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Beyond Language: Music and Costume in Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993)

There is a silence where hath been no sound,
There is a silence where no sound may be

(Thomas Hood, *To Silence*¹)

Language is an essential element in the process of creating the socio-cultural reality. This means that language is imbued with power. Thus, it becomes the main tool in establishing the subject position of individuals. It is within the linguistic discourse that subjectivity is being established, which is supported by Heidegger's claim that Being is disclosed in the essence of language since "Being speaks always and everywhere throughout language".² Though one of its distinctive qualities is the unequal distribution of power, which inevitably causes a system based on numerous inequalities. Therefore, language may be an attribute of power since meaning arises from language but it can also become an oppressive phenomenon because it is capable of taking the meaning away. As a result, not every individual has the access to language. In the traditionally patriarchal society it is *woman* that is excluded from language. Respectively, it is *man* that has power over language to define meaning and it is *he* that holds power in language. Eventually, this leads to the rise of binary system of duali-

¹ Fragment wiersza Thomasa Hooda zatytułowanego *To Silence* pochodzi z: W. Jerrold, *Thomas Hood: His Life and Times*, Nowy Jork 1907, s. 200. Książka dostępna jest na stronie internetowej <http://books.google.com>, zapis sporządzono 21.01.2010 r.

² M. Heidegger, *The Anaximander Fragment*. W: *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy*, tłum. D. F. Krell i F. A. Capuzzi, Nowy Jork 1985, s. 52.

ties which provides men with the subject position within linguistic discourse and simultaneously excludes women from language. Consequently, the system of meaning is built on a binary logic that is both dualistic and hierarchical.

The hierarchy based on dualism relates directly to the issue of gender binary division within which woman is always positioned as the Other, meaning a lack against which the masculine subject defines itself. Simon de Beauvoir remarks that

humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. (...) She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.³

This gender based division positions man as an autonomous subject within the realm of language and relegates woman to its margins. Hence, it may be assumed that it is the phallogentric language that strips woman of meaning, denying her subjectivity within discourse.

The subject position of an individual is constituted within language and the symbolic. In the light of the theory of psychoanalysis the question of subjectivity is inseparably related to possessing the phallus. Hence, women unavoidably identify lack – they are the negative Other. Consequently, the “I” position is reserved only for men, while women are denied access to the symbolic and are deprived of their own autonomous voice. They are always defined against men. This marginalisation of women has its origins in Lacan’s development of Freud’s theory of the acquisition of gendered subjectivity into a general theory of society and culture. Lacan assumes that “both meaning and subjectivity are structured in relation to a primary signifier, the Phallus, which governs the symbolic order of society and culture”.⁴ In Lacanian theory the acquisition of self-awareness and subjectivity within language is related to the process of misrecognition which takes place in an infant during the mirror phase,

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.⁵

³ S. de Beauvoir, *Introduction from ‘The Second Sex’*. W: *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, red. L. M. Alcoff i E. Mendieta, Oxford 2003, s. 150.

⁴ Ch. Weedon, *Feminism, Theory, and the Politics of Difference*, Oxford 1999, s. 81.

⁵ J. Lacan, *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*. W: *Continental Philosophy: An Anthology*, red. W. McNeill i K. S. Feldman, Oxford 1998, s. 330.

This experience of the fragmented body without a definite sense of a separate entity becomes the basis for all the future identifications by the subject once it has entered the symbolic order of language. This is that lack of fullness, self-presence, and the power to control meaning that motivate language. It is through the identification with the mirror reflection, which constitutes the Other, that an individual enters the symbolic order. However, according to Lacan this order is synonymous to patriarchy since the difference which makes the meaning possible can be guaranteed only by the transcendental primary signifier – the phallus.

Due to occupying the position of the Other, woman cannot experience the process of identification. She is the Other against which identification takes place. She is the negative signifier through the exclusion of which meaning is attained. Yet she cannot generate meaning for herself. In the phallogocentric linguistic system masculinity denotes what is universal while femininity marks what is peripheral. Therefore, there is no place for woman within language since the very act of enunciation negates her existence. Hence, in reference to women language inevitably becomes an oppressive phenomenon.

