

'Nobody Said Anything': Vision and Textuality in Short Stories from Raymond Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*

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Representation can only be properly analysed in relation to the actual concrete forms which meaning assumes, in the concrete practices of signifying, 'reading' and interpretation; and these require analysis of the actual signs, symbols, figures, images, narratives, words and sounds ... in which symbolic meaning is circulated.

Stuart Hall

In trompe-l'oeil it is never a matter of confusion with the real: what is important is the production of a simulacrum in full consciousness of the game and of the artifice by miming the third dimension ....

Jean Baudrillard

## INTRODUCTION

Raymond Carver was born in 1938 in Clatskanie, Oregon, a small sawmill town near the Columbia River. Married with two children at the age of twenty, the family moved to California in 1958. Between 1976 and his untimely death in 1988, he published 10 books of poetry and prose. His first volume of short stories, entitled *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) is the subject of this paper.<sup>1</sup>

A typical Raymond Carver story might begin as follows (from the opening paragraph of "Nightschool"): "My marriage had just fallen apart. I couldn't find a job. I had another girl. But she wasn't in town. So I was at a bar having a glass of beer, and two women were sitting a few stools down, and one of them began to talk to me" (94).<sup>2</sup> This beginning has all the hallmarks of the celebrated Carver

style: the use of ordinary discourse; prose which features an “elliptical spareness and precision” (Nesset, 2); stories which are full of “edges and silences” (Saltzman, 21). The end result is a pared-down, minimalist style (although Carver himself has rejected the term as being inadequate).<sup>3</sup> These stories, which gather up the “bits and pieces of ourselves” (“Collectors,” 105) present characters often depicted as “managing badly with the delimited vocabularies they struggle to master” (Nesset, 27). At the heart of the matter, where Carver’s writing is concerned, there is the issue of language and its limitations.

Carver himself has written of “the importance of using ... common language, the language of normal discourse, the language we speak to each other in” (*Fires*, 37). Moreover he affirms the need of a writer “to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow these things — a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring — with immense, even startling power” (*Fires*, 24).

The use of “clear and specific language” (*Fires*, 27) to some extent makes a case for any discussion of Carver’s work to center on language effects, on the lexical level. Some of the points for a ‘strategies of language’ approach to Carver’s work, as Michael Toolan has identified in “Discourse style makes viewpoint” are the notion of perspective or viewpoint as a set of beliefs and attitudes, which derive from the narrator’s lexicogrammatical choices, the pragmatic features of language, and the orientational background. This approach is concerned with “the language effects in a short story achieved by the use of certain words, phrases, and verbal stagings of the situation” (Toolan, 127).

While recognizing that “language constructs meaning” (Hall, 1) and keeping the lexical level in mind, in the following analysis I want also to redirect attention to some other effects projected by the text. Stuart Hall has stated that, in “the shared cultural ‘space’ in which the production of meaning through language — that is, representation — takes place (t)he receiver of ... meanings is not a passive screen on which the original meaning is accurately and transparently projected” Rather, writer and reader are active participants in a process which ... is always double-sided, always interactive” (10). And writer and reader can be engaged actively in a variety of ways. If Carver’s stories are full of ‘edges and silences,’ my concern here is with the ‘edges,’ with what might constitute textual boundaries, frames and framing devices embedded in the text, the visual component of the image that

does not directly depend on a linguistic effect, in fact may be situated in contrast to it. Although most often a pivotal word or phrase turns a Carver story (the lexical level), there are exceptions.

I will try and identify three such instances: 1) the representation of objects; 2) the inscribing of a viewpoint (perspective) both within a story and between stories, requiring a kind of 'cross-viewing' on the part of the reader, and producing a trompe-l'oeil effect; and 3) in-sight or vision. These instances, in a combination of ways, have links with the act of seeing, to voyeurism, and also to the inculcation of a visionary experience, however small or insignificant or misunderstood it might be. If, as one critic notes, a "story ends, as many of Carver's do, with a proleptic leap from the central anecdote to the time of its telling" (Simmons, 113), such "leaps" are not confined to the lexical or narrative level alone.

