

HARMFUL SPEECH

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Overlaying Meanings

Speech, as an approach and as mediation, is in many ways permissive. It is one of the ways that makes conveying meaning possible, even if it is a compromise, as is any form of representation. Speech is transformed by its states from ongoing to documented. Once speech ceases, it is no longer evolving and is kept in possibly many forms that shape meaning into completion. The complete is tied to the action of finalising, when decisions were taken and acted upon. Not like the momentary possibilities of speech, but very much as recollected versions of it: a state is set and this is irreversible. As when an action took place upon it and influenced the now completed, it brought an ending. The completed is removed from current time, marking its moment of completion and marked by it. In that sense the complete is opposite to the contemporary, and separates ongoing speech from any of its documentations.

Therefore, completed and documented speech, which is a mark in time, is a collection and recollection of possibilities of meaning. In *The Way of Love*, Luce Irigaray approaches speech as a moment when '[the word] has to be sought in order to say, but also the silence.'¹ Seeking words is as if to search in an archival collection, of documentations of speech but also of language. This suggests an observation on that which is collected. Perhaps silence then is not the lack of speech but a moment freed from the archive of speech and of language, an ongoing silence when possibilities might shift and when language is explored.

When Irigaray refers to words as 'simple paths going from the one to the other, which can be forgotten,'² to forget the word is to forget the archive. In forgetting the archive

An image, which can take many forms and which holds a place for what it represents, is always in use to some end. For representation brings an intention to utilize the represented, which is always momentary, for needs that could be private or public. Jean-Luc Nancy, in *The Ground of the Image*, writes of a violence inherent to images, as it is through the image that 'being is torn away from being.'¹ The image, which in its mere presence separates itself from what it represents, obstructs it.

The violence in images does not only occur in their coming to being, but also in the way in which their obstruction of the present imposes an interpretation. Transforming what they represent into a different presence, as when an opinion, a reflection or interpretation is being said, images change what they represent as they accept on themselves meanings that are different from those of the represented.

These implications of the image necessarily pull towards a search for what is considered to then be true. In return to Nancy, truth is itself violent, as 'it cannot irrupt without tearing apart an established order.'² Even though truth, like the image, is violent, it is indeed opposing to the image as it is independent of subjective translations and transitions, for 'truth does not operate through arguments, reasons, and proofs: these are more like the necessary but obscure flipside of truth's appearance.'³

Harmful Speech

The possibility to express oneself and to be recognised as self-expressing is a manifestation of freedom. Freedom is to be acknowledged and through that to convey an obligation to be responded to. It is not a question of the ability to express or of the possibility to belong, but of the place this expression in the form of a public statement is received as an influential representation of urgency and a positioning of individuality.

In *Between Camps*, Paul Gilroy relates to individuality in the formation of identity, reflecting on an 'identity [which] ceases to be an ongoing process of self-making and social interaction. It becomes instead a thing to be possessed and displayed,'¹ leading to a sense of belonging which necessarily forms around 'inclusion and exclusion that it cannot help creating.'² It is a question of retaining the possibility to identify while maintaining individuality, and a perception of others as autonomous, a positioning that celebrates otherness.

This means reconsidering a perspective according to which 'to share an identity is to be bonded on the most fundamental levels: national, "racial," ethnic, regional, and local,' while taking into consideration that 'identity is always bounded and particular.'³ Therefore making a statement as a form of individuality is to be recognised. While the power of gathering and finding similarities has been and still is a powerful moving force to many ends, togetherness must take into consideration that ev-

Speech is powerful as it is a representation of the perceived and unperceived, and in that it brings an ability to transform what it acts upon. It brings forward a possibility, an emphasis, and while it is ongoing it is always new. In a series of lectures by Michel Foucault, titled *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, Foucault approaches the concept of truthful speech as an opening for violence, seeing truthful speech as a weapon—as power.

In the first lecture Foucault discusses avowal in ancient Greece through a passage from Homer's *The Iliad*, which 'presents a vast interplay between relations of force, manifestations of truth, and the settlement of a litigation.'¹ In it, a race unfolds between five competitors, presented by their abilities and destined to their place in the race according to these. The moment of the race presents interruptions, as it 'is fraught with constant irregularities,'² the central one of them being a choice made by one of the competitors to advantage themselves in a certain moment over a competitor who is more able. In doing so, 'he did not break a rule of the race: he upset the race insofar as it was to be a liturgy of truth.'³ By changing the correspondence between abilities and place, this act prevented the manifestation of this correspondence as a presentation of that which is considered to be true.

When after the race the competitor was confronted with their action and was requested to take an oath—that the action was not done voluntarily or meant to deceive—the competitor renounced the oath and in that decided to renounce their place

in the race. This speech of the oath is so powerful as for if it was declared, it would have destructed the law of the race, which is the correspondence between abilities and place. This speech of the oath is more powerful than the action of obstructing the race, as this action can be renounced by speech, while the speech is an affirmation and a validation of an intention to challenge an existing structure.