The oppressive function of language contributes to perpetuating a discursive formation of gender division based on unequal power relations. It is language itself that denies woman the possibility of free self-expression because the use of language instantly necessitates relations of hierarchy, exclusion and domination. Thus, in her 1993 film *The piano* Jane Campion creates a female protagonist who decides to reject the traditional linguistic conventions which would deny her female subjectivity for the benefit of alternative ways of expression. Therefore, the film introduces a mute protagonist, Ada McGrath, who travels in the mid-nineteenth century from Scotland to New Zealand with her ten-year-old daughter, Flora, to marry a man she has never met. Ada does not speak at all but her muteness is her deliberate choice since she refused to speak a long time ago. At the beginning of the film, the viewers are informed by the heard voice-over, which is a voice in Ada's head, saying, "I have not spoken since I was six years old. No one knows why, not even me. My father says it is a dark talent and the day I take it into my head to stop breathing will be my last... The strange thing is I don't think myself silent, that is, because of my piano".⁶

Thus, Ada's muteness is highly symbolic and plays an essential role in a presentation of a protagonist who escapes the socio-cultural norms and codes of behaviour imposed on women in the Victorian Age. Ada's withdrawal into a world of silence is a manifestation of her defiance and rebellion. She chooses

⁶ *Fortepian*, scen. J. Campion, reż. J. Campion, wyst. H. Hunter, H. Keitel, S. Neil, A. Paquin i in., prod. Jan Chapman Productions & CiBy 2000, Australia (1993).

to live in a peculiar kind of isolation, separated from the world she cannot accept due to its rigid conventions strictly imposed on each individual. Therefore, she withdraws into silence. Her refusal to speak can be considered a powerful symbol of not conforming to the generally expected order of patriarchal society. Consequently, the piano becomes Ada's principal means of communication. Though she can also communicate in writing and in sign language with Flora, who translates and speaks for her mother, Ada's passionate music expresses her feelings best and entirely. Her way of playing the piano is exceptional, she enlivens every tune of this instrument which is connected to her in a mysteriously inexplicable way. In the film Aunt Morag remarks, "She does not play the piano as we do... no, she is a strange creature, and her playing is strange, like a mood that passes into you... To have a sound creep inside you is not all pleasant".⁷ This penetrability of Ada's piano music results from the fact that she *speaks* through its tunes. It is her deliberately chosen form of voice, it is *a language beyond language*.

This withdrawal into silence on the side of Ada tends to follow Jacques Lacan's phallogocentric theory of language which presupposes that "meaning arises from difference. In the order of language, a signifier attains reference to a signified through the exclusion of other signifiers. In patriarchal culture, that which is excluded is the feminine".⁸ Thus, Lacan defines woman in the negative and positions her as the cultural representation of lack. Hence, woman as the symbol of lack has no place within language and has no voice of her own. Lacan's theory assumes that "[t]here is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words".⁹ Since subjectivity involves entry into language, which is always already masculine, woman is denied the subject position within discourse. She can neither be a subject nor she can speak by herself because it is the phallus that is the universal signifier and woman is always its negative. Therefore, "within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*".¹⁰ In other words, women represent a category which is linguistically absent. They become subordinated and finally excluded from the linguistic discourse.

According to Lacan, silence, which characterises the pre-linguistic phase of the development of a subject, is natural to women. The process of entering into successive phases connected with the realm of culture and language leads women inevitably to alienation and functioning in a symbolic order alien to

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A. Elliott, *Social Theory since Freud: Traversing Social Imaginaries*, Londyn 2004, s. 68.

⁹ Cyt. za: S. Frosh, *Sexual Difference: Masculinity and Psychoanalysis*, Nowy Jork 1994, s. 118.

¹⁰ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Nowy Jork 1999, s. 14.

them because “women are by definition excluded from language... it is impossible in principle for a woman to express herself knowingly in the Symbolic, so becoming a full subject of that order of experience”.¹¹ Since woman is denied the access to language, then the only alternative is no language at all, that is silence. This reasoning would account for Ada’s renunciation of traditional language for the benefit of music and gesticulation, the both of which offer resistance to the established norms. Thus, Ada’s music and gesticulation, which cannot be simply translated into words, emphasise the protagonist’s distance toward the outside world. Ada’s peculiar “speech” is highly ambiguous since it is full of vagueness and numerous understatements. Yet it is this peculiar pantomime of gestures and her expressive way of playing the piano that make it possible for the protagonist to express her genuine feelings and to communicate without the requirement to use any conventionalised linguistic structures that she could find oppressive.

Through her refusal to use the traditional language, Ada manifests her rejection of the established order in the Victorian Age. Instead she creates her own world based on a set of rules which are set exclusively by herself. In addition, Ada’s muteness does not refer only to rejecting traditional linguistic structures but it also becomes a strong protest against a submissive participation in the socio-cultural reality. Being aware that any language would suppress her self, the protagonist chooses no language at all. She withdraws into silence and now the piano music becomes the ultimate link between Ada and the outside world. Hence, the piano is in a way an extension of Ada herself. It is a powerful metaphor of Ada’s deepest self – her beautiful, expressive, battered soul.