#### ONE OBJECT AT A TIME

I don't have the kind of memory that can bring entire conversations back to the present, complete with all the gestures and nuances of real speech; nor can I recall the furnishings of any room I've ever spent time in, not to mention my inability to remember the furnishings of an entire household. Or even very many specific things about a race track — except, let's see, a grandstand, betting windows, closed-circuit TV screens, masses of people .... I put the furnishings and the physical things surrounding the people into the stories as I need those things. (*Fires*, 30)

I will begin my discussion with the second and third stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* each of which contain elements of the particular verbal-visual paradigm I want to examine: "Neighbors," and "The Idea."

The story entitled "Neighbors,"<sup>4</sup> although strongly set in the linguistic mode, introduces a visual component in order to establish the theme of voyeurism. It is the tale of a marriage in the process of diminishing. Bill (a bookkeeper) and Arlene (a secretary) were a happy couple, until they look in on the lives of their neighbors Harriet and Jim Stone, who live across the hall. While the Stones' are away, Bill and Arlene watch over the vacant apartment, feed the cat and water the

plants. But they also do more: Bill helps himself to cigarettes and alcohol, and even goes so far as to try on their clothes. Looking after the Stones' apartment provides Bill and Arlene with an opportunity "to examine the objects of that other, fuller life and experience it vicariously" (Campbell, 15). A pattern of behavior is created, whereby entering their neighbor's apartment sets the stage for increased sexual excitement in their own mundane lives.

Carver in *No Heroics Please: Uncollected Writings* has set down the genesis of this story, which came from a real instance of "apartment-watching" in Tel Aviv.

I found that experience of entering and leaving someone else's empty apartment two or three times a day, sitting for a while in other people's chairs, glancing through their books and magazines and looking out their windows, made a rather powerful impression on me. (103)

Carver further notes "the confusion or disorder of the central personality in the story" (103) and the "essential sense of mystery or strangeness that is in part due to ... the story's style" (103). He refers to the turning point in the story as when Arlene insists on going into the apartment alone: "She reveals through words and through appearance ... that she in turn has been doing pretty much the same" (104) as Bill. This is a pertinent point for our discussion, the fact that Carver makes his own distinction between 'words' and 'appearances.' He cites examples from the story, for instance, when Arlene returns from the Stones' apartment, the color in her cheeks, and the white lint clinging to the back of her sweater.

Carver has alluded to his own inability to recall with any accuracy "the furnishings of an entire household", for example, or that his method is to put the physical things surrounding the people "into the stories as I need those things" (*Fires*, 30). Yet there is evidence in the text of the stories themselves, of an accuracy in depicting objects and establishing consistent viewpoints that not only enhance the structure of the narrative, but also make them 'visible.'

When Bill first enters the Stone's apartment, he noticed this: "The sunburst clock over the television said half past eight" (10). The sight of this clock reminds Bill of the time when Harriet first bought the clock, and crossed the hall to show it to Arlene. Next Bill prowls around the house. "He looked out the window, and then ... he moved slowly through each room considering everything that fell under his gaze, carefully, one object at a time. He saw ashtrays, items of furniture, kitchen utensils, the clock. He saw everything. At last he entered the bedroom"

(13). The key sequence here is “one object at a time,” a process which begins and ends with the clock.<sup>5</sup> As a lexical item the clock is a noun which stands for an object we recognize as indicating time. In this case, the time when Bill entered the apartment. It is also the last item to fall “under his gaze” as he moves from room to room, giving the reader a sense of seeing panoramically around the house. This gives added emphasis to Bill’s statement that “He saw everything.” The sequence certifies that we as readers ‘see’ everything that he saw. (The clock is also an object of recollected time, the time when Harriet first bought it and showed it to Arlene, pointing to a more easygoing time in the relations between the two couples.)

