

## ***The King's Speech: a Bioethical Approach, Or What the Cinema Teaches us About Stuttering***<sup>1</sup>

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We are starting this talk with the screening of a fragment of Slavoj Žižek's film. In a way it is about how we see, how we read films. One way of entering into this conceptual complexity is through film fragments. In barely ten minutes memorable scenes from *The Exorcist*, *Alien* and especially Chaplin's *Great Dictator*, are paraded across the screen, to immerse us in act into the scenario we wish to cover today. The subject is the question of voice, the emission of the human voice, and which, as Žižek points out, is mediated by the erotic vicissitudes of the body. Stuttering should be placed here.

Our second introductory reference shall be the recent comment made on the film which appeared in *PsycCRITIQUES*, the American Psychological Association's electronic database, signed by Nina Ghiselli and Gina Davis.<sup>i</sup> The article, while it praises the aesthetic proposal, the work of the actors, etc, it points out that the merits exist "(...) despite the incongruities between *The King's Speech* and what we now know about the origins of stuttering and its treatment". In other words, for the authors the film shows incongruities concerning what we know today about the origins and treatment of stuttering. This is a possible road: Psychology judging the film in terms of what is right or wrong regarding our knowledge of a certain pathology. We, on the other hand, will be taking another road: we shall ask ourselves what the film teaches us, in this case about a speech disorder, an accident of communication, an inhibition. In other words, at what point can fiction come to modify our evidence.

### **"Voice of the horse"**

Let's start with the screening of the first sequence of the film – a sequence that we could call "the horse's voice" -a dictionary definition for the word "neigh". It's about those first five minutes of the film – a

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<sup>1</sup> What follows is a summarized version of the seminar given by the author in February of 2011 for Music-Therapy students at the School of Psychology, University of Buenos Aires. We would like to offer special acknowledgments to Ignacio Trovato, who organized the presentations and to Carolina Rua who participated in the preliminary investigations. This version includes the contributions of the attendants to the Seminar organized by The Ethics and Human Rights Chair, and the Seminar Movements and Movies in Bioethics, University of Oslo, May 2011, to them our special thanks. Author's e-mail: jjmf@psi.uba.ar

via crucis for the character that slowly reaches the microphone to speak at Wembley Stadium in front of a crowd of people. The director's shots are extraordinary. The impressive sound amplifying equipment of the 30s, the parade of technicians, the gargles of the announcer, make the preliminary presentation, it all helps to generate a climate of tension. And when the character reaches the podium and faces the microphone, we the spectators also feel intimidated.



The character is in silence for a long time, to give himself the strength to start and it is then when the horse neighs. What is the director saying with this entrance of the horse's voice?

From the narrative point of view, it is the expression of impatience of the audience, because stuttering and stammering are, in effect, exasperating - people are not comfortable. But we can also suppose that the horse's neigh is there to indicate from the start, the crucial difference between human logic and animal logic. Notice that in the first take the character is in front of the horse – the Royal Guard is looking at him and the scene is filmed "in subjective camera".

This indicates that we have two different places: while the horse with unbroken voice neighs, the human is fighting a battle with his voice. It obviously is about an extreme case, where the character's inhibition combines with the defective sound system multiplying the echoes of his stutter. But the scene is there to tell us something more. There is a point that is foreign, strange in the human voice. Something that never seems to be fully tamed, controlled, that emerges in a traumatic way. This is the meaning of the

trailers of the films screened by Žižek: it is the little girl in *The Exorcist* from whose body unrecognizable sounds emerge, it is the voice that liberates itself from its words in *The Great Dictator*, it is the singer without body in *Mulholland Drive*. This structurally traumatic dimension of the voice is what returns with an alien effect from our own body, a sound that will always be foreign, to the point of not belonging to any natural object – unlike the horse's neigh that is, in effect, natural.

This is the notion which originated in Heidegger and which Jacques Lacan picks up when he proposes the object voice linked to the invoking drive. Voice as the non natural object is what makes it possible to think the field of language, the significant and its discursive articulation as something independent of effective sound, emanating from nature.

In this way the director gives us a key that will run throughout the film and which will probably allow a clinical reading of the case, a reading we are tempted to follow by the evidence of the terrible, unreachable father. But maybe we should wait and look further back, into the mother figure, anaesthetized in extreme, a figure in which the two brothers, with their symptoms, seek refuge: the henpecked man and the stutterer.

Is this not the same situation we live as speakers at conferences, having to speak in public under circumstances when we are expected to be at our best? And is this inhibition not made even worse when for professional reasons we must speak to the audience in a foreign language? Unfamiliar sounds which disorganize us, cause deep anxiety, and even leave us speechless – it is in this sense that we all have a bit of a stutter.

### **Demosthenes**

The scene ends, and with it the agony, the anguish of the auditorium. By this time we already know that our character is His Royal Highness the Duke of York, son of His Majesty King George V of England, an Empire that in the 30s ruled in 58 colonies around the world. And that the speech that he was expected to give in Wembley, was the message his father had written, a message that, taking advantage of the new possibilities of radio transmission, would be heard live by all the subjects of the crown

The director cuts the scene when the character, at the paroxysm of his inhibition, painfully tries to finish the first phrase of his text: I have received from His Majesty the... the... the K... King... This cut,

both discursive and scenic, is placed there for some reason: something tells us that this man, with his suffering, tells us something with the words he cannot fully enunciate.

