

## The Aural Identity of George in Tom Ford's *A Single Man*

Tom Ford's directorial debut, *A Single Man* (2009), was widely acclaimed at film festivals across the globe. The film earned him several nominations, including Best Original Score at the Golden Globes, and The Golden Lion at the 66<sup>th</sup> Venice Film festival where he would also win the Queer Lion. Surprisingly, the critical attention and success of the film has not translated into an outpouring of scholarly attention. Most of the academic articles focusing upon the film, thus far, are in the field of adaptation studies. Articles, like "Tom Ford and His Kind" by Lee Wallace, focus heavily on the film's relation to Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel, *A Single Man*, which the film is based upon. Outside of adaptation studies, the other common topic written about is the director himself. His status as a fashion-world, homosexual icon has overshadowed the perception of his film. It appears easier to discuss the director's own status than to delve into the complex inner workings of the film. The portrayal of George (Colin Firth), a homosexual professor in the late 1960's, is done with careful consideration of the character's interior life. The film beautifully communicates the inner pain George suffers after the death of his partner, Jim. George is unable to outwardly speak about his loss and must mourn in isolation. The isolation and disconnect from the world around him is largely communicated through the film's sound track which is composed by Abel Korzeniowski and Shigeru Umebayashi. The sound track becomes an extension of George's interiority and speaks for him in a way he does not, and cannot, verbally speak for himself.

The film begins with a sound advance of strings that evoke a sense of sadness and romance. The strings are accompanied by images of George's naked body floating in water. This initial introduction to George signifies the sense of loss he is currently feeling. We only get shots

of his limbs floating in the dark waters, creating the impression that he is not whole. He is a fragmented body and self. The sweeping strings mimic the fluidity of the ocean surrounding George. The strings and ocean engulf him completely as does his loneliness. Tires screeching and then a crashing noise disrupt the last note of the opening piece. The tire's screech is not immediately identifiable as such, but the diegetic sonic source becomes obvious when the scene cuts to a car crashed in the snow. After the tires and initial shot of the snow, the film cuts back to George in the water. There is a resistance to accepting the tires screaming and this relates to Georges' resistance to accepting the loss of Jim. The tires are so intrusive because they force George out of his ocean and safety of isolation. The sound effect forces his (and our) confrontation of the death of Jim, again.

As George walks over to Jim's body, the musical piece, "Snow", begins to play. The piece comprises of two sets of strings being played. In the foreground, there are string notes played at a lower pitch and longer notes. The second strings are played at a higher pitch and shorter notes. The strings in the foreground create the sense of longing, while the shorter notes intrude upon the moment. The quickness of the notes in the background indicate how the moment is fleeting. The background strings sound as though they flutter away with the snow. As the shorter, quicker notes move from the background to the foreground, we are reminded of temporal limitations. There is a time limit to how long George can indulge in the moment. While the section does not become purely polyphonic, there is certainly a tension between the two string sections. This translates emotionally into a pull between the sadness of reality and the fleeting moment offered through dreams of being reunited with a lost love.

No dialogue occurs during this opening scene of the film; and yet, it communicates very strongly what George is feeling. The lack of traditional linguistics cues positions the opening in

relation to what Lacan calls “the real.” Lacan’s notion of the real is described by Lapsley and Westlake as being “defined negatively as that which the imaginary seeks to image and the symbolic seeks to symbolize. But it necessarily eludes all such attempts, remaining outside imagination and symbolization” (69). The dream sequence becomes the site of traumatic loss which the Symbolic cannot fully represent. George’s trauma defies the Symbolic because the Symbolic does not fully accept the initial connection between the two males. The trauma of losing a loved one resists attempts at linguistic control so the film uses a medium considered outside traditional linguistics. The music can communicate “the real” in a way that dialogue would fail.

The language and emotion George cannot verbally utter is relocated to the soundtrack. The music is extremely empathetic to his longing for Jim and the occurrence of trauma. Physically, George has lost Jim to the car accident and the dream sequence shows us the loss. Aurally, we are moved to understand the emotional strain this loss has placed upon George’s identity and self.

The fragmentation of self becomes more apparent as George’s voice-over narration begins. The narration begins after the film cuts from the dream sequence to George waking in his bed. The pain of being ripped away from this moment with Jim is heard in George’s gasp. When George later states, “For the past 8 months, waking up has actually hurt,” we know this to be true not only because George states it via voice-over. We know it to be true because of the gasp we hear. It aurally communicates the inner pain with which George is forced to start each day. There are pauses of silence between George waking up to his narration beginning and the start of “Becoming George,” the musical piece. These three elements communicate the multiple forms of George. We see him physically beginning his day, we hear George’s voice, and we hear the

musical piece. These three elements do not occur simultaneously as we might expect, rather there are disconnects among them.

