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Shhh!: Whisper cycle in John Crowley's rendition of Samuel Beckett's *Come and Go*

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Abstract:

Samuel Beckett's Come and Go (1965) is about three women whose conversations are both audible and inaudible due to each one's whispering whenever two of them are alone and the other is out of sight. This paper focuses on the film version of Come and Go – directed by John Crowley in 2000 – as part of the Beckett on Film project, which transferred Beckett's 19 stage-plays to the screen. Drawing upon Mladen Dolar's theorization of the object voice, this paper aims to analyse how Crowley renders Beckett accessible for contemporary audiences in cinematic terms, with a specific focus on the whisper scenes.

Introduction

Samuel Beckett's dramaticule *Come and Go* (1965) was first staged in German (*Kommen und Gehen*) at the Schiller Theater, Berlin, in 1966. Later on, it was revived by professional companies and amateur groups worldwide. Its film version, *Come and Go*, was directed by John Crowley at Ardmore Studios, Ireland, for *Beckett on Film*, produced by Michael Colgan and Alan Moloney in 2000. The film presents Flo, Vi and Ru, portrayed by Paola Dionisotti, Anna Massey and Sian Phillips during eight minutes. *Come and Go* revolves around three women, who repeatedly whisper in each other's ear. This paper examines how Crowley reinterpreted Beckett's work, by focusing on the whisper scenes, each of which can be regarded as a manifestation of the object voice. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar theorizes Jacques Lacan's concept of the object voice, and explains that

inside the heard voices is an unheard voice, an aphonic voice, as it were. For what Lacan called *objet petit a* – to put it simply – does not coincide with any existing thing, although

it is always evoked only by bits of materiality, attached to them as an invisible, inaudible appendage, yet not amalgamated with them: it is both evoked and covered, enveloped by them, for 'in itself' it is just a void. (2006, p. 73-4)

Given that the whisper scenes in *Come and Go* are based on both audible and inaudible sounds, each of their ghostly aspect reveals the object voice, which "is the pivotal point precisely at the intersection of presence and absence" (ibid., p. 55). The film reinforces the unheard whispers of the three female characters with their entrances and exits in such a delicate way that viewers get the feeling that each woman just disappears and becomes absent, as if passing through a void. Crowley reinforces the mysterious aspect of the piece, based on the whisper cycle, by creating a ghostly ambience.

Beckett's whispering women on screen

The whisper scenes always occur between two women, only when the third one is absent from the stage, and each woman utters the same vocal reaction after every whisper scene. Crowley strictly follows Beckett's description of the women's position: "sitting centre side by side stage right to left Flo, Vi, and Ru. Very erect, facing front, hands clasped in laps" (Beckett, 1984, p. 195), and attaches great importance to Beckett's instructions on the players' similar costumes: "drab nondescript hats with enough brim to shade faces. Apart from colour differentiation three figures as alike as possible" (ibid., p. 197). The hats, which obscure the women's eyes, serve as a barrier for viewers to clearly identify each woman, and thus intensify their mysterious aspect. The film's opening scene demonstrates that Crowley visualizes the physical appearances of Beckett's women characters, as he introduces them in the same-coloured hats and same coats of different colour. However, a closer look at the women's costumes, designed by Lynette Mauro, makes it clear that Flo's collar is closed as opposed to that of Vi and Ru. Regarding Flo's collar, although Crowley's choice does not coincide tightly with Beckett's details on the costume, specified as "full-length coats, buttoned high, dull violet (Ru), dull red (Vi), dull yellow (Flo)" (ibid., p. 197), his reinterpretation, I suppose, is an attempt to differentiate Flo from the other women. Despite the fact that Vi is the first one to speak as the film begins, Flo becomes the first one to initiate their circular whispers and repetitive exclamations.

The first absent character becomes Vi, whose opening question "when did we three last meet?" (00:00:10-00:00:12) remains unanswered by the other two women. When Ru's statement "let us not speak" (00:00:13-00:00:15) invites them to eschew a potential dialogue,

Vi stands up, passes in front of Flo, and disappears in darkness behind them. The reason for Vi's decision to part from her friends is never clear due to lack of any explanation, but may be based on her resentment towards Ru, whose sentence leaves no room for any vocal expression. Flo takes advantage of Vi's absence, and finds the opportunity to ask Ru a question about Vi. Their exchange serves as a precursor of the forthcoming whisper, uttered by Flo:

Flo: Ru.

Ru: Yes.