The protagonist’s strong attachment to the piano is frequently emphasised in the film. One of the first scenes depicts Ada and Flora who after having arrived in New Zealand are left on a beach where they await Ada’s new husband. Yet on the stormy coast of this alien land there is nobody to welcome them, no reassuring sign of human presence, and eventually the two women are forced to spend the night alone. The camera shows Flora sleeping in her mother’s laps beside the piano while Ada’s hand finds a way through a hole left by a broken board to reach a bit of the piano keys. Then in the subsequent close-up the viewers can notice Ada’s hand on the keys, hidden behind the boards, as she begins the tunes of the melody which will repeatedly haunt the film.

Nevertheless, the most visible connection between Ada and her musical instrument is established on the level of their physical resemblance,

here is an equivalence between the instrument and Ada’s physical appearance. Ada is dressed in hooped, voluminous skirts and is tightly corseted in excessively elaborate and inappropriate clothing amid the muddy wilderness of New Zealand. The piano is

¹¹ S. Frost, *Sexual Difference: Masculinity and Psychoanalysis*, Nowy Jork 1994, s. 120.

securely packaged in wooden boxing and deposited on a wild and windswept beach, a completely unsuitable place for a sensitive and valuable musical instrument.¹²

Such a presentation of the film protagonist tends to intensify the relationship between her and the piano. This special bond between Ada and the piano also indicates the emotional isolation of the protagonist, who is neither able nor willing to enter into a relationship with anyone who does not accept the piano as her integral part. Thus, when Stewart, Ada's new husband, finally arrives but refuses to take the piano with them, Ada looks down from the cliff at her piano with a feeling of great loss, as if she were leaving her soul in peril. Then, at Stewart's hut, where she is separated from the piano, Ada feels more lonely and isolated than ever before. She carves piano keys onto the wooden table in Stewart's kitchen and begins her silent concert accompanied by Flora's singing.

Even though Stewart does not understand Ada's passion for her piano, or he understands it and that is why he opposes to it, Ada eventually succeeds in regaining her musical instrument. She manages to get help from Baines, Stewart's European neighbour, who agrees to make the difficult trek back to the beach for a rapturous reunion with the piano. In this scene the viewers see Ada's smile for the first time and they witness her passionate piano concert during which the music she plays becomes an outburst of unrestrained joy since she has finally regained her voice. This is one of the most vivid scenes of the film. It is full of strong emotions constituting a powerful mixture of excitement and uncontrollable joy. The camera shows Ada playing the piano in a very emotional manner. Ada gently sways in time with the music, her eyes are half-closed and her lips are slightly parted, with a visible smile on it. She becomes excited and her face is glowing. While Flora, as though inspired by her mother's joy, begins a peculiar dance on the seashore. Consequently, the two women seem to be unearthly creatures enchanted in the tunes of magic music.

The described scene depicts Flora dancing only in her petticoats, which is also quite meaningful since costume in *The Piano* plays an important role. Clothing is a powerful carrier of the socio-cultural norms and conventions imposed on women in the Victorian Age. The nineteenth century clothing embodies the spirit of those times by making sexuality a kind of taboo. However, the Victorian constraints reflected in female clothing appear to be more alluring than unmasked freedom. Consequently, the characteristic clothing becomes a means of expressing suppressed sexuality. Hence, Ada is shown in tight-fitting tops and waist-clinching dresses, which not only emphasises how tiny and delicate she is but this kind of clothes is also aimed to expose her sexuality.

¹² L. Tylor, *Inscription in 'The Piano'*. W: *Writing and Cinema*, red. J. Bignell, Londyn 1999, s. 91.

As a result, Ada's clothing may be interpreted twofold. On the one hand, it appears to symbolise all the constraints related to functioning in a given society and culture. On the other hand, Ada's voluminous and tightly-laced dress may be considered a metaphor of her isolation. Yet above all it may symbolise Ada's intimate world and then the clothing becomes a symbol of sexuality and desire.

The latter reading of Ada's clothing becomes highly reasonable in reference to her relationship with Baines to whom she begins to give piano lessons. In fact Baines neither wants to learn to play the piano nor he is interested in music. The object of his real interest is Ada herself. All the peculiarities characterising Ada, that is her muteness, isolation from the outside world, dignity turning into roughness at times, and above all the uncommon passion for music, fascinate Baines. Thus he enters into a secret deal with the woman he strongly desires. He offers her to regain the piano – one piano key for each music lesson she would give him. However, on condition that Ada lets him to touch her during their appointments. Though initially indignant with such a daring offer, eventually Ada requests one black piano key for each lesson. To get back the piano – her voice – the protagonist has nothing to exchange but her body. That is Ada's price for her "lost voice."