In another story, “The Father,” a similar effect establishes the father’s estrangement from the group. “The father was in the kitchen and could hear them playing with the baby .... ‘Who does Daddy *look* like?’ Alice repeated, and they all at once looked through to the kitchen where the father was sitting at the table with his back to them” (42).

The sense of mystery and strangeness in “Neighbors” reaches a climax in the bizarre scene of cross-dressing at the end of the story; after trying on the husband’s clothes, Bill then proceeds to dress up in the wife’s clothes:

He rummaged through the top drawers until he found a pair of panties and a brassiere....He put on a black and white checkered skirt and tried to zip it up. He put on a burgundy blouse that buttoned up the front. He considered her shoes, but understood they would not fit. For a long time he looked out the living-room window from behind the curtain. (14)

He puts on one item after another, a kind of striptease in reverse. This is also the point in the story where voyeurism, which maintains a separation between the person watching and what is seen, i.e. he is looking around the apartment, looking through her clothes, “looking out the living-room window from behind the curtain” (Bill presumably still dressed in woman’s clothes — is anybody watching?) gives way to fetishism. Interestingly Bill does not put on what happens to be a very potent fetishistic object, her shoes.

## FROM BEHIND THE CURTAIN

In the next story, "The Idea," the voyeur motif of Bill Miller's fascination with his neighbors is carried to an extreme. In this story, an older couple peer out their window at the man next door who, every third night or so, rain or shine, performs a strange ritual outside his house. The couple, Vern and his wife (the narrator) can see this man standing outside and looking into his own bedroom window to watch his wife undress. It reminds one of a Renaissance painting, or even Poussin, where a nymph is being spied on by a man, who in turn is being watched by someone else, a doubling of perspective which implicates the viewer in the web of gazes.

Campbell cites this story as a case of "double voyeurism" (20). Vern and his wife wait inside a darkened room anticipating their neighbors appearance outside his bedroom window, "in front of the lighted window" (17) where a woman (supposedly his wife, inferred not stated) will perform a striptease. This key passage is framed by the window, and in a way this links it to the previous story, where Bill, behind a curtain dresses up in woman's clothes.

Runyon has alerted us to the possibility of linkages between stories: "*Intratextuality* may be the proper coin to account for what can happen when the texts in a text (poems or stories in an intelligently assembled sequence) begin to refer to each other in ways that seem to refer to their doing so ... *intratextual* connections that characterize Carver's fiction" (9).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the case of neighbors "looking at a man who was standing and looking into his own bedroom window" (18) in one story provides a kind of cross-viewing effect for the reader when 'seen' in relation to the previous story. Here is the scene in full.

We kept watching.

I could make out someone behind the curtain now. It must have been her undressing. But I couldn't see any detail. I strained my eyes .... Suddenly the curtain was drawn aside and the woman turned her back to the window....

"She's taking off her clothes," Vern said....

Then the bedroom light went out and the man started back along the side of the house. He opened the screen door and slipped inside, and a little later the rest of the lights went out.(18-19)

It is perhaps an instance of *trompe-l'oeil*, under the terms set out by Baudrillard<sup>7</sup>: The "effect of decentering forwards, this pushing forward of a mirror of objects to

encounter a subject that resembles them — all of this, under the forms of anodyne objects, is the appearance of the Double that creates the characteristically gripping effect of *trompe-l'oeil*” (56). In the one story, a man dresses up in woman’s clothes and looks out from behind the window curtain; in the other, a woman (unspecified “It must have been her”) undresses with the curtain drawn aside and with her back to the window,<sup>8</sup> watched by a man, who is in turn being watched by neighbors.