Flo: What do you think of Vi?

Ru: I see little change. (00:00:56-00:01:07)

Flo's gradual approach to Ru and whispering in her ear indicate that while Flo conveys secret information, Ru attentively listens to her. This suggests that Flo lowers her audible voice so that no one, except Ru, would hear what she articulates. Given that Flo is busy conveying some information to Ru, yet what she tells her is inaudible to viewers, her whisper recalls Dolar's comment on the object voice with reference to Lacan: "sonority both evokes and conceals the voice" (2006, p. 74). By preferring whispering to speak out loud, Flo acquaints Ru with information/news, yet deprives viewers of her audible voice. During Flo's whisper, the camera zooms in, and viewers can just hear the sound of her moving lips that conceal her voice.

The importance of keeping the whispered line secret is a repetitive pattern in the film. Ru's reaction to Flo's whisper serves as the first exclamation, to be repeated by the other two women, and Flo's action to prevent Ru from uttering any word by raising her finger to her lips is the other reiterative action to be further imitated by Ru and Vi, respectively. To begin with Ru's reaction, she expresses her bewilderment at what she hears from Flo by uttering "Oh!" (00:01:32), and at this point, the camera that freezes Ru's facial expression, which reflects surprise, stops zooming in. Ru cannot comment further on what she has heard, because Flo immediately prevents her from giving any clue by putting her finger to her lips. In this context, Flo and Ru exemplify Steven Connor's remark on the whisper that it "signifies intimacy and secrecy" (2014, p. 48), because they do not unveil the mystery of the whispered line. Flo's attempt at keeping Ru silent endows her with authority, and her posture reinforces this power. She is reminiscent of Angerona, the Roman Goddess of silence, who "is depicted with a bandaged mouth, one finger to her lips, demanding silence" (Auset, 2009, p. 7). Angerona, as the protector of the secret name of Rome, asks through her posture for secrecy, and her statue

in Vienna's Schönbrunn Gardens, which holds her finger across her lips, is a helpful example to see the similarity between Flo's and Angerona's gestures. Similar to Angerona, Flo insists on maintaining confidentiality, silently asking Ru not to reveal what she has shared with her. Ru's obedience of Flo indicates that she complies with Flo's instruction, and thus yields to her authority. By means of this mutual agreement, Flo and Ru fail to clarify Flo's whisper, and although their subsequent dialogue gives a hint about the subject, it is not possible to pass a definite judgement:

Ru: Does she not realize?

Flo: God grant not. (00:01:37-00:01:41)

This exchange implies that "she" is probably Vi, who is out of sight, and the knowledge – that Flo and Ru know whatever there is to be known – needs to be hidden from her. The subject of the gossip remains unknown, yet it is open to multiple interpretations. Daniel Koczy speculates that "the brief exchange which follows appears to relate to the absent one's ailing health and to a hope that she does not know what she has coming" (2018, p. 134). Keir Elam reinforces the possibility that the issue is about health: "the unnamable object of Flo's discourse, foregrounded by her very evasiveness, is, we are left to infer, the imminent death of the third party, the absent Vi" (1994, p. 147). Apart from these predictions, there are other options, some of which are articulated by various audiences of *Come and Go*, directed by Sidney Homan: "a young girl broke out with, 'She has bad breath.' Others have suggested the woman's husband has been cheating on her, or that she has some incurable disease, or a child has just died, or simply 'she is growing old and doesn't look so good anymore. Many answers are very involved, with details about an accident, or some financial loss, or illness, or marital and family problems" (Homan, 2010, p. 309). These estimations are all possible suggestions, but can be added to, based on the fact the whispered line is an enigma for viewers.

Spectral whispers

The ambiguity surrounding Flo's whisper and Ru's brief response becomes a recurrent scene, albeit with two different women at every turn. In this context, the three women epitomize Steven Connor's view that "the whisper is a spectre-speaking" (2014, p. 48). Vi's entrance eliminates any further exchange between Flo and Ru, yet viewers watch a re-run of the action with Ru's whisper and Vi's echoic response. After Vi enters, Flo's suggestion – similar to that

of Ru's in the beginning – implies that there would be no space for vocality between the three of them:

Flo: Just sit together as we used to, in the playground at Miss Wade's.