With time Ada's meetings with Baines become more and more sensual as the latter gains more confidence in his lust and Ada gradually discovers emotions she has never experienced before. At that time the piano tends to function as a peculiar link between the two. It is Baines that comes to recognise the intimate, constrained affinity between Ada's body and the musical instrument. For Baines the piano becomes a fetish, which is best portrayed in a scene depicting the nude man walking around it and tenderly wiping up its surface with his shirt. The concept of the fetish is crucial to film theory since it addresses two fundamental issues of visual culture, namely the issues of signification and visualisation. In reference to the latter the fetish is a powerful visualisation of the desired object. Hence, within the system of signification the fetish symbolises desire.¹³ Thus, the fetishised object constitutes a projection of the real object of desire.¹³ In *The Piano* the musical instrument symbolises Baines's utmost desire – Ada. Therefore, the physical similarity between the protagonist and the piano is frequently emphasised and scenes showing Baines as he fetishises Ada often extends this to include the piano. The physical correlation of Ada and the musical instrument is most clearly apparent in the scene in which Baines transgressively explores Ada's body while she plays. When he crawls under the piano the viewers see not only Ada's hooped underwear but also the working mechanisms of the piano. As Baines touches sensually Ada's skin through a tiny hole in her

¹³ Por. *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, red. J. Collins, H. Radner i A. Preacher-Collins, Nowy Jork 1993, s. 68.

stocking he violates Ada's exposed body and simultaneously trespasses on the hidden space beneath the keys. This scene shows that the piano functions as a way of representing Ada more emphatically than any other signifying system. This proves that Ada's self can be expressed fully only through music.

Nevertheless, Ada's way of self-expression is not restricted solely to music. On discovering feelings and desires previously unfamiliar to her, the protagonist reaches for the sense of touch, which becomes her new medium of communication. Yet it is not met with approval by her husband whose body she explores by touching and slapping his back down to the buttocks. This very sensual scene offers a bold reversal of traditional cinematic conventions since it is the man that becomes an erotic object of the female gaze. In addition not only is the gaze reversed but also the gender roles become redefined. Thus, this unexpected and unconventional expression of Ada's emotions evokes anxiety in Stewart since he realises that there is a part of Ada he can neither control nor understand. Stewart does not accept either music or touch as a possible form of communication. Therefore he is rejected by Ada who consistently disengages from traditional language in favour of alternative means of expression. Yet though she discards language as a medium of communication, Ada does not remain speechless, she "has her language too: music. Her inner life and essential being come forward when she plays the piano".¹⁴ This choice of nonverbal language gives Ada freedom from any existing linguistic systems which could violate her subjectivity. No one and nothing can lay a claim to her will while playing the piano. It is this autonomy that Baines concedes in returning her the piano without payment. He calls off the bargain because he has no hope of touching Ada the way her music has touched him. When Ada is finally given a free choice, she feels that she must give herself to Baines of her own free will, which becomes the culminating point in their relationship. That is the liberating moment when her repressed passion suddenly explodes. However, the protagonist pays a high price for her sexual liberation. She becomes severely injured by her husband who cuts off her index finger with an axe, in a symbolic gesture of castration.

The motif of castration in the film theory relates to the image of woman who is not phallic and thus becomes a symbol of threat. Therefore, the sight of woman's body arouses male awareness of the female lack, which provokes castration anxiety. Traditionally this fear of castration may be overcome and counterbalanced by either devaluating and punishing the guilty object, that is woman, or by substituting a fetish object.¹⁵ However, in the context of *The Pi-*

¹⁴ G. Mast, B. F. Kawin, *The Movies: A Short History*, Boston 1996, s. 530.

¹⁵ Por. L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. W: *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, red. R. Stam i T. Miller, Oxford 2000, s. 483–494.

ano the phallus is above all understood as the emblem of language. Hence, the castration anxiety functions mainly on the level of language which is the determinant of power relations within the film. It is within the linguistic system that subjectivity is being established. Thus, by cutting off Ada's index finger, which is indispensable for her when playing the piano, Stewart violently excludes the woman from language since Ada's language manifests itself in music. Then it may be assumed that through the symbolic act of castration Stewart confirms the male domination in the realm of language.

