropolises turned into “cities of silence” overnight: devoid of the characteristic hustle and bustle, the prevailing noises of transport or the buzz of passers-by. An unexpected audio-sphere transformation started to function as one of the elements of the media narrative concerning the worldwide pandemic. In New York “all the usual sounds of Lower Manhattan – car horns, idle chatter and the frequent rumble of the subway down below – have been replaced by the low hum of wind and birds” (Bui and Badger 2020). A similar tone at the other end of the globe was used to describe how the usually vibrant Cebu City in the Philippines died: “Only the roosters crowing and dogs barking to break the silence” (Mahjoub 2020). Social media were flooded with video materials recorded by drones (drone footage) titled “The Silent City,” “ghost town,” “eerie quiet” presenting Chicago, Rome, Budapest, Liverpool or Warsaw all stuck in motion. “The difference between silence and noise has finally ceased to be just a theory. Many of us have managed to experience it with our own ears.” (Nowicki 2020.)

The aim of the present study is to investigate documents broadcast in audio media, for which the indicated acoustic phenomenon is not only a topic but also an element of the message structure, in order to illustrate the effects of silence experienced during the pandemic. The analysis targeted the radio reportages made from March to May 2020, when Poland suffered the strictest restrictions related to COVID-19. The study included the Polish Radio reportages aired both on national and 17 regional radio stations also made available on the stations’ websites in the form of podcasts. The selection involved the productions directly referring to auditory experiences without considering a number of recordings on other aspects of the pandemic, such as remote education, the health care situation, volunteer work or economic problems caused by the appearance of the coronavirus. The aim of the present analysis is to provide answers to detailed questions concerning the description of silence in the radio reportages made during the said period and the use of silence as a phonic tool for creating meanings. The presented characteristics are based on audible material. Its subsequent stages take into account the structure of the radio work and the conditions of radio broadcasting that directly determine the shape of the message. The transcripts of fragments of radio broadcasts presented below include notes inserted in square

brackets, which regard the information concerning the middle-distance sounds, non-verbal elements of the statement and meta-textual comments.

Radio Reportage within the Context of Sound Studies

The acoustic dimension of the pandemic documented in the radio reportage is studied in the context of sound studies defined as “an interdisciplinary area that studies the material production and consumption of music, sound, noise and silence” (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2012, 7). The phenomenon of sound within the framework of sound studies is analysed in terms of diverse aspects, i.e. acoustic ecology (Schafer 1994 [1977], Truax 2001 [1984]), sound design, sound art, listening practice, acoustemology (Feld 2015) and anthropology of sound (Schulze, 2018, 2020). This diversity of possible approaches makes Jonathan Sterne define sound studies as “the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival” (2012, 2).

The notion of soundscape proposed by R. Murray Schafer (1994 [1977]) is the starting point for reporting sound in terms of perception and society. He regards sounds characteristic for a specific space or situation as an element of sonic environment. That category does not only include a set of audible feedback – sound features of reality, but also subjective feeling and sound experience. Marshall McLuhan (1962) defines a phonic stratum as “acoustic space,” underlying the necessity for detachment from visuality in communication. In the Polish discourse, sound is often defined as “audiosphere” (Stanisz 2012, Losiak and Tańczuk 2014, Szpunar 2020) implemented into scientific research by Maria Gołaszewska (1997) as an aspect of “easthetics of senses.”

Exhibiting sound draws attention to the activity of listening, raising awareness, and acoustic sensitivity. Schafer points to the need for modelling these skills and for special preparation to the listening experience, naming the process “ear cleaning” (1994, 208–211). In what concerns this perspective, the reflections of Pauline Oliveros, who introduced the notion of “deep listening,” are particularly valuable (2005). The composer recommends the practice of focusing intensively not only on musical sounds, but also on the sounds of nature, daily life, and mindset.

In radio reportages, registration and composition of acoustic details is combined with generation of emotions and development of narration, and particularly with the use of personal narrative (Lindgren 2016). Radio reportages documenting volatile sound space during the pandemic can be distinguished from other audial

projects, for instance *#Stayhomesounds* on the sonic portal, *Cities and Memory* (Droumeva 2021).