The scene is also powerfully cinematic, the “darkened room” versus “the lighted window.” The experience of voyeurism, of gazing, brings out differences in the couple. She wonders about the woman’s appeal, whereas Vern wonders about the excitement it causes him. The story resolves itself in a play of language: the demonstrative ‘that’ when she says “someday I’m going to tell that trash what I think of her,” and a threat; “Anybody comes looking in my window they’ll have the cops on them. Except maybe Cary Grant” (20).<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the reference is to a male cinema star and the name of a famous screen actor is not out of place here, as the act of voyeurism has a cinematic aspect; the “darkened room” evocative of a movie theater contrasts with the “lighted window”, a movie screen, and the woman’s striptease performance on that screen.<sup>10</sup>

“Are You A Doctor?”, a story about loneliness, opens innocently with a wrong number. A divorced woman, Clara Holt, trying to contact a doctor for her sick child, accidentally calls the unlisted number of Arnold Breit, who has been waiting for his wife to call. Clara asks him to meet her. Arnold, a cautious man, goes against his taciturn nature and drops in at her apartment:

Lights from the windows illuminated the balconies. He could see planters on the balustrades and here and there a piece of lawn furniture. At one balcony a large man in a sweatshirt leaned over the railing and watched him. (35)

As Arnold climbs the stairs, he remembers a hotel in Luxembourg where he and his wife had stayed many years ago. Once inside Clara’s apartment, he doesn’t take the chair she indicated “but instead one that let him face the balcony” (38). He recalled the large man in the sweatshirt. During the course of their encounter, Arnold, acting impulsively, kisses her. At the end of the story, as he leaves Clara’s apartment, he looks back at the building. “But he was unable to determine which

balcony was hers. The large man in the sweatshirt continued looking down at him” (40). The visual items here, the balcony (like the window in “The Idea”) and the man in the sweatshirt, and the perspective “looking down at him” all contribute to the effect. They will act as a frame in a later story, another kind of trompe-l’oeil effect in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”—the balcony in Mexico.

## IN-SIGHTS

At that moment — I swear all of this took place there in the laundromat — I could see nothing ahead but years more of this kind of responsibility and perplexity. Things would change some, but they were never really going to get better .... I’d had, I realized later, an insight. (*Fires*, 33)

The opening story in the volume, “Fat” concerns a waitress disillusioned with her job and her marriage. The story is told in the first person; the viewpoint implied by all the language choices can be attributed to the story’s narrator: “I am sitting over coffee and cigarets at my friend Rita’s and I am telling her about it”(3). What the narrator anxiously tells her (the “it” is a commonplace in Carver’s style<sup>11</sup>) is the tale of an incredibly fat customer. Two things in particular strike her as noteworthy about this man. Firstly, his incredible size; “He’s really a fatty”(4). Subsequent references to the man are marked out by similar colloquial expressions. Besides “fatty”, “God, he’s fat” (5), and an “old tub-of-guts” (6). Secondly, the man’s habit of using the first person plural form “we” to refer to himself: “I think we’re ready to order now ... I think we will begin with a Caesar salad ... we’ll see about dessert later” (3-4). This construction works in the story to establish the size of the man, as more than one person. Core deictic expressions used like this create a pair, the “May I serve you “ of the waitress balanced by the “We’re ready to order” of the fat customer. At a pivotal juncture in the narrative, it allows for a blending of point of view; the “we” is now that of waitress and customer:

Believe it or not, he says, we have not always eaten like this.

Me, I eat and I eat and I can’t gain, I say I’d like to gain, I say.



No, he says. If we had our choice, no. But there is no choice. (7)<sup>12</sup>

It is perhaps the moment, as Campbell notes, of “one character’s identification with another, the discovery of herself in the other” (17). There is no doubt this is a verbal staging, for there is no question of direct visualisation. From this point the story ‘rolls over’ and the waitress comes into view as the center of the story.

