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Film Narrative
November 26th, 2019

Revised Draft: The Cry of Her Cello

In the film adaptation of a collection of Raymond Carver's short stories, *Short Cuts* (Spelling Pictures International, 1993), director-screenwriter Robert Altman presents us with an intricately linked series of vignettes. By and large, these vignettes arise from direct analogs to Carver's cast of characters, with a few notable exceptions. In particular, two musicians — a mother, Tess (Annie Ross), and her daughter, Zoe (Lori Singer) — occupy momentous roles in the film, while not appearing in the short stories at all. Their respective musical contributions help integrate the entire film and the lives of other characters, hence Altman's hefty allocation of screen time to their personal arcs. Upon witnessing Zoe's role in the film, we identify her as the most serious, sober character in either work: her emotional gravitas shines through her repeated cello performances. However, to a reader of Carver's work, she initially feels out of place until we realize the role that her character fills — an extended allegory for Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. She does not occupy this weighty role alone, for the drowned young woman in Carver's story "So Much Water So Close to Home" is visually depicted in the film, but never explicitly in the story. Indeed, Altman brings the figure of the drowned woman to the foreground through Zoe's character, giving voice to her sorrows through the music of the cello, and emphasizing the tragic nature of her being silenced.

In order to explore this extended allegory, we'll need to consider the physical and emotional parallels between Ophelia, Zoe, and the corpse found in the river. Equipped with that framework, we can then see how the editing choices in Altman's synthesis of distinct vignettes

support Zoe as Ophelia. And ultimately, understanding how Zoe has been built into this representation, we can appreciate the profound melancholy portrayed in her music, affecting the film at large.

From the beginning of the film, Altman draws our attention to the physical similarities between Zoe, Ophelia, and the corpse of the young woman. Indeed, he guides the audience toward viewing these three women as one figure by offering and denying specific anchors. In the painting “Ophelia” by Sir John Everett Millais (1851-2), Ophelia wears a lightly colored, lacy dress, waterlogged along with her long hair. Similarly, when the fishermen discover the young woman in the river, Altman depicts her in loose, veil-like clothing, with her long hair obscuring her face. By denying us the anchor of facial recognition, Altman suggests the woman’s undefined nature; her character acts as a canvas for intratextual and intertextual connection alike. Yet he does offer us the anchor of costume and hairstyle, as we see Zoe throughout the film wearing a similarly loose, lightly-colored, veil-like dress, with her long hair partially obscuring her face. Furthermore, the three women are of the same, nondescript age. When the fisherman who finds the dead body and his wife discuss the age of the woman in the river, he says, “Oh, I don’t know. In her twenties maybe? I couldn’t tell.” Likewise, the news anchor in Carver’s short story describes her as an “unidentified girl eighteen to twenty four years of age” (74). Indeed, this nondescript young woman figure maps perfectly to Ophelia — along with Zoe. We see Zoe live with her mother, play cello in a professional quintet, and shoot hoops with the local teenagers. Altman intentionally leaves her age ambiguous. With the only anchor of age being that of relative youth, we can further merge Zoe, Ophelia, and the drowned woman.

After connecting the three women by appearance, Altman extends the allegory to another defining characteristic shared between Zoe and Ophelia: an inability to effectively grieve.

Altman shows us the most apparent demonstration of Zoe's inability to grieve in her reaction to Casey's death. Upon learning of his demise, her body language becomes very rigid, as she grips a basketball for support — as if it were a child. Yet, as Casey's mother hugs her, she cannot manage to hug back. Her raw distress continues as she approaches Tess in the jazz bar, attempting to discuss Casey's death. Tess reacts without any heart, dismissing the tragedy as carelessness (she scoffs "kids"), failing to hug Zoe, or offer any emotional support whatsoever. Tess leaves us in a medium shot with Zoe that pans to follow her as she quickly walks out of the bar — the pillars, stools, and tables of the surroundings obscure the shot, forming a metaphorical cage around her emotions.

Along with grief, we see Zoe struggle to engage with complex emotions when away from her cello. Perhaps most graphically, we see her outburst of self-harm instigated by her frustration with her mother's alcoholism. Upon being asked to prepare another drink for Tess, Zoe smashes a glass into the kitchen sink, severely cutting her bow hand. We see her slowly unfurl each finger, as blood flows down, and smirk when her mother yells from the other room. As Tess returns, Zoe has smeared blood along the cabinets, and has departed the home without communicating with Tess. We can understand this bizarre scene as Zoe's rebellion against her mother and her alcoholism (a disease that Zoe solemnly laments in the subsequent scene). Yet this act of self-harm clearly fails to healthily address the issue, and only serves to jeopardize Zoe's livelihood — her ability to play cello. Similarly, the smeared blood results from the same kind of turbulent, emotional flailing that Ophelia exhibited on her climbing of the willow tree

that ultimately yielded her death. Clearly, an inability to healthily convey the intensity of their emotions marks both women.

But Altman goes beyond simply drawing parallels between these women in disparate scenes. Through the authority of editing, Altman directly connects Zoe to the drowned woman, and thus to Ophelia, in order to give voice to their anguish through Zoe's music. This connection through editing can be seen in three phases. Zoe's feigned death in her pool establishes a visual connection between her and the two drowned women. Then, Altman employs two nearly identical cuts to link this connection with the evocative energy of Zoe's music.