Ru: On the log. (00:02:09-00:02:17)

Flo's reference to past days implies that their acquaintance dates back to childhood, and thus is an invitation to nostalgia. Moreover, regarding "Miss Wade's", James Knowlson states that Beckett uses the name of his cousins' school: "Sheila and Molly attended Morehampton House, a boarding and day school for girls, on the Morehampton Road. The school had originally been run by three spinster sisters and was commonly known in Dublin as Miss Wade's" (1996, p. 44). This suggests that Beckett's female cousins might be the inspiration for his work, and the idea of a girls' school, run by three women, reinforces the link between gossip and its frequent association with feminine discourse. In the film, after the three women sit in silence for approximately 15 seconds, Flo stands up and exits for no apparent reason. Her departure does not violate the silence, because she does not make any sound. Her exit, similar to that of Vi's at the beginning of the film, gives the impression that she might be barefoot. Although viewers cannot see their feet due to the lack of light, Crowley, one way or another, succeeds in maintaining silence during each woman's exit, either by depriving the players of their shoes or by following Beckett's instruction by making them have "light shoes with rubber soles" (Beckett, 1984, p. 197). Beckett himself intensifies this ghost-like disappearance by specifically declaring that "the figures are not seen to go off stage. They should disappear a few steps from lit area" (ibid., p. 198), and Crowley sticks to Beckett's suggestion by visually displaying the spectral absence of the women as if they had vanished into darkness all of a sudden. He diffuses this spectrality with the women's seat – the only prop on screen – specified by Beckett as "narrow benchlike seat, without back, just long enough to accommodate three figures almost touching. As little visible as possible. It should not be clear what they are sitting on" (ibid., p. 197). Whenever one of the women stands up to fade back, her vacant seat is not visible, but shrouded in darkness, and every time she comes back to sit down, it seems as if she is taking a seat on a void space. In this sense, as soon as Flo exits, Ru addresses Vi, and their dialogue echoes the previous exchange between Flo and Ru:

Ru: Vi.

Vi: Yes.

Ru: How do you find Flo?

Vi: She seems much the same. (00:02:54-00:03:03)

Similar to Flo, who moves more closely to Ru, Ru approaches Vi this time, by filling the gap between them, and immediately whispers in her ear. Given that “the whisper is a speech that appears to be internal, a closet speech or ‘speaking within’, that has insufficient projective force to get untangled from the thicket of tongue and teeth which gives rise to it” (Connor, 2014, p. 50), it can be regarded as a manifestation of the object voice, which is situated at the intersection of language and the body, yet belongs to neither: “what language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part neither of language nor of the body” (Dolar, 2006, p. 73). In the film, during her whispering, Ru’s moving lips are visible, yet viewers cannot hear her voice. Vi’s listening posture and her reaction to Ru’s whispering by saying “Oh!” (00:03:19) imitates Ru’s previous attentive listening and reiterative response to Flo; however, what differentiates Vi from Ru lies in her different “Oh!” tone that expresses great sorrow, whereas the first “Oh!” indicates surprise. Crowley thus materializes Beckett’s instruction on this circular exclamation: “Ohs. Three very different sounds” (Beckett, 1984, p. 198). This suggests that each whispered line gives rise to a distinct reaction, and each woman vocalizes her response in a different tone. The viewers, who have already witnessed the identical scene with Flo and Ru, are familiar with Ru’s subsequent act of putting her finger to her lips so that she can inhibit Vi from shedding some light on what she has whispered. Ru’s gesture of “Shh”, exactly the same as Flo’s, denotes that Ru – instead of Flo – now assumes the role of Angerona, and thus she has the power to silence Vi. This repetitive scene not only functions as a non-verbal communication that succeeds in restraining Vi from articulating any word that would reveal the secret between them, but also denotes that the absence of one woman immediately gives rise to gossip about her. This suggests that these women are completely exchangeable, as are the things they say to each other. Moreover, the fact that Ru plays Flo’s previous role, and Vi imitates Ru’s former performance foreshadow the similar exchange between two women:

Vi: Has she not been told?

Ru: God forbid. (00:03:23-00:03:27)

This dialogue implies that “she” refers to Flo this time, and there is something hidden from her.

James Knowlson asserts that “each of the three women goes off stage in turn while the others speak of her illness or imminent death” (2003, p. 76). These alternatives are plausible, yet are not the only two possible issues concerning Flo. Furthermore, it is not certain whether the whispered lines, unknown to viewers, definitely relate to Flo or not. It is also unknown whether what is said has any relation to what was said before. The repetition of the act suggests that there also might be repetition of content, but this could be deceiving.

The last whisper scene is between Flo and Vi, and thus presents a similar experience to viewers, yet in this case with Ru’s absence. Since it is “uncertain whether it belongs to the inside or the outside, it [the whisper] is always also spread abroad” (Connor, 2014, p. 49), and thus its ghostlike aspect is reinforced with the third whisper scene in the film. While Ru exits in silence in accordance with Beckett’s instructions that “Exits and entrances slow, without sound of feet” (Beckett, 1984, p. 198), her disappearance into darkness is no different from Flo’s and Vi’s previous ones; she neither speaks, nor makes a sound as she leaves. In this context, lighting is an important factor in reinforcing the mysterious atmosphere of the film, and Beckett gives specific details: “soft, from above only and concentrated on playing area. Rest of stage as dark as possible” (ibid., 197). Crowley’s arrangement demonstrates that he conforms to Beckett’s rules, yet reinforces the women’s enigmatic absence by creating a foggy background. In other words, Crowley does not opt for a pitch black that would reflect Beckett’s note of “as dark as possible”, but chooses to create a ghostly ambience, instead. While Ru remains offstage, her visual absence is enough for Vi to initiate a conversation with Flo:

Vi: Flo.

Flo: Yes.

Vi: How do you think Ru is looking?

Flo: One sees little in this light. (00:05:13-00:05:23)

Following this exchange, Vi speaks into Flo’s ear, and it is the third round that reiterates the secret sharing, without giving any definite idea to viewers. As Brandon LaBelle rightly observes, “when someone whispers to us, we feel the breath against our ear; we are drawn in, full of anticipation: *what does this voice want of me?* In this way, the whisper may threaten and endanger; it may excite or intimidate, but above all, the whisper is a voice used for secrets” (2014, p. 149). In this context, during her whisper, viewers can only hear the sound of Vi’s movement of lips, and thus it is only Flo, who learns something. Forging a relationship between

whisper and silence, Judith Roof remarks that “the whispers are near silences, like the silence begged for by Ru in the first interchange, ‘Let us not speak’” (1987, p. 160). However, bearing in mind the sound of her moving lips, I propose that whispering differs from silence, because to speak in a quiet way is not equal to silence, which negates any spoken word. Due to dim light and the shadow of her hat, Vi’s mouth is not visible during her whisper, and thus gives no clue to her utterance. As opposed to Vi, who prefers to share her words in secret, Flo expresses her reaction “Oh!” (00:05:42) in such a loud tone that it leaves her mouth wide open, and reveals her great astonishment. Hersh Zeifman establishes a link between William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*¹ and Beckett’s *Come and Go*, and claims that “Flo(wer), Ru(e), and Vi(olet) – Beckett’s three women bear the cryptic traces of Ophelia’s death-flowers, the secret they share is embodied in their very names. Thus the words they dare not speak aloud compose a threnody, whispered intimations of mortality: each of them is suffering from the same terminal disease, the inevitability of death” (1983, p. 140). Bearing in mind the parallelism between the abbreviated forms of plants and the women’s names, Zeifman’s remark sounds convincing; however, the fact that neither of the three whisper scenes offers a clear explanation makes any definite conclusion impossible. For instance, there is a possibility that Flo may share Vi’s whisper with viewers by giving voice to it. However, Vi prevents Flo from bringing to light any potential clue by sealing her lips in a token of silence. This third identical act is a powerful non-vocal strategy to ask for silence, and Vi reiterates it instead of articulating her request for silence with words. This authoritarian shush gesture, this time, makes Vi resemble Angerona, as the third woman to repeat this movement, and thus close the circle of desire to keep a secret or, indeed, several secrets. Flo refrains from either repeating or giving any clue as to the whispered lines. Again, their subsequent exchange makes it clear that there is a clue about the sex, the subject is a female one, and it is better that she does not know or learn whatever it is:

Flo: Does she not know?

Vi: Please God not. (00:05:50-00:05:54)

It is not clear whether they are talking about either the absent Ru or an event related to her, but it is true for all the whisper scenes that “the nature of what is whispered is [...] dependent on individual audience members” (Homan, 2010, p. 308). Every viewer can have a different idea on what turns each woman into a rumourmonger, since Flo’s submission to Vi’s non-vocal gesture obscures the secret.