The voice-over narration becomes separated from the image of George on-screen. The separation between George's body and his narration is discussed in Kyle Stevens's article, "Dying to Love: Gay Identity, Suicide, and Aesthetics in *A Single Man*." In the article he states, "The on-screen George is not speaking, nor does he seem to be thinking the words we hear, so we know that it is not the George we are seeing speak, but another George" (109). Part of the reason we know it is not the same George is because the narration continues later, after the onscreen death of George. In his voice-over, George is talking about a version of George that no longer exists. This technique highlights the separation between George, his body, and his identity.

The separation of George from his former self is signaled by the delay in "Becoming George" entering the sound scape. The song does not begin on the cut or immediately alongside the voice-over narration. The song does not begin until George's feet hit the carpet. The delay in "Becoming George" translates into George's own delay into wanting to become himself. The delay signifies that the identity of George is something that he must construct and maintain each day. The physical George we see, the voice of George we hear, and George's interiority heard in the music, all act independently in this scene. These three elements are each parts of George and convey his fractured identity.

The struggle to navigate his identity after Jim's death is illustrated as George continues his morning ritual. There is an attempt to control his environment. His dresser drawers are organized with defined lines and separators. His socks are neatly folded and his shirts are pressed with a clear wrapping around them. There is something stiff and regulated about his clothing. He

is putting on a uniform for the day. The uniform becomes a tool to navigate the realm of laws and language, the Symbolic. In order for George to operate in the Symbolic order, he performs an acceptable version of masculinity. Included in this performance is giving the impression of heterosexuality. In Judith Butler's influential book, *Gender Trouble*, she argues there is no outward indication of one's sexual orientation. Sexuality is an internal status but there is a belief that heterosexual males have certain mannerisms and can therefore be identified externally. Masculine gender performance and heterosexuality were understood as a singular entity in George's time. In Butler's piece, she summarizes gender performance by arguing "[gender] has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (136). In performing traditional ideas of masculinity, George gives the impression of heterosexuality.

The meticulous manner in which George presents himself highlights his ability to "perform" George and is echoed in the steady meticulous notes of the music. While looking in the mirror George's voice-over states, "I know what part I am supposed to play." The notion that one can perform identity is further theorized in Judith Butler's, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." In this article she states, "*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*" (italics original 313). George is performing a version of societal normalcy for which there is no stable origin. In performing this version of George, he is forced into silence about his loss. George is not solely fragmented because of his gay identity but he also has no relief from the performance of gender and sexuality. With the loss of Jim, there is also the loss of being heard.

The above mentioned line is spoken as the camera pans upwards and we see George looking at himself in the mirror. The image of George we get in this shot is not directly George, but a reflection of him. Again, there is a separation between the image of George, George's

voice, and George's connection to his own self. In the act of performing identity for the Symbolic order, a person experiences a sense of loss. Lapsley and Westlake describe this as:

“In a further sense, too, the entry into language is the birth of desire. Because the laws of society are inscribed within language, entry into the symbolic order entails that the child submit to its pre-given place and role, while that which is not consonant with such a social identity is consigned to the unconscious”(70).

When George must submit to performing the acceptable roles inscribed within the Symbolic, he loses part of his identity. With the loss of Jim, George is further cut off from fulfillment and the self becomes further fragmented. The on-screen George's first line of the film is, “Just get through the god damn day”. This occurs after he has finished getting ready and is looking at himself in the mirror. With his performance ready, he is now ready to enter the Symbolic order.

Ingrained in performing identity is the fear of one's masked identity becoming visible. The tension over visibility is heard in George's frequent remarks referring to himself as invisible. His anxiety over visibility parallels his anxiety over identity. His homosexuality does not fit into the prescribed social roles in the Symbolic order. Visually, he must conform while what is unseen in the unconscious is silenced. There is constant tension between his performing and the silencing of his traumatic loss of Jim. While George continues his morning ritual, the scene cuts to a flashback of Jim playing with the dogs in the yard. The lighting is warmer in color but this image is quickly replaced by a grey-washed image of George standing behind the window pane. He is perfectly framed in the glass panel. The piano notes in this scene are played slowly and individually. They do not compete for attention over the subtle strings in the background. There is a sense of singularity and of loneliness that voices George's emotional state. Standing behind

the glass, George is completely visible to the rest of the world. There is no longer any relief from the performance.