Radio Reportage in the Period of COVID-19

According to Monika Białek: “radio reportage presents a coherent image of the external reality registered on the spot. This image is painted with sounds, it has some aesthetic value highlighted by the whole set of radio ways of expressions and is composed by the journalist on the basis of authentic events” (Białek 2018, 109–110). The documentary quality of the broadcast is stressed by the characters’ natural, spontaneous statements and the real acoustic background of the recorded place. Another distinguishing element of the genre is its non-accidental composition and dramaturgy. The registered conversations and events build an independent story. As researchers emphasize (Klimczak 2011b, Ryczkowski 2018, McLeish and Link 2015) reportage, without giving up its informative function, combines the latter with an aesthetic one, which is associated with the conceptual framework of artistic journalism (Postema and Deuze, 2020). Reportage gains its expressive power through authenticity, personal character of the spoken word, sometimes extremely intimate, as well as through the sound qualities of a given recording.

Making any radio reportage has always required advanced competencies and a mature journalistic style. However, in the conditions of social isolation and the COVID-19 threat, this task has become a real challenge. “How can we make reportages and podcasts when we cannot leave the house?” – the esteemed reporters of the Polish Radio, Hanna Bogoryja-Zakrzewska and Katarzyna Błaszczyk, asked on their blog in March 2020. “We cannot visit a particular site, that is, we cannot do what is most important for a reporter. We are devoid of a possibility to meet another man.” (Bogoryja-Zakrzewska and Błaszczyk 2020.) The recordings on the phone or instant messaging as well as the inclusion of amateur recordings made by the characters themselves in the broadcasts became a solution. In this way, the protagonists became co-creators of the programmes. The creator-protagonist role reversal functioned the other way, too: more often than usual, the author’s voice and a record of his or her everyday life can be heard in reportages. These turned the journalist into a protagonist of a broadcast.

Reporters used social media more frequently than ever before. Social media started to function not only as a platform for the promotion of programmes, but also as a space for contacts with the characters as well as recording of the content material. The reporters of the Polish Radio in Gdańsk and Lublin, Magda

Świerczyńska-Dolot and Katarzyna Michalak, led a joint sound project called *I Do Not Hear* (*Nie słyszę*, 2020).¹ Their original idea reversed the traditional production strategy and distribution of audio content: firstly, the journalists were collecting audio materials on the Internet for a few weeks, placing short audio recordings on a specially created blog. Secondly, the statements compiled in this way were exploited only in the next stage to be aired on a radio station. The reportage sound layer – likewise, the everyday lives of the characters in these broadcasts – was/were saturated with the sounds of Internet communicators, smartphones and computers. The human voice modulated on the phone was provided with an “electronic” sound and the statements were often accompanied by acoustic pollution: wind striking the microphone, crackling, signal fading, providing a new aesthetic of the professional radio reportage focusing so far on pure sound and perfect acoustics. Unusual types of radio reportages made during the pandemic resulted from the limitations imposed on editorial work and, at the same time, from the need to find solutions that could be attractive to the listener. Radio reportages are, therefore, a valuable documentation of the lockdown as an exceptional social moment and a repository of original stories about the “quiet contemporaneity.”

Reporter Stories as the Documentary of Silent Cities

The main components of the polyphonic narrative structure of radio reportage are: the human voice, acoustic effects, music and silence (Wójciszyn-Wasil 2018). Individual sequences of a recording build overlapping layers of sound, creating a soundscape: expressive sounds in the foreground and acoustic background coming from afar. In the specific sound texture, all elements have their own meanings.

The first group of reporter stories can be regarded as documentaries of silent cities. The protagonists of Joanna Sikora’s reportage *Listen to Silence* (*Posłuchaj ciszy*, 2020)² describe how the bustling streets of Rome, Bilbao and New York usually sound. The inhabitants of the mentioned cities, like professional reporters, provide accounts from the place of the events: “It’s going to be a little shaky because I’m walking down the street. I need to buy something to eat so I left home. [pause] Beautiful sky, a walk down an empty street.” “It is a beautiful, sunny afternoon in Spain, for now I am the only person here. [distant hum] Attention! There is a car, something unusual.” “Hi, hello. We’re broadcasting live from New York. I’m

1 Online: <https://nieslysze.pl/>. Last accessed 01. 05. 2021.

2 Online: <https://www.radio.bialystok.pl/reportaz/index/id/181986>. Last accessed 01. 05. 2021.

going to work. I also wanted to show you that there's no one around, the streets are deserted." The silence looming out of the quoted statements is only signalled in the verbal layer by the terms: "An empty street," "a car – something unusual," "there's no one around," and it is complemented and at the same time authenticated by the sound of the middle-distance. Instead of the sound of street cafes, car horns and shouting crowds or the music of street musicians, a weak, steady noise reaches the listener's ears from a distance. The seemingly ordinary situation of going out for shopping or to work, which becomes an event worthy of media attention, emphasizes the uncommonness of the situation in pandemic conditions.