The waitress is unable to share this insight fully with Rita, or communicate it to her husband Rudy, who works in the restaurant kitchen. She considers her own married sex life with Rudy: “When he gets on me , I suddenly feel I am fat. I feel I am terrifically fat, so fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all” (8). Again language completes the identification process (compare “I feel I am fat” with, say, the more common expression, “I feel fat”). At this point the story breaks off. “My life is going to change. I feel it” (8). The power of the nuance coming from Rilke,<sup>13</sup> Nessel notes here that her closing words extend and reinforce “limits, reflected as they are in her use of the passive construction. She does not say ‘I am going to change my life’ but ‘my life is going to change’” (16-17). According to Saltzman, “her inarticulateness stakes out the limits of her growth of consciousness” (24). This is achieved in the abrupt break in paragraph syntax at the end of the story. She will not act, but wait to be acted upon.

The story clearly turns on linguistic effects to develop a point of view, through diectic expressions.<sup>14</sup> But there is another dimension, “the discovery of herself in the other.” Confirmed through the intertextual references to Rilke, and Kafka, “her story becomes a register of her dissatisfaction with her childless marriage. Though the obese man’s grotesque figure fascinates the waitress, it is hardly a bust of Apollo, making Carver’s ending homage to Rilke both ironic and poignant” (Simmons, 112). A proleptic leap of imagination is needed for the reader to transpose the image of ‘fatness’ from the man to the waitress, the exact same effect that requires us to see the man in Kafka’s story as an insect,<sup>15</sup> or Alice through the looking glass. This is, I think, the effect Carver is aiming for.

This kind of in-sight is successfully staged in “Nobody Said Anything.”<sup>16</sup> A boy (the narrator) escapes the constant arguing of his parents by escaping to do some fishing at Birch Creek. He gets a catch, but the trout turns out to be a weird green fish<sup>17</sup>. He encounters another boy who is trying to get hold of a huge steelhead; he needs help. After a titanic struggle they manage to land the fish. “We were wet and shivering. We looked at him, kept touching him. We pried open his big mouth

and felt his rows of teeth .... There were nicks out of his head around his eyes and on his snout where I guess he had banged into the rocks and been in fights. But he was so skinny, too skinny for how long he was, and you could hardly see the pink stripe down his sides” (57). They decide to halve the fish, and the boy returns home in triumph with his trophy from the victory. According to Campbell, “a perception passes across our line of sight as we read and is concentrated in the controlling image of the fish” (10). “Just look. Look here. Look at this. Look what I caught” (60). He shows the wondrous fish to his parents, which stops them arguing momentarily; “But look, Dad. Look what it is. He said, ‘I don’t want to look,’” (61). The sight of the monstrous fish only further enrages his parents; “Take that goddamn thing out of here! .... Take it the hell out of the kitchen and throw it in the goddamn garbage!” (61).

The boy does so. “I went back outside. I looked into the creel. What was there looked silver under the porch light. What was there filled the creel. I lifted him out. I held him. I held that half of him” (61). Campbell points out the transformation here, “of the grotesque fish into an image of silver beauty” at the end of the story. That the fish can be “an image of silver beauty,” adds a mythic, even spiritual quality<sup>18</sup> to the story. In *Remembering Ray*, it is pointed out the fish does, after all, have “magical powers”; under the porch light, a silver apparition. A perception passes across our line of sight as we read, in some way made distinct from the reading sequence itself, whereby the image of the fish becomes the dominant image. The parents sit at the table, arguing. Smoke is all over the kitchen from a fry-pan. Outside, under the porch light, a boy is afforded an unexpected in-sight, a vision emanating from the silver fish. Nobody said anything.

## NOTES

1. Some of the stories gathered together in *Furious Seasons* antedate stories that appear in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* The latter volume is generally regarded as Carver’s first collection, since it is his first book to be published by a major press, and its appearance marked his rapid rise to prominence.
2. Subsequent references to stories in this volume are noted parenthetically in the text.