In a more transparent visual metaphor, Altman depicts Zoe as a corpse in water. Forty minutes into the film, Zoe takes off her clothes and enters the pool in her backyard. She proceeds to turn face-down and go limp — from the high angle of the house's balcony, we see her floating like a corpse, a clear visual analog to both Ophelia and the woman in the river. Indeed, her exposed body, hidden face, and suffusing hair resemble the woman in the river, planting the first seed of connection.

After the initial foreshadowing, Altman then employs the following two parallel cuts. At the one hour mark of the film, Altman shows the fishermen having a raucous time, casting their lines in the river. We then cut to an upstream shot of the young woman, at a high angle, again in visual homage to Millais's "Ophelia." We begin to hear another somber cello theme like those we've heard several times before, and we cut to Zoe's feet, with toes awkwardly contorted under her chair, the cello's base between her legs. By linking the corpse to Zoe through music and the cut, Altman implies their complex similarities. Furthermore, the jarring, unnatural position of her toes draw a disturbing visual parallel to the corpse in the river.

While perhaps more subtle the first time, Altman employs the exact same editing technique twelve minutes later. We have another shot of the dead woman, followed by a fade-in of Zoe's music and a cut to her playing the cello — although this time we see a medium shot of her upper body, with her hand bandaged from the aforementioned glass. Her bow arm moves frenziedly, her zig-zagging bandage acting as a secondary dominant of the shot. This shot both further entrenches the visual similarity to the corpse, and echoes the pattern of self-harm in both Zoe and Ophelia, as discussed before. Indeed, Altman's choice of identical editing and parallel corporeal distortion overtly link Zoe to the drowned woman.

To complete our understanding of the unity between these characters, we must consider Zoe giving voice to the anguish of the other women through her music. Consider the aforementioned shot of Zoe's toes: from her toes, the camera tilts upward, revealing her sorrowful, impassioned face expressing the tragedy in her music. Because the music accompanies the transition from the drowned woman to Zoe, we hear the cello theme as their mutual cry — expressing the anguish that Ophelia and the drowned woman would express, had they the ability. Moreover, because Zoe uses the cello to voice these feelings, she, too, remains vocally silent — further connecting her to the other women.

Indeed, such silencing pervades throughout the film: we repeatedly see other characters talking over Zoe's playing, often at its emotional apex — a heartbreaking rejection of these women's suffering. During the introduction of the film, where Altman forms a collage of his vignettes to demonstrate the links between the characters, several characters attend Zoe's concert. Altman provides a full shot of her onstage with her quintet, giving an agonizingly beautiful solo with her eyes closed, deep inside the music. Then we cut to the audience members,

who begin to chatter and squabble about their future plans, in whispers loud enough to distract us from Zoe's music. As soon as Altman introduces Zoe's musical voice, it is drowned out. The same phenomenon repeats later in the film. Altman cuts from Zoe's poignant practicing to Tess lumbering up the stairs, who then exclaims, "How long ya gonna do that? ... Do you have to play so loud?" Altman lets us into Zoe's complex emotional world, and then smashes it to pieces. Tess's overt devaluing of Zoe's musicality represents a direct attack on the suffering conveyed by Ophelia, Zoe, and the woman in the river.

This is the critical component missing from the short stories that Altman sought to portray through Zoe: through the constructions of their respective media, Altman and Carver address the silencing of women differently. Carver silences the woman in the river through the very framework of the short story; he denies her any meaningful description or directly observable interaction with other characters. Thus, Carver constructs the story in such a way that he omits any semblance of agency or perspective of the drowned woman. Altman, on the other hand, deliberately depicts the way that other characters silence these women. Through the editing of his film, Altman gives voice to Zoe's pain through her music, and has other characters — and even the audience — explicitly ignore it.

While frustrating to watch as this develops, the film ultimately reifies the profound tragedy of this disrespect with Zoe's suicide. Upon failing to receive compassion from Tess regarding Casey's death, Zoe leaves her car running in a sealed garage. As the fumes rise, she takes out her cello and begins to play a truly mournful theme; we see her and the cello in the right half of a full shot, with the car door ajar in the left half. While her music continues (this time without auditory interruption) we see the camera slowly zoom to the left side of the shot —

completely cropping her out before we cut away, leaving her to die. Finally, after the audience and her own mother have dismissed her cries, we the viewers neglect her pain in her last moments on Earth. And then she dies. All three women have now met the same fate, and not a single one was heard.

Altman ultimately saw the drowned woman in Carver's work as a more important figure than the ghostly enigma omitted from the written scene. Not to suggest that Carver's representation doesn't carry weight — rather, Altman chose to amplify her cry to deepen the tragedy therein. *Short Cuts*, in literary and filmic form alike, deals with the human condition, be it harrowing, uplifting, or somewhere in between. The devices offered by film — namely sound, editing, and visual metaphor — have enabled Altman to construct an allegory between Ophelia, Zoe, and the woman in the river that Carver lacked the machinery to properly convey. Indeed, through this allegory, Altman depicts a markedly grim truth of the human condition, the capacity we all possess to ignore and silence the suffering of others.

While both works suggest that such violence can affect any arbitrary person, the allegory of Ophelia outlined herein remains gendered in nature. One could readily investigate the other ways in which both works silence women — more transparently through murder, more subtly through asymmetric power dynamics in marriages. Yet few (if any) motifs carry as far throughout the film as Zoe's musicality. When one considers the darker implications her art and its reception hold, one could readily argue that Altman's overarching vision for *Short Cuts* agrees with that of Carver: a series of authentic misadventures, bookended by the oppressive silencing of women.