The description of a quiet metropolitan street in another part of the programme is supplemented with further details:

"It's just empty everywhere, there's nobody. There's a bus or a car coming through from time to time. Generally, it's very quiet. When I wake up during the year, there are a lot of shops around with the external shutters pulled down by the shops for the night and lifted up in the morning; these blinds make an awful big bang which can be heard everywhere [the police car signal is getting stronger in the background] the Carabineers drove by [the police siren signal, hum] [the protagonist comes back to the interrupted thought] no one is lifting them, this sound is absent."

Silence becomes an acoustic synonym for absence. In a literal sense, it expresses the absence of sounds characteristic of a given place, such as the sound of the lifted-up shop roller blinds – constituting some kind of acoustic reference point for the inhabitants of the Italian capital – mentioned by the protagonist of the radio broadcast. In a broader context, silence refers to the loss of active life, everyday rush rhythm, intense social interactions. According to the findings of audio anthropologists, hustle and bustle is understood as an "evidence for the significance and power of the city and the well-being of its inhabitants" (Losiak 2012, 15). As Brandon LaBelle notes: "noise is not only environmental disturbance. Rather, it remarkably provides a key experience for the establishment of an acoustic community in the making" (2014, 82). He further defines noise as "a relational exchange where sound is also voice, dialogue, sharing, and confrontation," "a rich encounter for the making of responsibility" (2014, 82). The sense of security, prosperity and an encounter during the pandemic has been taken away not only from the inhabitants of large cities. Silence has become a universal symbol of the sense of threat, fear and uncertainty.

The moment when a police siren is heard in the background of the protagonist's speech draws attention in the above reportage excerpt. The woman tries to ignore

the siren, but the sound is so strong that it interrupts the issue being discussed. Then the sound of the siren enters the foreground, filling the pause. The character refers to this sound, unambiguously identifying it with words: “the carabinieri drove by” and only after a while does she continue the unfinished sentence. The described scene lasts only 7 seconds, but the cumulated sounds and their peculiar dramaturgy create a suggestive image that advances to the rank of a sound metaphor. Authentic announcements and words recorded in a real, concrete space lose their literalness, opening new dimensions of interpretation. “By taking the interpretation to a deeper level, we touch on some general truth about reality, we read the story on several levels of meaning” (Klimczak 2011a, 132). The moment of reality recorded in the sound shows how fear and danger interrupt everyday life, come to the fore and necessitate changes.

The police sirens and statements “Stay at home,” issued through a megaphone, are not the only contrasts to the silence of the big city. Concerts on balconies and applause for medical service are also characteristic sound accents of the pandemic. They are a sign of solidarity and a sense of community in ghost cities and they give encouragement and hope. The noise generated by spontaneous actions brings back vitality for a moment and a sense of causality. Breaking the silence removes social distance. The discussed programme by Sikora includes an extensive sequence of amateur applause recordings for health service. The author mixes sounds from Rome and New York, displaying their supra-local dimension. A similar commentary provided by one of the protagonists reveals how the city’s audiosphere and its experiencing change: “At the beginning of the quarantine we had such a social initiative that we met and sang together on the balconies. We organized the said balcony concerts because it still seemed to all of us that it was okay, well, we believed that it was enough just to stay at home and we would overcome it all [breathing], but when we saw these growing numbers, we stopped laughing and I guess, nobody felt like having fun or singing on the balconies or playing loud music [sighing], I really had the impression that there was a bit – literally – like the silence of the grave. It was a moment when I didn’t even see my neighbours on the balconies. When I was going out on the balcony, I saw an empty world and I had the feeling that in this silence there was such a great tension [pause] [sigh], fear, terror [breath] such a great mourning [pause], such even national mourning. [pause] Although nobody really talked about it, [pause] I felt it floating somewhere.”

