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Abstract: The article discusses the strength of stillness both at a narrative level related to Rosana’s appearance and at an aesthetic level related to the soundtrack. The quiet sound design communicates intensity and meaning, as does Rosana, who is largely ignored by the family but is an eminently strong character.

Keywords: stillness, suspense, soundtrack, film music, hi-fi aesthetics, attention.

The Strength of Stillness

Stillness as a phenomenon
The term ‘stillness’ typically refers to the absence of something: The absence of sound, motion, disturbance and surprising occurrences. Synonymous terms are quietness, tranquility, calmness, being in balance, etc. Terms mostly associated with something pleasant.

But stillness can also be the presence of something: Something we hear (such as raindrops on the window, meditative music, or a calm and deep voice) or something we see (such as a slow movement or a well-balanced visual composition in a painting, a sculpture, a landscape or in a room). In other words, stillness is something we experience through our senses – the presence and not the absence of sensory impulses.

This notion of a perceived stillness is explored in El Adiós as a narrative and affective strategy. In the presentation of her short film in connection with its nomination for the European Film Awards 2016, director Clara Roquet said:

[I]t intends to focus on the thickness of the daily rhythms, the importance of the little actions of the protagonist performing the same invisible rituals she has performed every day. […] Through the visual language I wanted to enhance this sense of stillness and sobriety. (Roquet, 2015)

In this article, I will illustrate how the perception of stillness is not only communicated and enhanced through the visual language of the film but also through its soundtrack. But first, the analytical lens of stillness is turned towards Rosana’s appearance and development in the film. The two perspectives focusing on Rosana and the soundtrack, respectively, will be
combined in the last section arguing for the strength of stillness as an aesthetic strategy and in life as such.

**Rosana’s appearance**

On the surface Rosana appears to be a quiet and withdrawn character. She performs her daily routines and duties and moves slowly and silently around in the house throughout the whole film. But beneath that surface, an emotional tension is built up, a tension which is partly released in the two scenes where the non-diegetic guitar tune is playing, which I will return to in the next section.

The character of Rosana develops from being a passively sleeping maid (Shot 1) to being an active, powerful woman, but still in a quiet way, with a downhearted expression on her face (Shot 67). It is reasonable to see the film as Rosana’s awakening after a mourning period, both concretely and symbolically. In the first shot we see her sleeping and then slowly opening up her eyes and ears towards the foggy landscape (which might be a symbol of her inner state of mind) and the sounds of the outside environment (Shot 2-4). Then we see her slowly opening the windows and doors to let some light in.

Throughout the film, we get more and more clues about the power she possesses, especially towards Mercè: Rosana is the one who finds the mother’s diary which Mercè can show to the guests; she is the one who sews Mercè’s broken dress, and she is the one who keeps the house and makes the funeral possible. Mercè appears insecure and weak compared to Rosana. For instance, when she tries to express her appreciation of Rosana by saying: “I don’t know what we would do without you, Rosana” (Shot 19), she is met with silence. Rosana is surrounded by a form of intimacy, but behind her solitary appearance she comes across as strong-minded. Around halfway through the film, Rosana contradicts Mercè in a conflict about which dress the dead mother should wear (Shot 24b, 08:55). “If you wish you can change it yourself”, Rosana opposingly and surprisingly replies (Shot 43). After this scene, a power struggle escalates between the two. Mercè has the power to exclude Rosana from the funeral, but Rosana wins the struggle by leaving the house in the end. My point is that the very character of Rosana demonstrates the strength of stillness with her calm behavior and silence.

**The sound of stillness**

The film begins with the symbolic sound of a ticking clock while the camera slowly zooms in on the sleeping face of Rosana. The soundtrack illustrates how her senses slowly wake up by introducing
environmental sounds one at a time: a barking dog, a bird singing and a church bell ringing. In R. Murray Shafer’s soundscape terminology, this is an example of a hi-fi soundscape of keynote sounds. **Keynote sounds** is a term for sounds representing a specific recognizable environment, in this case a pastoral, rural scenery. **Hi-fi** refers to a soundscape where sounds are easily distinguishable, allowing the listener to hear the details and nuances in the individual sounds. This is in opposition to low-fi soundscapes where sounds are blurry and difficult to identify (Schafer [1977] 1994).

**Hi-fi aesthetics** is a significant feature of sound designer Diego Casares’ soundtrack. Just like the many close-up images, we hear all nuances in the close-up sound recordings: the steam from the iron, the sewing thread being bitten in two, the rustling of the curtains and clothes, etc. It sounds as if microphones are attached to Rosana’s clothes and fingers as she moves around in the house and touches things. No words are spoken until Shot 14, where Julia asks Rosana: “Why are you crying”, and the silent magic is broken, forcing us back to reality.

The absence of sound is also a well-established filmic trick to create suspense especially known from horror films, where a moment of intense silence is heard just before the victim notices the murderer, before the bomb detonates, or before the birds attack. That effect is taken to the limit in the recent feature film *A Quiet Place* (Krasinski, 2018), which revolves around a plot where a family has to live in complete silence because monsters will attack them if they make even the smallest sound. Try to imagine how difficult it would be to give birth to a child without making a sound or to keep a newborn completely silent. In cinemas – both public and at home – we are used to magnificent Dolby surround sound. So, silence can be a quite strong effect, creating a creepy and uncomfortable mood, but also an intense present awareness, which is deafening in its own way.

The suspense effect is also present in *El Adiós*. Beneath the subdued visual, verbal and acoustic surface, oppressed and pent-up emotions are intensified. The musical guitar theme strategically used twice in the film functions as a kind of release for some of Rosana’s emotional pressure. Through the delicate and hesitant musical structures, her emotional state gets a form and an expression, and it is not a tense, confused or desperate expression but a quiet, calm, clear and light one. The music affords Rosana’s strength to make an impact. It is as if the music enables her to say the final goodbye in her own way. First to her beloved and lost mistress of the house (Shot 53-58, 10:40) and then to the house and family (Shot 67, 13:50). From this interpretation, the music has a key role in the film as a leitmotif for the very title ‘The Goodbye’.

The composer Paul Tyan, who made the original tune for *El Adiós*, has uploaded a video on YouTube showing himself recording and playing the theme. We are told that he
originally composed it for piano but switched to guitar because it was a better match with Rosana’s emotions and her Bolivian background (Tyan, 2015).

**The strength of stillness**

From different perspectives, both the character of Rosana and the soundtrack demonstrate the strength of stillness, and together they create a strong emotional narrative in synergy with the other filmic settings. The sense of stillness is not only enhanced through the visual language, as Roquet suggests in the quote above, but also through the soundtrack.

When a soundtrack is quiet, the important sounds stand out. When a person appears in a calm and orderly manner, even her smallest movements and expressions stand out. Thus, *El Adiós* uses **hi-fi aesthetics** to pull out the patterns and figures from the curtains of everyday life. By using stillness as an aesthetic strategy, the film cleans our senses and enables us to perceive in a more attentive way. That is a competence we can take with us in our own daily life: to practice attentive listening and increase the awareness of our surroundings.

**References:**