However, *Campion* offers a satisfactory resolution to the castration inflicted on the protagonist. Ada is provided by Baines with a prosthetic finger which becomes a symbolic bond between the couple, especially as it enables the women to play again the music that brought them together. Consequently, through the relationship with Baines, who has saved her in a way, Ada is able to function in the traditional world, which earlier seemed oppressive and hostile to her, without giving up her subjectivity. This means that the socio-cultural conventions have finally ceased to pose a threat to the protagonist. What is more, she abandons her secluded world of silence and begins to learn the traditional language.

The piano which initially provided Ada with the possibility of an autonomous form of expression has become a painful ballast since now it is a tie with the past. Therefore, Ada decides to throw the piano overboard but at the same time she deliberately puts her foot inside the rope attached to the heavy instrument and is pulled down into water, as if her destiny were literally tied to the piano. Yet suddenly Ada begins to struggle, regains the surface and is saved. However, in spite of the fact that the protagonist has chosen life instead of death, the final scene of the film depicts a young woman's body floating in the sea water as if further life in the traditional reality would mean for Ada the same as death. At the same time a comment made by the voice-over, which is still Ada's inner voice, is heard, "At night, I think of my piano in its ocean grave, and sometimes of myself floating above it. Down there everything is so still and silent that it lulls me to sleep. It is a weird lullaby and so it is. It is mine".¹⁶ The final shot of the camera shows a woman's body tied to the piano with a thick rope, which indicates the strong correlation between the two. In addition, this scene becomes highly significant in its reference to water imagery. The motif of water is a life-giving symbol as it has got the power of animation and creation, but it symbolises destruction as well, which can be related to the discussion on language as a creative but also oppressive phenomenon. Therefore, the film may be interpreted twofold. On one hand, the protagonist through her choice of life has been restored to the world of traditional language (which is implied by the symbolic

¹⁶ *Fortepian*, op. cit.

gesture of disposing of the piano), but on the other hand she has given up a part of herself (which is again symbolised by disposing of the musical instrument). Consequently, the final water scene can symbolise both death and rebirth. Thus, the ending of the film remains open indicating that “*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification”.¹⁷

POZAJĘZYKOWE ŚRODKI EKSPRESJI: MUZYKA I KOSTIUM
W FILMIE JANE CAMPION *FORTEPIAN* (1993)

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi omówienie wykorzystania pozajęzykowych środków ekspresji w filmie *Fortepian* w reżyserii Jane Campion. W celu przeciwstawienia się opresyjnej funkcji języka, który odmawia kobiecie roli podmiotu, reżyserka sięga po alternatywne sposoby wyrazu. Wychodząc z założenia, że skoro tradycyjny język wyklucza kobietę jako podmiot dyskursu, Campion powołuje do życia bohaterkę, która odrzuca *stricte* językową komunikację na rzecz swobodnej ekspresji poprzez muzykę. W efekcie zaprzestaje ona porozumiewać się za pomocą dźwięków mowy, zamyka się w świecie milczenia i od tej pory to dźwięk muzyki fortepianowej staje się jej nowym głosem. Jednakże pomimo zarzucenia mowy na rzecz milczenia bohaterka nie pozostaje zupełnie niema, gdyż rolę mowy przejmuje odtąd muzyka, która stanowi swoisty język funkcjonujący poza jakimikolwiek strukturami języka. W szerszym kontekście znaczeniowym decyzja bohaterki staje się symbolem nonkonformizmu w shierarchizowanym świecie norm oraz konwencji opartych na teorii fallocentrycznej.

Tytułowy fortepian stanowi metaforyczną reprezentację filmowej bohaterki, co zostaje wyraźnie wyeksponowane na poziomie wizualnym poprzez ukazanie fizycznego podobieństwa pomiędzy bohaterką a instrumentem muzycznym, który poniekąd staje się przedłużeniem jej osobowości. Podobieństwo to zostaje osiągnięte poprzez odpowiedni dobór kostiumu, którego rolą jest podkreślenie kobiecej delikatności, wyeksponowanie jej seksualności, ale także zasygnalizowanie emocjonalnej izolacji bohaterki. W rezultacie w filmie fortepian funkcjonuje jako zarówno swoisty język bohaterki, jak i jej fizyczne odbicie, co prowadzi do widocznej korelacji pomiędzy nimi. Więź łącząca kobietę z fortepianem jest tak silna, iż zdaje się uniemożliwiać jej powrót to rzeczywistości językowej, która wymaga od bohaterki wyrzeczenia się części swej osobowości, a może nawet rezygnacji z własnej podmiotowości, w celu pełnego uczestnictwa w społeczeństwie i kulturze.

¹⁷ J. Butler, op. cit., s. 43.