The silence, which at the beginning of the pandemic was perceived as an annoying effect of forced isolation, turned into a symbol of tension, fear and mourning in the following weeks. Its significance became increasingly negative.

The reasons were the worsening epidemiological situation, further information about infections and deaths as well as the (individual and collective) reaction to the said dramatic circumstances. The evolution of the sensual perception of silence presented in the protagonist's statement is simultaneously a record of the transformation of emotions accompanying her feeling. Personal reference to the context models its meaning. The same character who described silence as "frightening," "of the grave" can give it a positive overtone, calling it "the silence of hope, of some concentration" at the moment of the decreasing range of COVID-19. As she explains, silence means for her then that "the situation is slowly improving for us, that we can manage and that we should stay locked down for some time, that we still need to endure more and that we can't give up."

The specificity of silence as an acoustic phenomenon allows it to become a sign of extreme existential experiences: both mourning and hope can be a prelude to catastrophe as well as an expectation for a better future. Its semantics emerges in confrontation with a contrasting sound. The observations made here are in line with the findings of other researchers (Komisaruk 2014, Losiak 2011), who stress the fact that silence refers to a specific situation, redefining its meaning and value each time.

"Within the four Walls" – Silence of Enclosed Spaces

Radio reports document not only the unique sound environment of the pandemic period, but also the experience of lockdown "from the inside," showing what life is like for people locked down in their own homes for weeks. The listener is given insight into a private space accessible only to co-inhabitants, which introduces a personal perspective to the narrative. Reporters often arrange recordings in the space where the protagonist operates on a daily basis, as it is one of the ways of audile character identification as well as a provision of a psychological mechanism facilitating greater honesty on the part of an interlocutor. When paying visits to people in their own flats became impossible during the COVID-19 threat, their function was taken over by recordings made by the characters themselves, which at the same time enriched the construction of radio broadcasts and strengthened the authenticity of the conveyed messages. The above form of cooperation facilitated the creation of the reportage entitled: *In isolation* (*W izolacji*)³ by Magda Świerczyńska-Dolot from Radio Gdańsk. "Some time ago

3 Online: <https://m.radiogdansk.pl/audycje-rg/manufaktura-reportazu/item/109343-jak-bedzie-wygladal-swiat-po-koronawirusie-czy-wroci-jeszcze-normalnosc-reportaz-w-izolacji>. Last accessed 01. 05. 2021.

I wrote a message on a social network. I asked my friends for audio recordings concerning the time of isolation” (Świerczyńska-Dolot 2020). In one of the first sequences of the recording, the question “Do you hear?” is uttered and after a pause, when no sounds reach the listener’s ears, the answer is given: “This is silence.” It is puzzling why this “sound emptiness” draws so much attention. The protagonist explains: “In such a large family like ours, with seven people, silence is a deficit, we still miss it. I miss it when I run between the kids, plug something in, when they have online lessons, I miss it when they argue. And now there’s silence. And I miss it.” Family life inside four walls is getting more intense. Family members function within a limited, common space and are forced to undertake various, sometimes mutually exclusive, activities. One of the characters notices: “Our home has become home, school and workplace at the same time, in exactly that order of priorities.”

Remotely based work and education in lockdown conditions forces each person staying in a flat to perform tasks simultaneously. In such a reality, the home ceases to be a natural “refuge of peace and quiet.” This situation is illustrated by Katarzyna – the main character of Hanna Bogoryja-Zakrzewska’s reportage: “Rose at one desk, having her ZOOM classes; Jeremiah at the other end of the room, sitting back to Rose, has his classes. Marcin, in the other room, is involved in whole day long saxophone classes with his students; I have my own classes with students and there is one more person – poor little Jonah –, who usually gets a tablet to play educational games. And simply, everybody is engrossed in talking to their screen” (Bogoryja-Zakrzewska 2020).