3. Some characteristic points of minimalist fiction are as follows: "a preference for parataxis over subordination that establishes the primacy of sequence over consequence. Simple and compound subject-verb-object sentences predominate. The use of the present tense ... is common in minimalist fiction ... and can heighten the sense that these characters operate in an ever-present" (Simmons, 108).
4. See *Fires*, 39. 'I was writing a short story that I'd called "The Neighbors." I finally finished the story and sent it off .... A letter came back ....he (Lish, the editor) was changing the title to "Neighbors," that he was recommending to the magazine that the story be purchased.'
5. Compare with the visual catalogue in "Put Yourself In My Shoes" detailing the items the couple were not supposed to use: the kitchen utensils, the dishes, the blanket and sheets, the bathroom things. No visual effect is intended.
6. On the 'intratextual' link between stories argued by Runyon (9), see also Simmons, *Deep Surfaces*. "Runyon is concerned primarily with the apparently deliberate linkages between stories as they appear in Carver's collections .... such linkages and correspondences do suggest that Carver was aware of common motifs among his stories, and took some care in arranging his collections accordingly" (209, footnote 15).
7. See Baudrillard's ideas: "Trompe-l'oeil ... is not derived from painting but from metaphysics" (53) and "It is a kind of game with reality" (59) which make it applicable to literature.
8. Other examples of the window as a framing device can be found in "Collectors," "Ducks" and "What Do You Do In San Francisco?."
9. In this story, "that trash" refers both to a woman, and a woman as sexual object.  
The next story "They're Not Your Husband" as the title indicates, turns upon a colloquial line, uttered by the husband of a waitress who, unlike the woman in "Fat," is gaining weight. I have discussed in a previous article, how language controls the fluctuation and reversal of point of view, to the extent that, in adapting the story to film, director Robert Altman made a series of radical improvisations and changes. The cinematic irony achieved in some scenes in the film visually undercuts elements of Carver's original story. 'Short Cuts': Robert Altman's Film Adaptation of Short Stories by Raymond Carver."
10. Another reference is to John Wayne, in the story "Night School" (99).Also, the television is ubiquitous in Carver's stories.
11. Hemingway's story "Hills Like White Elephants" is an example of influence in the use of the demonstrative *it*. The passage beginning "You've got to realize,' he said, 'that I don't want you to do it ... you know it's perfectly simple .... stop talking?'" has a number of variations on the pronoun "it" whereby the antecedent/ referent keeps changing. Also the title, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* echoes the pivotal line in Hemingway's story of miscommunication between a man and a woman; "Will you please please please please please please please stop talking" (*Men Without Women*, 47).
12. Tess Gallagher, Carver's second wife, in *Remembering Ray* cites an important probable source for this story, the starkness of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* which she finds emblematic of a larger truth expressed throughout Carver's work. Campbell (14) notes the influence of

- Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" as follows: "Because I have to fast, I can't help it".
13. The influence of Rilke is an important intertextual link in Carver's work. Rilke is mentioned by name in "The Student's Wife" and in other stories, the tone — for instance, "Fat." Compare the ending of Carver's story and the last stanza of Rilke's poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo": "...for here there is no place/ that does not see you. You must change your life." (lines 13-14).
  14. See Toolan (129-130) for a discussion of deictic expressions; "When a speaker uses a deictic expression, the expression 'points' to a person, place or time *from* the assumed place and time which that speaker occupies .... Core deictic expressions are the personal pronouns .... They tend to come in pairs, with one term implying 'close to speaker', the other implying 'distant from speaker'."
  15. "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." (Kafka, 67)
  16. "Nobody Said Anything" was originally published in *The Seneca Review* as "The Summer Steelhead" and Carver characterized it as "an initiation story." See *Remembering Ray* (60) for an account of this.
  17. The word green has been called one of the "subliminal connectors" in the story. It is not a visual identifier, but has a lexical association: we don't 'see' green.
  18. Runyon makes an interesting tie-in with the Biblical tale of Tobias, pp. 26-28.

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