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Citation for final published version:

Prout, Ryan 2019. A small and silent revolution. *Short Film Studies* 9 (2) , pp. 153-156.
10.1386/sfs.9.2.153_1 file

Publishers page: https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs.9.2.153_1 <https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs.9.2.153_1>

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A Small and Silent Revolution

Keywords

Servitude, Grief, Vilhelm Hammershøi, Víctor Erice, Care-giving, Diglossia

Abstract

Through explicitation of Roquet's aesthetics—including echoes and reflections of Erice, Hammershøi, and Martel—this article argues that *The Goodbye* harnesses intertextuality concisely to question how class, language, gender, servitude, and race intersect. It addresses the role of grief in illuminating the indignities of deeply entrenched power relations.

Main text

Clara Roquet has told interviewers that she had been thinking for years about the narrative premise of *The Goodbye* before deciding to take on the direction of the film, as well as the screenwriting. This long gestation shows itself in a short film, of just less than 14 minutes, that is densely packed with references to Spanish and world cinema, and to the aesthetics of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Scandinavian art. What this article aims to do is to illustrate the sources of inspiration that Roquet has credited, whilst also attending to the film's original deployment of this intertextuality to underscore tensions between conservatism and modernity in Spanish society.

Closest to Roquet among her references, geographically if not chronologically, is Víctor Erice, whose 1973 film *El espíritu de la colmena* she credits as an influence, particularly its treatment of a time 'that seems to have stopped, and which has to do with death and with places that are so conservative that time no longer flows, and where social customs are frozen' (Joffroy Chandoutis 2016). The aural segue in the film's opening sequences between the ticking of a clock in an interior and the ringing of bells in external public space both emphasises the importance of time and the notion that the manners and customs that pass for normal in Ángela's domestic household, following her death, speak to a socially embedded conservatism (Shot 1a). Indeed, the film was shot at the Da Pena family home, in the Osona region, outside Vic, which is one of the most culturally conservative areas of Catalonia. *The Goodbye* reminds us of time stood still in a shot that picks out a collection of pocket watches, decorative, rather than functional, and another reference to Erice, perhaps, this time to *El sur*, in which a pocket watch figures throughout (Shot 57).

As in Erice's films, children are privileged spectators in *The Goodbye*, the viewer encouraged to look through a child's eyes at an illogical and stultified environment. *The Goodbye* uses framing to emphasise the view of children looking at interiors from behind a door jamb, and also affords Julia, the third generation of Ángela's family, with the valedictory glance through a window that confirms Rosana's apparently abrupt departure from her life as a servant (Shots 29 and 66). Peering over the edge of her late employer's coffin, Julia at her side, Rosana says 'We'll both sing for her, won't we, you and me' just as Mercé appears to break up this intimate moment (Shot 35). Scolded for breaking protocol, Rosana is as infantilised in her relationship with Mercé as is Julia. While Mercé freely expresses herself with gesture, we see in a tightly constructed shot that Rosana, by contrast, tenses her hand behind her back (shot 24b). Her body language echoes the sanction against someone of her status expressing emotion or grief. And yet, Rosana is the only person physically to touch all three generations of Ángela's family; she dresses the body in the defiantly red dress (Shot 9); and then we see Rosana adjusting Mercé's black dress, sewing up the aperture in its back, thread measured and cut in her mouth (shot 21b), just before trying to cheer up Julia, by tickling her (shot 23).

Perhaps because of the restrictions on her expressiveness, Rosana's emotions seem to be the most legible. As she leans over Ángela's body, the camera captures the smallest constriction around the corners of her mouth (Shot 8). It is a reaction that amplifies the film's central conceit of the dress. 'What I wanted to convey by means of the dress,' Roquet says, 'is that ultimately the person who knows the deceased best is Rosana, and not Ángela's own daughter' (Joffroy Chandoutis 2016). We are left in no doubt about Rosana's grief, but there is also a sense that her loss is greater than Mercé can ever know. While *The Goodbye* quotes Buñuel (another reference Roquet name checks), and his rebellious servants, who promptly walk out of a grand house on Mexico City's Providence Street in *El ángel exterminador*, the short adds another twist to this relationship. Rosana is distinguished not only by her lower class but also by a different ethnicity. A Bolivian with indigenous features, she could be representative of the army of Latin American service workers in Spain. Does Rosana's phlegmatic bearing conceal a tragedy of children left behind, or a rupture in her own family? *The Goodbye* opens up this possibility and Roquet has said of Rosana that her demeanour evokes those '[P]eople who often leave behind their own families and children in their countries of origin to come and look after other people's children and families' (Chavarren 2015). An original aspect of *The Goodbye* is its use of the master-servant trope to uncover that in the industry of care giving, the feelings involved in looking after the elderly are often overlooked when