The radio broadcast bears a telling title, *Where Silence is Missing* (*Tam, gdzie ciszy brak*)⁴, and portrays two families through their everyday activities: three children are raised in one family and seven kids are brought up in the other one. Both families play music, the children deal not only with their homework, but also practice playing the instruments and there is a new-born baby as well, who needs care. All the said circumstances make silence a difficult state to maintain. This is evidenced by means of mobile phone recordings made by a mother and her daughter. Expressive conversations, joint learning, singing as well as loudly voiced children’s rebellions against their duties are heard in them. One of the characters says straightforwardly: “I miss silence, I miss silence the most in the world” and adds: “when I find a moment to write something, I have to put on my headphones and cut myself off from the world with some other music, so I

4 Online: <https://www.polskieradio.pl/80/1007/Artykul/2500537,Tam-gdzie-ciszy-brak-reportaz-Hanny-BogoryjaZakrzewskiej>. Last accessed 01. 05. 2021.

miss silence.” Two overlapping layers of sound constitute the background to the quoted statement: a lively exchange of opinions between children and playing the saxophone. The second trick to enhance the impression of noise is to modify the levels of sound intensity: the sound in the background is so loud that the words that should be well heard in the foreground blend in and, consequently, the listener is forced to make more effort to understand them. With these acoustic solutions, an overwhelming hustle and bustle of the recorded family is not only referred to by the characters, but becomes a listener’s direct experience, too.

The need to combine work, education, household duties and the diversity of needs and expectations of each family member makes silence – even the one that remains at the level of a dream – an escape from intense stimuli, rest, an equivalent of peace and suppressed emotions. It is also a longing for an orderly daily rhythm, concentration, sometimes listening to oneself, regaining control over one’s life.

The silence experienced within four walls recorded by radio reporters has yet another dimension: slow motion, distance, suspension of daily routine. One of the participants of the sound project *I Do Not Hear* notes: “At the beginning of the pandemic, the silence denoted some calmness and rest from everyday life and duties. It was only later that we started to notice things connected with this silence [pause]. It is due to the fact that I miss not only sounds, but also silence that is not burdened with a sense of distance and coolness” (Michalak and Świerczyńska-Dolot 2020). Other statements point to a longing for silence experienced in a museum, office or forest, “a specific silence as it is not altogether quiet in the forest” (Michalak and Świerczyńska-Dolot 2020). The references mentioned above show that the protagonists express their desire to return to direct contacts, to work with others, to change their place and to have a close, uninterrupted virtual contact with art. Marcin, who recorded his poignant speech in Australia, referred to an empty church, to which he, as a priest, refused admission to people usually seeking consolation and spiritual strength there: “Maybe someone even knows I’m inside, I don’t know. I can’t let the person in, it’s very painful.” Staying silent requires people to refrain from reacting to one another, from spontaneous kindness and to give up meetings. Silence becomes an expression of longing for the other person, for conversation, common laughter and the natural sound of human voice, not deformed by the Internet communication, in which “this subtlety and these nuances, something that is difficult to describe in words and which is always obvious when we meet someone live, escape” (Michalak and Świerczyńska-Dolot 2020). Therefore, silence becomes synonymous with loneliness, abandonment, the “curse of isolation” (Świerczyńska-Dolot 2020).

It is significant that the issue of increased acoustic sensitivity returns in the stories of silence compiled during the pandemic. Experiencing a muffled space forces us to listen carefully: “Now when I’m in the garden, the singing of birds seems to be more distinct,” “now I start listening again, I’m curious to discover new sounds,” “now I can hear every little detail, every sound of my house more clearly” (Michalak and Świerczyńska-Dolot 2020). A sharpened perception stimulates a deeper reflection, in which silence ceases to be merely a lack of stimuli: “After many, many years it has come to my attention that this silence has as many shades as the white colour includes.”

Silence as a Tool for Creating Meanings in Audile Messages

According to Joanna Sosnowska, “silence is not directly synonymous with absence or emptiness in the media message. It is a specific form of existence of meanings and emotions, which cannot be conveyed through other means of expression” (2019, 101). However, radio researchers stress that silence, as a stylistic element of the message, occurs “on an exceptional basis” (Kita 2017, 38). Grażyna Stachyra writes about a perceptible “fear of pause” in the media, especially on the radio (2019, 72). In artistic genres like the reportage, silence is a sparingly and precisely used tool for modulating meaning. It is opposed to sound and has great potential for expression: “strengthens, highlights, exposes, marks the dramatic moment” (Wójciszyn-Wasil 2012, 109). Monika Białek notes that: “Silence can be heard most clearly in the radio reportage. It does not only sound, it also plays” (2010, 87). It can be noticed that this phonic sound is exploited mainly as an acoustic background and a pause separating words and phrases in the reports of the COVID-19 pandemic period.

