Sonic Scope: New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture

Samiran Culbert - "Leaving the Table": Leonard Cohen and the Death of an Artist in Three Acts

Samiran Culbert

Published on: Feb 15, 2021

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

"Leaving the Table": Leonard Cohen and the Death of an Artist in Three Acts

Samiran Culbert, Newcastle University

When I first read Prof. Henriques' prompt, I thought of the structure of a life. Our lives are a three act montage, they hold within them multiple beginnings, middles and ends, which frame the stories we tell ourselves and others. There is no debate that the final act of life's three stages is our death. But death itself is not rigid or one dimensional, it too has its own beginning, middle and end. In my response I am going to concentrate on death and the three stages in which Leonard Cohen presented his.

My first "sound-image" is not a sound image at all, it is a letter. To be more precise it is the letter Cohen sent to his previous lover Marianne Ihlen on her deathbed. She has been dubbed his "first muse," and is considered to have inspired much of his early musical work after their meeting on the Greek island of Hydra. In July 2016 it was announced that Marianne had died, and that Cohen had sent her a final letter while she lay dying.¹

What first strikes you about this letter is the openness in which it is written, the most affecting line being: "I am so close behind you that if you stretch out your hand, I think you can reach mine." We can view this as the beginning of his death in the public eye, as for the first time - whether cryptically or not - he was referencing the fact that he was in ill health. This was fully realised in November 2016 when Cohen died. With his death, there is a retrospective understanding that these words are now more powerful and affective than we may have first thought. We can consider this letter as a beginning to his death narrative, allowing the audience a fleeting glimpse of his mind as he was nearing the end.

My second sound-image relates to Cohen's death. In October 2016, a few weeks before his death, Cohen released what would be the last studio album of his lifetime: *You Want it Darker*. The middle sound-image in my montage is Cohen's track "Leaving the Table."² After Cohen's death, these images, lyrics, and the metaphor of "leaving the table," are given a new level of meaning. He is portrayed posthumously as being at peace with death whilst allowing the listener to take solace in the narrative that the death was expected and welcomed.

So why is "Leaving the Table" only the middle of Cohen's death story? When we or a celebrity die, we are outlived by our objects, by the cultural milieu we leave behind. In Cohen's case one of the ways this manifested itself was through a posthumously constructed album by his son Adam, *Thanks for the*

Dance. For my final sound-image I have turned to this album and in particular the video for the track "Moving On."³

The "Leaving the Table" video was framed through the use of Cohen's images throughout his life, a montage of life. "Moving On," however, is marked by his absence. He is the disembodied voice in the background of the images of his past life, a life now gone, a voice still present. We are struck with an odd juxtaposition while looking at this video, as Cohen is present but marked by his absence. This is the realisation at the centre of all celebrity death, as we are first confronted with both the celebrity's continued presence through mediated objects and the knowledge that they are no longer living.

Death is usually the end of our physical stories, but we are survived by the cultural objects we have left behind. For Cohen, his letter, his last album, and finally his posthumous work, has constructed a retrospective montage of death, understood only after the fact by his fans. He hinted he was leaving through the letter, this was then realised in a retrospective understanding of his last albums, until finally he is marked by his physical absence. Death cannot be the end to our stories when we are survived by the elements we have affected and produced. In these three cultural objects, we can view Cohen as both alive and dead, influencing and collaborating with others past his physical end. This is of course another type of life, one which separates the physical body with the cultural marks Cohen left behind.

Bibliography

Collins, Pádraig. "So Long, Marianne: Leonard Cohen Write to Muse Just Before Her Death." *The Guardian*, August 7, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/aug/07/so-long-marianne-leonard-cohen-writes-to-muse-just-before-her-death>.

Media Cited

LeonardCohen. "Leonard Cohen - Leaving the Table." YouTube video, 3:47. September 17, 2019. Accessed February 8, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOrdWbqp85E&ab_channel=LeonardCohenVEVO.

LeonardCohen. "Leonard Cohen - Moving On (Official Video)." YouTube video, 3:38. January 31, 2020. Accessed February 8, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EkydhgKUPA&ab_channel=LeonardCohenVEVO.

Footnotes

1. Pádraig Collins, "So Long, Marianne: Leonard Cohen Write to Muse Just Before Her Death," *The Guardian*, August 7, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/aug/07/so-long-marianne-leonard-cohen-writes-to-muse-just-before-her-death>. ↵
2. LeonardCohen, "Leonard Cohen - Leaving the Table," September 17, 2019, accessed February 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOrdWbqp85E&ab_channel=LeonardCohenVEVO. ↵
3. LeonardCohen, "Leonard Cohen - Moving On (Official Video)," January 31, 2020, accessed February 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EkydhgKUPA&ab_channel=LeonardCohenVEVO. ↵