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Let us for a moment go on to the next scene, the one where the court doctor orders coarse, primitive "treatment": the Demosthenes Cure. To fill the patient's mouth with smoke and marbles shows the obvious clumsiness of those who want to treat the problem by attacking the organ. However, what is interesting about the Demosthenes reference, who as you know went on to be one of the five greatest Greek orators, but who had been booed in his first speech, one which he could not even finish because of his stutter. The doctor takes from the mythological tradition the treatment of the pebbles in the mouth, forgetting what was the point of inflection in Demosthenes life, that which allowed him to use his voice differently. As tradition has it, it has to do with his meeting with Plato himself, with whom, by means of transference, he was able to make a change in his life.

### **The "acousmatic voice"**

The whole film leads us then to what shall be the first interview with this strange character whose home and practice were on Harley St. London, and who has a simple plaque on his door reading: "Lionel Logue. Speech Defects".

From this long scene, extremely rich in annotations, we shall take the last part because it is the one that really acquires value of intervention.

The therapist tells his patient to read a passage from Shakespeare. The patient tries to do so but stutters constantly and in frustration stops reading and rudely goes towards the door as if to leave. It is then that the therapist suggests he try once more. He takes him to a recording machine and offers him a microphone, confronting him once again with the text. But before that he places a pair of headphones over his ears. And we the spectators hear a symphony by Mozart. The patient protests because he believes he

will be too dazed by the sounds to read the text. But the therapist insists and finally the patient submits to the experience.



What is interesting here is the cinematographic take. The director puts us in the patient's place: we cannot hear what he is reading, because in the theatre we only hear Mozart at an unusually high volume. Neither can we see the movement of the patient's lips, because the camera takes him from an angle where the microphone hides his mouth. In other words we are put in the patient's place, who is reading, but deaf to his own voice, with no mirrors or other elements from which to catch the reflection of his moving lips. We share with the patient the absolute uncertainty regarding what is happening there. The scene ends, the frustrated patient once more makes a move to leave and it is then that the therapist hands him the recording: The recording is free. Please keep it as a souvenir.

The patient leaves the room. His wife is waiting for him in the hall and looks at him with expectant eyes. The patient's phrase is as laconic as it is axiomatic: No. But he nevertheless carries the recorded disc under his arm.

Some time later, this man returns home after a disagreeable encounter with his father; he looks downcast, is lying on an armchair, when he suddenly starts swearing out loud. We the spectators imagine that they are addressed at his father that has just humiliated him because of his stutter. And in a way, this

is the case, because by means of transference, the insults are directed towards the therapist; fraud, imposter... He then gets up and puts on the recording.

What then takes place is a scene which we will call, picking up on Michel Chion's concept, *voix acoustique*, the acousmatic voice. The term "acousmatique" comes from Old French and was conceptualized by Pierre Schaeffer in relation to concrete or real music. A possible definition could be that sound that reaches us without our knowing the source. Like when we hear a noise, and we spontaneously turn to look in the direction it came from. We presume seeing to be more precise than our sense of hearing and seek support in vision to reveal that which we find disquieting. They say the term comes from a Pythagorean sect, as tradition has it, Pythagoras taught without being seen, hidden behind a curtain to avoid distracting his disciples' attention with his image.

This concept of acousmatics, as developed by Michel Chion, allows us to understand this scene in *The King's Speech*. Following Zizek's video which we saw at the beginning, it refers to a voice that becomes independent of a body, a voice that emancipates from a body. They are the sounds that emanate from Hitler's emulator in *The Great Dictator*, by Chaplin, or the crass words that come out of the little girl in *The Exorcist*, or the melody that remains floating in the air when the singer faints in the scene from *Mulholland Drive*.

For Bertie, his voice too returns acoustically:

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer.  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;  
No more;(...)*

We hear the reading of the third Act of *Hamlet* in clear, flawless English. The character is astounded when he realizes the voice is his and at the same time foreign. The scene is strengthened by the entrance of his wife who comes into the room attracted by the impeccable and moving reading of Shakespeare, reading that comes from a voice she knows well, that of her beloved husband. There is a cut and in the following scene both are back in Lionel Logue's consulting room.

What is interesting to point out here is the ethical sense of intervention. Evidently the therapist heard how the patient had read without a stutter in his first visit and the therapist could have insisted the he listen to the recording and confronted him with his success. It would have been a good way to obtain prestige as a professional and keep him as a patient. But he wagers on something else. He leaves it up to the patient to decide. He simply gives him the recording so that the decision to face his own powerful voice lies on him. Only then will the therapist obtain clinical efficacy.

As of this crucial scene, the therapist will be able to display a gallery of resources. Some are already known techniques in the field of speech therapy, such as warning the patient that he does not stutter when he hurls insults, or when he induces him to sing the words he feels he won't be able to say. But others are situational inventions, like when he goads him on during the rehearsal of the coronation ceremony, to confront him in act with his voice.