care givers are subject to the studied and xenophobic inattention blindness of the social class represented by Mercé.

Another name checked by Roquet as a source of inspiration for *The Goodbye* is that of Lucrecia Martel, and, as in Martel's work, in the short we see, or hear, a close attention to aural effects. The soundtrack knits together the domestic space, with the mostly unseen exterior, and attentiveness to the dialogue also reveals social hierarchy. The conversations in *The Goodbye* switch between Spanish and Catalan, and who speaks which language, and to whom, follows well-established conventions. Mercé always addresses Rosana in Spanish, a habit that seems to confirm the stereotype that the Catalan bourgeoisie's only use for the Spanish language is to address the hired help. Mercé speaks to her daughter in Catalan, and the guests for the funeral speak among themselves in Catalan. But Rosana clearly understands the language as she and Julia converse in a mixture of both and Rosana answers, when Julia asks her what's hurting, 'Els ulls', Catalan for 'My eyes' (Shot 14). The linguistic demarcations in this domestic interior reflect the fraught language politics in Catalonia's public space where language use often serves to distinguish between Catalans *de vieille souche*, on the one hand, and first, second, and third generation immigrants, on the other. Catalan politicians such as Carles Llorens have railed against people like Rosana—Latin Americans who think that because Catalonia is in Spain they can come to Catalonia and expect the lingua franca to be Spanish (Prout 2009: 218).

If Roquet's acknowledgement of Martel as a reference point underscores the significance of sound, her debt to Vilhelm Hammershøi, the Danish artist whose work straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suggests a common interest in conjuring silence. Robin Simon says of Hammershøi's work that the 'Lack of movement marks his compositions as strongly as the absence of sound' (2008). In Hammershøi, *The Goodbye* finds a complement to Erice's frozen time, as well as an aesthetic language that makes of the Da Pena mansion a stage for Roquet's tableaux of grief, class differences, and suppressed emotions. The proportions of the shot where we see Rosana cross herself beneath what looks like a screen from a church recall those of Hammershøi, where solitary figures are similarly diminished and lost in expansive interior spaces (Shot 6b). Roquet depicts Rosana labouring above a sewing basket, and the composition of this shot again recalls several of Hammershøi's paintings in which he too depicts women with needlework (Shot 18b). When Mercé orders the servant to fetch the sewing box, she asks for 'el costurero', but the same object could also be called in Spanish 'una caja de sastré', a name that means 'tailor's box' and sounds also like 'disaster box.' The semantic

resonance of the object and of the scene evokes not only Hammershøi, then, but also his debt in turn to Vermeer and the other Dutch painters whose scenes are replete with coded visual metaphors.

Roquet speaks of how impressive she found Hammershøi's depictions of servants (Joffroy Chandoutis 2016), yet many of his paintings that do depict a human figure are not of a servant, but of his wife. Does this show, perhaps how easily the lower status of servants, and the inferiorization of women, are confused? Hammershøi is present not only in the film's interiors but also in its landscapes, especially the misty countryside around the mansion.

Is she beckoned by this foggy exterior when Rosana leaves the steaming iron behind, and with it, the red dress she had so carefully prepared for the deceased? Ángela's dying wish seems unlikely to be fulfilled, but her servant's departure transforms the same stubborn break with convention into a living will to escape inequality. Roquet says that at the end '[T]here is a certain catharsis, a small and silent revolution that stems from Rosana realising that she has a right to a space for her own sadness' (Vall 2015). Does goodbye also mean taking leave of an older generation that was fundamentally kinder? Always a fraught question, it is especially so in today's Spain.

[1500 words exactly, excluding title, key words, abstract, and references.]

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