We witness George forced to perform even when confronted with the terrible news of Jim's car accident. Even in his most vulnerable moment, George must maintain a traditional masculine identity. If he becomes emotional then he risks exposing that which the Symbolic expects to stay in the unconscious. The camera moves to a close-up of George while he speaks to Jim's cousin on the phone who informs him about Jim's death. We see George's chest moving up and down at a rapid pace but his voice remains even. There is pain in his eyes but his voice is steady. George is careful to pace his speech to not give away his distress. Even from the initial point of traumatic loss, George must silence himself. It is crucial that we hear Jim's cousin on the other line. The voice of Jim's cousin portrays the sentiments of the era. We hear him tell George he is not welcome to the funeral since he is not family. After the phone call ends, George runs to Charley's house. The sound of rain consumes the sound track as we see George fall apart in Charley's arms. George's screams of loss go unheard. He is silenced. The sound track is able to give a voice to "the real" in a way that language cannot. The trauma of the event is heard through the powerfully gushing rain storm. The intensity of the rain moves past ambient or simple diegetic noises. It takes on the role of George's voice and inner pain.

When the film cuts back to present day George, he is watching the family across the street from his bathroom. The music speaks to the longing for human connection. Like our initial introduction to George, the family is given no dialogue. As George watches them, his face is broken up by the wooden slates of his home. George's broken image reflects the fragmentation of his home and his self. The mother and children are shown together in the openness of their yard. This conveys a wholeness that George is unable to achieve. The youngest son of the family

kills a butterfly by rubbing it in between his hand. The film slows down during this shot. If we assume that the image is how George is perceiving reality, then he is focusing on the son's attack on the butterfly. There is a delicacy to life that the son is not able to perceive. The camera zooms out each time it cuts back to George watching the family. The longer he watches the family dynamic, the further he becomes from human connection. He is reminded of his own isolation.

While there is no dialogue among the family members, the father appears angry as he leaves for work. The mother rushes over to give him a kiss on the cheek. The entire scene acts as its own form of performance. The sound track highlights this construction through the hammering noise that is coupled with the musical piece. The hammering sound signifies the constructed façade of the family. There is a level of performance within the ideal that the Symbolic order tries to present as the original. It is this family that is supposed to represent acceptable gender and sexuality identities. Butler states, "compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasm of "man" and "woman", are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real" ("Imitation," 313). While the hetero identity appears as the one to be imitated in the Symbolic order, it is itself an imitation without an origin. George watches the family for an extended time without them witnessing his gaze. When the wife notices George watching he immediately hides. The family can be watched in a manner that George cannot. This distinction is one that resonates with Butler's words: George's performance "is [a] *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence" (original emphases, "Imitation," 314-315). George's performance is one of survival in the Symbolic order, unlike the family's performance of reproducing the status quo.



The family is shown again as George leaves for work. As George pulls out of his driveway the piece entitled “George’s Waltz” begins to play. The waltz is a highly formalized three meter musical piece that parallels the highly formalized and constructed version of George that he is presenting. The carefully calculated image of George is echoed in the carefully constructed musical notes. The family’s house is made of stone, unlike the glass and wood of George’s home. Unlike George, the heterosexual couple does not have the same fear of being visible.

Underneath the waltz, the ticking from the car clock is heard in the background. When George drives past the family, the ticking becomes louder and slower. It blurs the line between diegetic and non-diegetic. Throughout the film, there are moments where the “tick” of the clock is in the foreground and at the top of the sonic hierarchy. The ticking becomes an aural motif that signifies George’s anxiety over the future. He is constantly being reminded about moving forward in time by the intrusive ticking. Even as George is getting ready in the morning, the ticking of his clock can be heard in the extreme background. In the extreme background of the “Becoming George” piece, there is a soft ticking sound. From the moment George begins his day, there is the pressure of time. As George walks across campus, his waltz continues to play. It is important to note that while George walks to his office he walks against the flow of traffic. He is going against the mainstream. While on the campus he watches two males play tennis. The tennis ball being hit repeatedly is a close sound match for the ticking clock. In another instance, the sound of the clock is heard after George lectures his class on fear. There is a forte tick followed by the line, “Fear that we’re useless and no one cares about what we have to say”. The ticking becomes a technique the sound track uses to convey George’s own anxieties over time, including his being silenced.

The final tick of the film occurs as George lies dying on the floor. As the film closes, “Stillness of the Mind” plays alongside George’s voice-over. The piece pauses for a few moments to allow the final tick of the clock. The moment portrays a reclaiming of George’s identity. Unlike “Becoming George” earlier, the narration and the music are not separated by a pause. They are reunited. When the piece plays at the beginning he is isolated and depressed. When the piece plays this time, George is reconnected with himself and the world around him. There is a hope of transformation. There is a hope in connecting with other people. The film’s use of the sound track to communicate the interior life of the character is useful in examining characters that exist outside of the “norm.” In understanding how *A Single Man*’s sound track portrays the complicated relationship between people and the self, we can begin to look at other films with a renewed sense of how sound can give voice to what a character cannot verbally speak.

Works Cited

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