The story continues. The father dies and after his older brother's abdication, he becomes heir to the throne of England. He must deliver a speech at the coronation ceremony and Logue is helping him. The Archbishop and other influential people in the government advice him against continuing to see this therapist arguing that he is not a doctor nor does he possess any professional qualifications.

A very interesting scene takes place after this because we discover how Lionel acquired his skills. It has to do with the Great War, when the soldiers returned from the front to Australian, many of them in a state of shock, unable to speak. As he had experience and was good with matters related to speech, he was asked to help those poor boys. ii I gave them muscle therapy, voice and relaxation exercises but I knew I had to go beyond that, that the problems were deeper. Those boys screamed in despair during the night, and nobody heard them. My work was to return faith in their own voices, and let them know that somebody was listening.

This allocution evidently evokes Sigmund Freud's thoughts regarding war neuroses and traumatic neuroses. The therapist does not disregard the disruptive event, the factor triggered by the act of war, but looks further back, into earlier experiences, the cause of the symptom. This is what he therapeutically treats.

### **Final considerations: the illness as a situation**

Before screening the final scene, going over what we have seen so far, there are two final considerations. The first one is in regard to the ethical matters within the therapeutic framework. The therapist establishes a necessary asymmetry in the framework but does not do so schematically, always in the same terms. He seeks to establish a mark of the difference –because the places are not asymmetrical. But what happens when during the first visit, a conceited, slightly arrogant patient demands to be called Your Royal Highness, or Prince Albert Frederick Arthur George... and later Sir.

In this context, the patient is the one who tries to impose his asymmetry, imaginary asymmetry, rules of the game which if accepted, would work against the treatment. In this case, the therapist can break the terms of the situation, thus curiously presenting an apparent proposal of symmetry. The phrase, “here we are both equals” is his way of changing the rules of the game to disturb the position of superiority with which the patient introduces himself.

We do not know if Lionel Logue offers tea to all his patients during the first visit. But there is no doubt that doing so with him was the best way to break down the barriers, of dismounting him off his high horse -that point of inconsistency. That is why when in the final scene, once the patient was able to give the first spontaneous speech in his life, once he successfully passed that test, in that moment, when Bertie says “Thank you, my friend”, Lionel Logue, as you will see in this final scene, answers, “You are welcome, Your Majesty”. He in this way returns the necessary asymmetry. Just when the patient was willing to consider they were in effect equals, he reminds him that he continues being his therapist.

The cynical comment moves him away from both personal infatuation and the demagogy of equalization. The therapist must find his place outside these simplistic considerations.

This concept is far-reaching and brings to mind Alain Badiou’s commentary made to psychiatrists during an international conference. On referring to one of the statements made by the European Commission on Psychiatric Ethics, Badiou objects to one which states that: “the psychiatrist should treat the patient with passion, not the illness,” as opposed to Hamburger’s assertion that: the patient does not need the doctor’s compassion, but his capacity.



Indeed, if the doctor centers his practice on the “patient” it is because as such the patient has already been allotted this condition. Because the patient has already been condemned to its status of “being ill.” For the doctor to center his practice on the illness, on the other hand, opens the possibility of “[...] examining a situation of contingent impossibility and working with all the means necessary to transform it,” or more explicitly, “The ethical position will never renounce the search for a possibility as yet undiscovered. However minimal. What is ethical is to mobilize every intellectual and technical method at hand in order to activate that minute possibility. There is only ethics if the psychiatrist [...] does not cease to be a creator of possibilities”

Finally, a last comment regarding bioethics, transference and the cinema. A statement by the Argentine Speech Therapy Association came out in the newspapers saying that after the success of the film, the Academy Award and the box-office success, there has been a 30 % increase in the number of people seeking consultation for speech and communication disorders. An extraordinary example of how patients, society, are in need of therapeutic service, the possibility to consult a professional by means of transference with another that shows his practice on a cinema screen. We could conjecture that this 30 % of the people who went to the Speech Therapist, did so for the first time in transference with the extraordinary fiction of Lionel Logue.

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<sup>i</sup> Nina Ghiselli y Gina Davis: Stuttering: Fact or fiction? (Tartamudez ¿realidad o ficción?). *PsycCRITIQUES*, Vol 56(13), 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> In 1920 in Vienna, the first great debate on the statutes of war neuroses took place, which started with an accusation by Lieutenant Walter Kauders against the psychiatrist Julius Wagner-Jauregg, who was said to have used electric shock treatment on soldiers affected by war neuroses, and who were in fact considered simulators/fakers. Freud was called upon as an expert by an investigation committee, to give his opinion on Wagner-Jauregg's possible crime. In the report, Freud was very moderate with the psychiatrist, but violently criticized not only the use of the electric method but also the medical ethics of those who used them. He reminded the committee that the duty of the doctor is always and everywhere to be at the service of the patient and not of any state or belligerent power, and stigmatized the idea of simulation, incapable of defining neurosis, be the origin traumatic or psychical: “All neurotics are simulators, he said, they simulate unknowingly and this is the disease”. (Laplanche and Pontalis, *Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*)