Ru's entrance not only puts an end to Vi's and Flo's circular vocality, but also hinders any statement that would give a further hint at what the whispered line might be about. In this context, as the whisper "hovers at the edge of the audible spectrum as a subtracted orality that subsequently aims for those who are nearby" (LaBelle, 2014, p. 148), viewers never have precise information about the enigmatic whispers between three women. After Ru sits down, Vi's questions, one after the other, which are all left unanswered by Flo and Ru, invite viewers to speculate about them and their implications: "May we not speak of the old days? Of what came after?" (00:06:31-00:06:42). Similar to the whispered lines, these two questions imply that the women prefer to conceal something in their lives; yet, as opposed to the whispered lines that are devoid of vocality, they are expressed verbally by Vi. Viewers are, once again, free to fill in the blanks, until Vi's last question "Shall we hold hands in the old way?" (00:06:49-00:06:52) makes the women perform it by holding each other's hand. This suggests that instead of vocally remembering bygone days, which would probably bring back sad, even traumatic memories, they choose to remain silent and re-enact a moment they have previously shared: holding each other's hands in such a way that it testifies to the unbreakable link between them. The women's sitting position, facing viewers, seems to restore their initial appearance in the film; however, a closer look at their position – Vi, Ru, Flo side by side – demonstrates that, except for Ru, they do not occupy the same seats as in the film's beginning, and thus strengthen the circularity of the film.

Each whisper scene in the film makes viewers speculate as to the three women's unvoiced utterances. This suggests that the whispered lines remain shrouded in mystery for viewers, and thereby "perhaps the fact that the whisper has neither interiority nor exteriority explains why it seems to conjoin the secret and the rumour" (Connor, 2014, p. 51). The mysterious aspect of *Come and Go* and the idea of vocally produced cyclicity dominant in the film is intensified when Flo utters the film's last line, which is a circular object: a ring. When all the women hold hands, a close up shot to their hands displays that the women are touching each other's finger, either to console/support each other or to look for a lost object that has been present on their fingers. Although there are "no rings apparent" (Beckett, 1984, p. 197), Flo's declaration, "I can feel the rings" (00:07:18-00:07:20) – in the absence of any visible ring – is subject to multiple interpretations. Initially, the rings may refer literally to wedding rings, either lost or never attained objects in the women's lives. Moreover, they might express the never-ending female bond, in other words, "perhaps it is the connectivity of decades of friendship since childhood that Flo refers to, and the act of feeling witnessing through embodied memory

rather than verbal testimony” (Pine, 2020, p. 185). Besides these possible interpretations, the word “rings”, I contend, can be interpreted in terms of sound. Flo may mean that she is aware of the bells ringing, specifically implying the death bell that makes a ringing sound to announce the death of someone. These bells may ring in Flo’s head, as hallucinating sounds. Despite the women’s unknown ages, as mentioned by Beckett “(ages undeterminable)” (1984, p. 194), their references to past days imply that they have attained old age. Daniel Koczy rightly observes that “while we cannot be sure of the actual ages of Beckett’s performers, their dialogue will invoke a powerful sense of nostalgia and of nearness to death which generates its own questions and a desire to understand in Beckett’s audiences” (2018, p. 134). After Flo’s closing remark on the rings, which may indicate the bells tolling for their approaching death, the ending of the film reinforces this connotation, because the women’s image gradually fades out. Their disappearance in a blurring effect is identical to their initial fade in, which suggests that Crowley chooses a ghostly ambience for the women, and displays this in the cyclical structure of his film.

Conclusion

To sum up, *Come and Go* is based on a circular pattern performed by three women, who alternately whisper into each other’s ears, utter something audiences never get to share. The word “whisper” includes the silent letter “h”, which is not pronounced, and the whisper scenes in *Come and Go* present women who speak confidentially, and thus exemplify the absent presence of sonority. Bearing in mind that “the whisper signifies not just the keeping but also [...] the incontinent spilling of secrets” (Connor, 2014, p. 49), each woman in *Come and Go* refrains from uncovering the mystery of the whispered lines, and shares her words in secret. Each woman’s whispering produces the identical reaction in her listener, and thus viewers hear three women’s reiterated exclamation. Crowley projects this repetitiveness onto his film version, in which every whisper scene – that simultaneously unveils and veils each woman’s voice – is a token of the object voice, and each same vocal response afterwards evinces the echoic utterance.

Endnotes

¹ Zeifman specifically refers to Ophelia’s lines in *Hamlet*, and quotes: “There’s rue for you; and here’s some for me. We may call it herb of grace a Sundays. . . . There’s a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they wither’d all when my father died” (1983, p. 140).

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