Similarly, speech appears as violence in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), directed by Francis Ford Coppola. In pursuit of a mission, the protagonist requests the commander of a U.S. Army air assault unit to take him to a specific location on the coast of Vietnam, while knowing that this request will lead to the complete destruction of the destination. Where in *The Iliad* speech is subsequent to the action, in *Apocalypse Now* it precedes it. In both, speech is a moving force that destructs what is considered to be just. In *Apocalypse Now*, the unit arrives-destructs-departs as an embodiment of the request, which in its immediate formulation, as language which is spoken, is an action that cannot be returned. Speech as a promise for destruction.

When tied to an action, speech as a promise for destruction, or harmful speech, becomes a structure for an intention to transform that which exists. The tie between speech and action leads to a formulation of the perceived and of the possible, transforming the situation it speaks to. Speech that allows, when relating to an action, to decide what is possible or impossible, is the powerful weapon by which it is attainable to speak according to an act and act according to speech.

everyone is other, as this otherness appears in reflecting on the experiences of living which while being shared are also always individual.

Thinking of Derek Jarman's last film, *Blue* (1993), which documents his process of confronting AIDS and its implications, one of which is the loss of his eyesight which resulted in only seeing shades of blue, the film operates as an individual statement. As speech unfolds in the film, it allows its embodiment to a field of blue. The statement given by speech is individual, while its embodiment is confined only by the necessity to be contained within the screen on which it appears. The words then remain of Jarman, but their embodiment expands in blue, reaching to otherness. Otherness which is not confronting but receptive, because it is outside of the individual and is able to therefore grasp their individuality. The film in its blue does not represent a loss of images, but an image that stands for a connection from individual to public, to a statement and not a testimony alone.

This public statement demands not only to be conceived and be reflected upon, but also to be responded to. As no longer 'accustomed to believing in image, an absolute idea of value,'⁴ at least not an idea of image which is consistent with speech, and while 'a word or phrase [is] materialised in scintillating sparks,'⁵ *Blue* is suggesting to believe in statements and their reach, to not deny but to know of the other, and with this knowledge to bring acknowledgment and an obligation to respond.

¹ Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Accusation in Justice*, eds. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 31.
² *Ibid.*, 32.
³ *Ibid.*, 40.

But what does truth stand for while shifts of meaning occur through the representation of that which has already been present? Thinking of how Giorgio Agamben relates to ethics in *The Coming Community*, the true does no longer stand for itself. The true is merely the signifier of the false as true and false define themselves, for 'truth cannot be shown except by showing the false, which is not, however, cut off and cast aside somewhere else.'⁴ As they are created, images are privatised knowledge that obscure the true or false. Terms which lose meaning, as the representation imposes itself on the represented endlessly, transforming it through repetition. These repetitions introduce overlaying meanings, which always obstruct the meanings that came before and reflect the meanings that follow.

It is therefore not a matter of seeking to avoid this overlaying of meanings, but to become familiar with it. Meaning, which lends itself not only in terms of understanding but of transforming, offers a possibility to seize the represented, or to even lose meaning completely as a result of an overlaying which nullifies and obstructs. To seize the represented through meaning is to have power, as the true and false do not present themselves, they are together only the beginning of what is transformable and knowledgeable.

1 Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Dislocations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 103.
2 Ibid., 99.
3 Ibid., 98.
4 Derek Jarman, *Blue* (New York, NY: David Zwirner Books, 2023), 38.
5 Ibid., 36.

there is a disacknowledgment of what has been, while silence, or a momentary relief, is an opening for liberated meanings. While this retains the before and the after of what has been and will be done, it also considers what is archived in thought of what is not archived. When this process is communicated in words, in speech, it is a new possibility that is being shared. Silence is then the shift between what has been to what is possible.

Conveying meaning, that is to be shared and understood, is always done on the basis of past uses of a language, even when 'not yet closed upon some meaning, but opening from the one to the other—a between-two.'³ Unfixed meaning that is changing when it is in-between time and speakers is destined to function not only as mediating between times and decisions made in the past and ones that will be made in the future, but between those who use it to find one another.

It is the connection between the archived and speech that took place in the juxtaposition of two works of Moyra Davey and of Janice Kerbel at greengrassi in London, 2023. The work of Moyra Davey, *Skeletal Buddha*, consisted of photographs of the letters of the alphabet. Sharing a space with the work of Janice Kerbel, *Speech*, in which a speech was performed by Rory Kinnear, the two works function through speech and its archives. Hearing the speech in the space surrounded by the images of the letters, draws the letters into the words being said in the space and therefore into the structure of the archive. The performance reveals a silence contained in Moyra Davey's letters, which are as such, while themselves part of a structure, an opening for a liberation of meaning.

1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005), 24.
2 *Ibid.*, 17–18.
3 *Ibid.*, 16.
4 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 13.

1 Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, trans. Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček (London: Continuum, 2002), 15.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 16.

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TSARFAT 4

DESIGN
BIRKENBIR

LONDON, 2023.

NEW YORK CITY.

FRANZISCA RABOANANARI AMSTERDAM.

ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART, LONDON.

TIM MEUTZ.

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