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Moving, Belonging, and Sorrow in ‘A Very Different Time’ by Phil Smith

Silvia Viñas, Radio Ambulante

Abstract

Phil Smith’s *A Very Different Time* weaves poetry, music, ambience and snapshots of stories in an audio piece about movement, nostalgia, change and sorrow. It includes the voices of people he met while living in Berlin: a West African refugee; a musician and academic from the United States; a Syrian refugee escaping war; an academic of Italian/German citizenship; and a German musician who moved from a small town to the city. To this stream of voices, Smith adds layers of music, different beats, street sounds, distortion, the ambience that recall the words – valleys, mountains, water and islands –and a central poem. His use of sound separates different sections in the story, creates rhythm, and builds a story arc. The piece sounds melancholic, an exploration of what is being lost when countries or people put up barriers to keep “the other” out.

Keywords

audio feature, poetry, migrants, refugees

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Moving, Belonging, and Sorrow in 'A Very Different Time'

by Phil Smith

By Silvia Viñas

Executive Producer: Alan Hall [Falling Tree]

First Broadcast: 16th May 2017, BBC Radio 4.

Audio: <https://soundcloud.com/jazz-dis-junction/a-very-different-time>

Duration: 11.31

Phil Smith's *A Very Different Time* weaves poetry, music, ambience and snapshots of stories in an audio piece about movement, nostalgia, change and sorrow. Despite direct references to the recent wave of migration to Europe, Smith's work looks to various experiences of moving to explore universal ideas of home and belonging.

Smith's work as an audio producer has appeared on BBC Radio 4 and he has been featured by the Third Coast Festival podcast Re:sound. In *A Very Different Time* his background as a poet and musician really shines through.

The piece begins and ends with the same voice: Lorenz Rollhäuser, a radio producer and writer who has been living in Berlin, Germany, since the '80s. His voice introduces the piece by referring to how things have changed; how, before, migrants were out of sight:

So, there was no hardship at all. And we of course always thought, "Oh, this is how it will go on forever." We didn't see them. They were out of our sight. We didn't realise that, we didn't care... And it was a bit difficult to say goodbye to this illusion...But, you know, you live in a very different time...

What follows is a stream of words: valleys, mountains, water, islands, cities, sorrow –all in a woman's voice which has been altered to sound like a harmony. The effect is almost robotic. Each word has its own sound behind it. Insects chirp behind the word "valleys", while a crowd of unintelligible voices accompanies the word "cities". These words will come up again and again throughout the piece, like signposts.

Valleys, mountains, water, islands, cities, and sorrow are words from the poem *Paysage Moralisé*, written in 1934 by the English-American poet W.H. Auden. Paired with Rollhäuser's reflection about change, they are a one-minute introduction to a piece that turns ambient sounds, music and tape from interviews into a sort of poem of its own, but in audio.

The Poem

A friend showed Smith the poem *Paysage Moralisé* by W.H. Auden while he was living in Berlin. Smith says that the line “Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands”, immediately stood out to him. It reminded him of the refugee crisis in Europe and it resonated with material he had already gathered during his time in Berlin: interviews with a Syrian refugee fleeing war and a West African refugee looking for a better life, for example, but also conversations with others who had moved to Berlin for different reasons, like escaping small-town life. Smith wanted to make an audio piece where Auden’s poem explored migration and wider questions about searching for home.

Auden’s poem is a sestina, a complex, thirty-nine-line poetic form that uses a pattern of repetition. The six end-words of the first stanza are repeated throughout the rest of the stanzas –in this case valleys, mountains, water, islands, cities, and sorrows, the first words from the poem we hear towards the beginning of *A Very Different Time*. Notice the repetition of these words at the end of the first two stanzas of *Paysage Moralisé*:

*Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,
Seeing at end of street the barren mountains,
Round corners coming suddenly on water,
Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands,
We honour founders of these starving cities
Whose honour is the image of our sorrow,*

*Which cannot see its likeness in their sorrow
That brought them desperate to the brink of valleys;
Dreaming of evening walks through learned cities
They reined their violent horses on the mountains,
Those fields like ships to castaways on islands,
Visions of green to them who craved for water.*

A sestina ends with a three-line “envoi”, which must include all of the six recurring words. This is how *Paysage Moralisé* ends:

*It is our sorrow. Shall it melt? Ah, water
Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys,
And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands.*

In this audio piece, the first parts of the poem that we hear are these end-words, detached from the rest of the lines, as if being listed. Thanks to the corresponding sound behind each word, it’s easy for the listener to immediately picture each landscape. As Smith explains, it’s like flipping through postcards. But there is one word that is harder to picture: “sorrow”, a feeling that is inherent to moving, no matter the reason.

