

Whisperators – In praise of whispers

Description

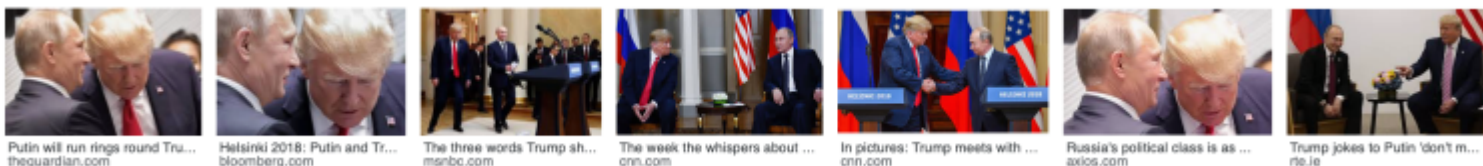
The popularity of whisper videos (e.g. [ASMR videos](#)) demonstrates the longstanding fascination we humans have with the [voice](#). Steven Connor has written extensively on the cultures of the voice. He says in his book *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations*.

The whisper signifies intimacy and secrecy. It is the mode in which I most naturally speak to or overhear myself. As such, it has religious or supernatural overtones, the whisper being the favoured mode of communication both of angels and of demons. The intimacy of the whisper gives it strong erotic force, too, as in the many popular songs in which whispering features (48).

Indeed, a search on my Apple music streaming service calls up many songs and albums simply titled Whisper. There's George Michael's Careless Whisper sung in full voice. A rap song called *Wait (The Whisper Song)* by Ying Yang Twins starts, Hey, how you doin' lil' mama? Let me whisper in your ear. Tell you somethin' that you might like to hear. That's a [rap song](#) delivered as a whisper appropriate to its transgressive (i.e. misogynistic and pornographic) lyrics.

Conspirators

Whispers aren't as secretive as you might think. More than concealing a message, they announce that a secret is being told. A whisper gives the game away.



To whisper is to keep secrets, but also to broadcast the fact that you have something secret to tell (even if there's no secret). If you are seen or heard whispering to someone else then that makes clear that there's a secret in play. Connor provides examples from literature. Here's one of my own examples taken from popular culture.

In the surreal comedy *The Good Place* series 2 episode 8, the humanoid information system, Janet, is under the influence of magnetic handcuffs, and behaves as if drugged. The Good Place architect, Michael, whispers something into Janet's ear then exits.

Trying to undermine Michael, Good Place resident Vicky comes up to Janet and asks, "Hey. What does Michael keep whispering to you?" Janet replies, "Um, something, something, Vicky. Something, something," leaving Vicky to fill in the blanks.

Later we learn that Michael really did whisper "something, something, Vicky" into Janet's ear. As a truthful information system, Janet can't lie. Michael calculated that Janet's faithful repetition of his words would fuel Vicky's paranoia and get her into trouble. It worked. Whispering is a sign of conspiracy, even if not in its substance.

People with real secrets to tell dare not be caught whispering. They use codes and other means, often in full sight. See post: [Everything is code](#) for an illustration of this.

Non-incognito

Though it belongs to the realm of secrets, a whisper is not anonymous. To speak "without the resonant tone produced by vibration of the vocal cords" (OED) strips the voice of much of its colour and texture, and other cues that enable us to distinguish one voice from another. As is known to any classroom supervisor, whisperers don't all sound the same.

Voice recognition applications pick up on the unique signature of a whispered voice. I've noticed that Siri on my smartphone returns an answer to my whispered requests with the same accuracy as if delivered full-throated.

The connection between whispers and digital media is easy enough to make. How do we relate these insights about whispering to space and architecture?

Whispering places

Some spaces make it easier to hear whispers, such as beneath domes or in caves, and these are sometimes called "whispering galleries." Some spaces incline us to whisper, due to the solemnity or acoustic reverberation of a space.

In my last post I mentioned a [crypt](#) in which one could hear the incessant trickle of water, as if a whispering voice. Whispers and whisper-like sounds seem to belong in such places.

Whispers also have a disconnected aspect. Connor associates whispering with ventriloquism, which he describes as:

"an improper or displaced form of speaking which might then appear to be coming from elsewhere, and so be magical or devilish. The whisper is this voice, embodied, but without abode" (50).

So whisper spaces might be un-homely, or detached spaces.

More profound perhaps is the provocative assertion that to whisper is to play between the spaces of inside and outside.

“The whisper is a speech that appears to be internal, a closet speech or speaking within, that has insufficient projective force to get untangled from the thicket of tongue and teeth which gives rise to it. And yet, if it holds back from utterance (a word essentially meaning ‘outing’, putting out or bringing forth), a whisper also seems to have no interior core or kernel. For, as the shell, shadow or outward semblance of speech, it is a kind of feigning or counterfeiting out of which all colour, body and melody have been drained. The whisper is kept inside, held back from speaking out loud, and yet it has itself no inside.” (50-51).

That’s worth meditating upon. Connor goes on to suggest that this ambiguity of interior versus exterior contributes to a whisper’s purchase in the realms of secrets and rumours.

“Perhaps all whispers are kin to the shades of the underworld summoned in Book XI of the *Odyssey*, who must lap from a trench of milk, honey and blood in order to plump their twittering voices out into audibility.” (51).

On the subject of shade, I’ve titled this post ‘In Praise of whispers,’ adapted from Junichiro Tanizaki’s book *In Praise of Shadows*. Tanizaki doesn’t mention whispers, but a close interpretation draws out architectural parallels between whispers, soft light and shadows.

“Whenever I see the alcove of a tastefully built Japanese room, I marvel at our comprehension of the secrets of shadows, our sensitive use of shadow and light.”

Whispers belong in the half light of a private room, a building’s eaves (where *eavesdroppers* hang out), in colonnades, doorways and other [thresholds](#).

References

- Connor, Steven. 2000. *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Connor, Steven. 2014. *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations*. London: Reaktion
- Tanizaki, Junichiro. 1977. *In Praise of Shadows*. Trans. Thomas J. Harper, and Edward G. Seidensticker. Stony Creek, CT: Leete’s Island Books. First published in Japanese in 1933.

Notes

- Connor notes the claim that whispering enables one to communicate with animals (pets), hence the expression ‘horse-whispering’. I found an album called ‘Dog Whisperer’ Soft Instrumental Peaceful Music to Comfort Puppies and Adult Dogs with tracks such as ‘Napping on the Couch’ and ‘Calming Down a Rowdy Rascal,’ though I don’t hear any actual whispering by humans or by dogs.

Category

1. Voice and text

Tags

1. ASMR
2. voice
3. whisper

Date Created

January 4, 2020

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark