

Call for Papers
International Conference
“Political Speeches in Film”

Université de Lorraine, Campus Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Nancy, France
Interdisciplinarité dans les Études Anglophones – Interdisciplinarity in English Studies
(UR 2338)

Monday 17th – Tuesday 18th March 2025

In 1970, Michel Foucault highlighted the links between discourse and power in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France: “I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers [...]”¹. This issue is also found in films. Even though Costa-Gavras has stated that “cinema is not a political discourse but a spectacle”, it seems that political discourse and movies are closely linked. This is demonstrated by the many films in which characters speak out in public to defend a cause, exploring the very nature of politics as the art of representation.²

The aim of this conference is not to consider the notion of discourse in general but that of speeches in particular. A speech is understood as a coherently organized declaration by an orator, a speaker, in a given context and in front of a specific public or audience, in order to convey an idea or a message. Here, a speech is thus synonymous with a tirade or an address, which means that neither the written version of speeches, nor debates and academic or celebratory presentations will be examined as part of this conference.

In films, some protagonists, while exercising power – governmental or other –, recite word for word tirades that have actually marked history. In *Invictus* (Clint Eastwood, 2009), Morgan Freeman gives the Rivonia Speech made in 1964 by Nelson Mandela who was facing the death penalty; Meryl Streep, who plays Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2011), delivers the deeply anti-Soviet speech “Britain Awake”; in *Mientras dure la guerra* (*While at War*, Alejandro Amenábar, 2019), Karra Elejalde, as Miguel de Unamuno, speaks out against the violence and barbarity of the military putschists in the amphitheater of the University of

¹ FOUCAULT, Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, translated from the French by A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, p. 216.

² HOBBS, *Léviathan*, Paris : Sirey, 1983, p. 177.

Salamanca ; Lambert Wilson, who plays the General in *De Gaulle* (Gabriel Le Bomin, 2020), recreates the Appeal of 18 June. These examples illustrate a common practice in biopics which are “based on public speeches made by historical figures whose lives they recount in whole or in part”, as pointed out by Claire Demoulin³, and which inevitably question the relationship between reality and fiction. By reactivating these memorable speeches, cinema turns them into “spaces of memory”⁴.

Political speeches in movies therefore take a variety of forms, including statements by political leaders, pleas for social change, declarations of war or calls for national unity. They are used to represent real or fictional historical moments, as well as to highlight contemporary issues.

In films, allusions to famous speeches can be made through the use of archival footage, whether it has been edited or not. That is how Goebbels and Castro remain mute, stripped of their opinions, beliefs and values, but also of the power of words, in *A Foreign Affair* (Billy Wilder, 1948) and *Topaz* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1969) respectively. Following in the footsteps of Plato⁵, Wilder and Hitchcock warn their fellow citizens against the seduction of skilled orators, whether politicians or sophists. They also recall, like Pierre Clastres, that “to speak is above all to possess the power to speak. [...] Speech and power maintain relations such that the desire for one is fulfilled in the conquest of the other. [...] To take power is to win speech”.⁶

In other cases, historical reality is manipulated to achieve the desired effect, allowing the orator to convey the director’s and/or scriptwriter’s positions. This is particularly true of anti-Hitler satires, the most famous example being *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, 1940), in which all audience members would have recognized Hitler as Hinkel, just as they would have recognized Mussolini as Benzino Napaloni. To devise the scene of Hinkel’s speech, Chaplin drew inspiration from newsreel images, enabling him to “plunge” his dictator “into a staging similar to that intended by Hitler. Or, perhaps more accurately, Chaplin appropriates Hitler’s mise-en-scène in order to detach its main features”, recalling the extent to which the Führer’s

³ Our translation of: « construits à partir des discours publics prononcés par des personnages historiques dont ils retracent tout ou une partie de la vie ». DEMOULIN, Claire, « Les biopics d’hommes politiques : des ‘films de discours’ ? Croisements esthétiques, rhétoriques et politiques autour du film *Le Discours d’un roi* », *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, Vol. XIV, n° 2, 2016.

⁴ NORA, Pierre (Dir.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. II La Nation, Paris : Gallimard, 1986.

⁵ PLATO, *Theaetetus*; *Sophist*, with an English translation by Harold North Fowler, London: W. Heinemann, 1977.

⁶ CLASTRES, Pierre, “The Duty to Speak”, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, translated by Robert Hurley in collaboration with Abe Stein, New York: Zone Books, 1989, p. 151.

speeches were scripted for propaganda purposes.⁷ More recently, in the opening scene of *Er Ist Wieder Da* (*Look Who's Back*, David Wnendt, 2015), Hitler wakes up in the middle of a wasteland in Berlin in 2011, with no memory of what has happened since his suicide in 1945. And in *Il Caimano* (*The Caiman*, 2006), Nanni Moretti, a filmmaker well known for his political stances, creates a mise en abyme of Silvio Berlusconi's life. The targeted audience of such speeches is twofold. While the orator addresses his audience in the movie, he also addresses the viewers on the other side of the screen, notably through frontal angles and PTCs, illustrating the power of militant films.

In *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), language, in this case Nadsat, goes beyond mere verbal communication to become a form of performance. Nadsat is not just a means of conveying ideas or political messages, but becomes a performative act in itself, an expression of the revolt and non-conformism of young rebels. This example is also a reminder that "the public reading of a speech is not just the reiteration of a text; it is the sign of a performance"⁸. In both cases, whether it's Nadsat in *A Clockwork Orange* or the public reading of a statement in *The King's Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010), language is not simply a means of transmitting information. It becomes a performance, a living expression that transcends the literal meaning of words. In politics, is saying doing?⁹

Purely fictional speeches can be found in every film genre, from spy films (*Foreign Correspondent*, Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) to science fiction (*Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*, George Lucas, 2005; *The Day after Tomorrow*, Roland Emmerich, 2004), comedy-drama (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Frank Capra, 1939) and cartoons (*Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 2001).

Politics also reveals itself to be an art of negotiation, compromise, staging and theatricality. It is only a short step from acting to politics, questioning the dichotomy between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of cinema. Donald Trump, known for his cameos in mainstream films, ended up appropriating cinematic codes for his public statements

⁷ Our translation of: « plong[er] [son dictateur] dans une mise en scène semblable à celle voulue par Hitler. Ou, plus exactement peut-être, Chaplin s'approprie la mise en scène hitlérienne pour en détacher les traits principaux ». ESQUENAZI, Jean-Pierre, *Le Dictateur de Charlie Chaplin*, Nouvelle édition [online], Lyon : Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2020, <http://books.openedition.org/pul/44965>.

⁸ Our translation of: « la lecture publique d'un discours n'est pas seulement la reprise d'un texte ; elle est le signe d'une performance ». DEMOULIN, Claire, *op. cit.*

⁹ AUSTIN, John Langshaw, *Quand dire, c'est faire*, trad. Gilles Lane, Paris : Seuil, 1970.

once in the White House. A few decades earlier, Ronald Reagan seemed so accustomed to playing the role of a sheriff that he frequently quoted popular films in his presidential speeches, such as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*¹⁰ (Frank Capra, 1936) and especially *Rambo: First Blood Part II*¹¹ (George P. Cosmatos, 1985). Some of Reagan's aides go so far as to claim that he borrowed one of his flagship concepts – his Strategic Defense Initiative – from Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951).¹² Such a penchant for cinema may have served Reagan's communications strategy, but it also provided arguments for his detractors, who accused him of blurring the boundaries between historical reality and cinematic fiction.¹³ As for Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hollywood star and Governor of California in the early 2000s, he has become the “Republican Conan”, repeatedly quoting lines spoken by the eponymous character. But even when they have never appeared in films, politicians are still actors, and do not hesitate to quote movies in their speeches – like Philippe Gosselin, a French Member of Parliament, who used a succession of dialogues from the film *OSS 117 : Rio ne répond plus* (*OSS 117: Lost in Rio*, Michel Hazanavicius, 2009) to talk about political transparency in 2017.

Political and cinematic discourse are intertwined. Lenin declared: “You must always bear in mind that, of all the arts, cinema is the most important for us”¹⁴, a statement that Walter Ulbricht in the GDR agreed with, as he gave precise instructions to his cameramen to film his speeches in wide-angle shots, only if there were enough people in attendance. But the great dictators of the 20th century are not the only ones to have used cinematographic techniques to serve their cause. During the 2022 French presidential campaign, Jean-Luc Mélenchon held a rally in Lille that, using holograms, was retransmitted to eleven other cities in France. With special effects or in the style of cartoons, electoral campaign videos borrow elements from the language of film and exploit the visual power of this medium. In this way, some candidates merge politics with familiar elements from the world of cinema to capture attention and communicate with voters in an original way. In 2012, the Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste candidate Philippe Poutou portrayed himself as a labor leader in a silent film entitled “The Anticapitaliste”, a parody of *The Artist* directed by Michel Hazanavicius in 2011. In 2019, Boris Johnson opted for a similar

¹⁰ NEVE, Brian, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition*, London & New York: Routledge, “Studies in film, television and the media” Series, [1992] 2005, p. 45.

¹¹ SHAW, Tony, *Hollywood's Cold War*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 273.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Our translation of: « Vous devez toujours garder présent à l'esprit que, de tous les arts, c'est le cinéma qui est pour nous le plus important ». *Sovietskoïé [Le Cinéma soviétique]*, n° 1-2, 1933, p. 10.

approach, parodying the romantic comedy *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003) in his campaign video.

This transdisciplinary conference aims to bring together scholars from all horizons to explore, in the words of Hannah Arendt, politics as “a space between people”, and its two-way relationship with movies through speeches.

Please submit your proposals (abstract of around 300 words and short bio-bibliographical note) to Manon Küffer (manon.kuffer@gmail.com) and Julie Michot (julie.michot@univ-lorraine.fr) by 1st October 2024. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by the end of November 2024 at the latest.

Languages of the conference: French and English.

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