We then start to hear whole lines from the poem, which are intertwined with short phrases by different characters who are talking about their own experiences of moving and belonging. But then, at around 3 minutes, the reading of the poem stops with a beeping pedestrian crossing as a bed of ambient sound. It serves as a symbolic crossing into a new section of the piece, where we are briefly going to hear longer, more complete thoughts about migration.

The Nameless Characters

As soon as the poem ends, with an emphasis on the word “cities,” we start hearing a voice which could belong to a migrant or a refugee:

“It’s hard to be, like, in country which is not your homeland. And you can’t speak the language. And you be alones. When you don’t have a lot of friends. I actually know a lot of peoples, but that’s not really I have friends. I know peoples but I don’t have really friends here, that’s it. Yeah. You have to wait, wait, wait...”

But we actually don’t know his backstory: why he moved, with whom, how long ago – and we won’t learn about those details in this piece. There is no introduction to this character or context about his life because there are no narrators. It seems like Smith wanted his characters to speak uninterrupted by outside onlookers like himself who, by narrating, might insert their own prejudices or views.

This man is immediately followed by the voice of a woman who helps to register refugees:

“Some people are still waiting there. There’s a line for getting numbers. This number-getting took sometimes days, sometimes weeks. Erm, so people were camping outside to be the first in the queue - just to get the number. And with this number you had to wait until this number to be called. And this is a totally random process. At the beginning, they have got these boards where numbers blink up.

Again, we don’t know anything about her backstory, why she has decided to work with refugees, if *she* has experienced moving. But we don’t have to, because this story is not about her; in fact, it’s not about any one person in particular. That helps universalise the story, prompting the reader to think about their own experience with moving and belonging.

We then jump back into lines of the poem intertwined with phrases from different characters. It feels like they are together because they tell us about their experience simultaneously and the ambience signals that they are in a city –one of the recurring words. But, at the same time, they feel far away from each other –like islands, another recurring word– because what they’re talking about is unique to their story.

Smith explained that the voices belong to people he met while living in Berlin: a West African refugee; a musician and academic from the United States; a Syrian refugee escaping war; an academic of Italian/German citizenship; and a German musician who moved from a small town to the city.

The Sound

To this stream of voices, Smith adds layers of music, different beats, street sounds, distortion, the ambience that recall the words – valleys, mountains, water and islands – and, of course, the poem. His use of sound separates different sections in the story, creates rhythm, and builds a story arc.

An accordion plays behind the opening lines by Lorenz Rollhäuser, and then we hear the recurring words from the poem with their corresponding sound. The only word that stands alone, without any ambience behind, is “sorrow.” This beginning feels serene and melancholic.

As the piece moves forward, Smith layers more sounds together: voices, ambience, and music. There comes a point when it feels overwhelming –but this seems to be deliberate, a way to signal a climax in the piece. The layers are then stripped down like the resolution in a story arc; bringing us back to the sounds we heard at the beginning.

The piece ends by returning to the first voice we heard, that of the German radio producer Lorenz Rollhäuser. His line, “But you know you live in a very different time”, brings us back to the beginning, to the idea of change –just like a sestina ends by recalling the words that are repeated throughout the poem.

Smith started working on this audio piece about six months after Britons voted to leave the European Union. He was living in Berlin and following the developments of Brexit, with its anti-immigration rhetoric, from afar. He says he was angry as he produced this piece, but hearing it you wouldn’t think this was his state of mind. The piece as a whole sounds melancholic, an exploration of what is being lost when countries or people put up barriers to keep “the other” out. The recurring word in the poem and the piece that best defines this feeling is “sorrow”, the only word that doesn’t have an obvious sound to accompany it, but is rather represented by the snippet of stories throughout the piece.

SILVIA VINAS

Silvia Viñas is a journalist, editor and audio producer. For the past six years she has worked as an Editor for *Radio Ambulante*, an award-winning podcast that tells Latin American stories. She lives in London.



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