The absence of background sounds in the sound-rich reportage structure facilitates the exposition of the foreground sounds. Michał Kaziów, writing about this function of silence, compares it to the whiteness of a canvas or a blank sheet of paper (1973, 107), as it does not distract the recipient but focuses his/her attention on the content. The most personal statements of the protagonists, often concerning painful experiences, breakthrough decisions, moments of re-evaluation of life are usually recorded in silence. The sequence of Joanna Sikora’s programmes, in which the character sincerely acknowledges her powerlessness and fear, was recorded in such an arranged environment without any additional noises: “Me during coronavirus... [voice suspension] [pause] [breathing] I guess it’s really the greatest lesson of humility in my whole life [the voice breaks]

[prolonged pause] that there are so many things that are... [pause] beyond my control and I can't help it [pause]. All I can do is accept it, get over it [pause], [shivering breath], live with the hope that everything will be all right, that we will be able to get through, that we will overcome it, [pause], that we will come back to life that may even be better than ever before" (Sikora 2020).

The narrative is a confidential confession requiring the attention of the recipient. Silence reinforces the said effect, forcing the recipient to become more involved. Silence as a pause between the words or phrases of a monologue does not only serve the purpose of taking in air, it also has an intonational function that enhances the meaning of the words following the pause and enables the recipient to understand the text (Bloch 2013, 69). In a monosensory, audible message, the aim is usually to shorten the utterance as much as possible in order to achieve a dynamic and colloquial effect. Breaking with this principle in reportage emphasizes the uniqueness and range of a given issue and its personal character. Sometimes, non-verbal elements, such as a sigh, loud breathing with a clearly audible quavering revealing a hardly restrained sob, appear in this space filled with silence. The lack of fluency typical of spoken language (Majewska-Tworek 2014, 154) is a sign of reportage authenticity. According to Maciej Drygas, author of radio plays and reportages: "a man who glides smoothly through his life often sounds less believable than the one who laboriously evokes image after image from his memory" (2010, 323). More often than usually, silence occurs as an important component of the message in radio reports on the pandemic. The intervals between individual sound sequences are long and clear, which slows down the pace of speech and deprives the recipient of the perceptual comfort. In this way, tension is built, the drama of the situation is emphasized and emotions are generated. It confirms the potential of silence as an effective tool for managing the recipient's attention.

Conclusions

Silence and its experience in the media narrative about the pandemic are particularly interesting in radio broadcasts based on auditory experiences. The reports of the Polish Radio, produced from March to May 2020, document unusual lockdown circumstances, while at the same time make people sensitive to new sounds, resulting from lifestyle changes in the face of the threat of COVID-19. The broadcasts discussed above include both reporter recordings from Spain, Italy and the United States presenting big cities devoid of the characteristic hustle and bustle, as well as personal stories about the silence of apartments

where the protagonists of the recordings were locked for weeks. Silence ceases to be understood solely as the elimination of noise, and becomes a metaphor for danger, fear, loneliness, longing for a return to daily activities, and on the other hand, it is read as a sign of deeper reflection, greater attention and hope. These multi-directional and even contradictory connotations are not mutually exclusive, since the meaning and value of silence is constituted in contexts.

Experiencing silence goes beyond the individual feeling thanks to a metaphoric line through which the recorded stories gain a universal context. The researchers and media creators regard the aforementioned approach “an essential structural element of good radio reportage” (Sygizman-Klimczak 2018, 37). The metaphor takes the form not only of a lexical juxtaposition but of an elaborate configuration of various sounds, shaping multidimensional scenes.

Tackling the subject of radiophonic silence requires a deeper reflection on its location and function in the structure of the sound material. Silence as background for the leading voices plays the role of an acoustic stage design, as a backdrop to the narrative situation. The pauses in the protagonists’ statements not only segment the content, but also emphasize the importance of individual phrases. They also point to the spontaneous and emotional character of the argument as well as confirm its authenticity. The “Space of Silence” in the radio broadcast facilitates the management of the listeners’ involvement, because the silence perception demands their participation. Silence has become a productive formula for a media narrative in a radio reportage about the pandemic, which provided an opportunity to discover new possibilities of audile communication and expose the value of sound. Radio broadcasts are a record of the state of silence and a kind of watchful listening so unusual for modern civilization. This new aesthetic of sound provides an impulse for further research into the evolution of audio production and the function of silence in the media.

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