

Seeing Voices: Cinema, Rhetoric, and Subjectivity

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Abstract

What can film teach us about political rhetoric? Although many different types of speech and argument are to be found in cinematic productions, films rarely present a single or clear-cut argumentative case like a formal oration. Instead, dialogue conforms to a wider narrative process, anchoring speech in cinema's visual form of storytelling. But if, as Richard Rushton claims, films can present narrative arguments that depict the tentative formation of subjectivity, we still need to account for the way audiences are lured into identifying with those narratives. In this paper I draw upon Lacanian film theory – specifically the notion of “the gaze” – to explain how film enacts a form of rhetorical “exigence” that disrupts the visual field to stimulate spectators' desire and invite resolution. Two recent films about Churchill are used to illustrate this point. Political rhetoric, I conclude, might therefore usefully be conceived as a visually oriented practice.

Keywords: Winston Churchill, rhetoric, cinema, psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

What can cinema tell us about political rhetoric? There are, without a doubt, many great moments of oratory to be found in cinema films, as well as striking turns of phrase, sharp verbal exchanges or revealing deliberations. Cinema enables spectators to experience a deep, affective involvement with individuals, their actions, and their utterances that would make any speech writer envious. But spoken rhetoric in film rarely does the work that an entire speech does in public or political life, even when the story is about political figures. While cinema draws intellectual interest from philosophers for its aesthetic qualities or its resonance with topics of social and political significance (see Shaw, 2008), its re-

lation to rhetorical argument is less clear. Notable rhetorical interventions take a subordinate role to the wider considerations of narrative, action, and plot. When speeches are depicted, they are often brief or in part, illustrations of a character's qualities or markers of a decisive moment within the plot. Equally, outside of openly "rhetorical narratives" in documentaries or "essay films", which may present an explicitly argued case (see Bordwell and Thompson, 1993: 112–19) or "diegetic" voice-overs that enunciate from off-screen (see Bordwell, 1985: 16–26), overtly political films or films with a social message rarely offer a single or clear-cut speech delivered directly to camera. Instead, we apprehend any overall message in mediated form, by way of interpersonal conflicts, character development, dynamic action and movement, or the unfolding of a narrative arc that involves multiple points of view. So, although we often discern political messages in individual films, they are rarely presented as discrete argumentative positions.

It might be better, then, to think of the place of spoken rhetoric in filmic storytelling as bound up with the wider politics of cinema – that is, with cinema's distinctive techniques of drawing in, sustaining, and satisfying the attention of the spectator. Moments of oratory – if present at all – are usually a response to the given constraints of a fictive situation that calls forth problem-solving, explanation, or action. Films are usually dramatic presentations of fictional situations, assemblages of audio and visual material into a formal unity, of which speech (and other types of) performance is a function. They usually depict dynamic scenarios in which characters are charged with identifying and resolving problems. Any moral or philosophical argument is by necessity linked to this wider "entertainment" goal, which generates dramatic tensions where characters emerge as agents with the appropriate subjective resources to resolve those tensions. Moreover, where decisive moments of speech do occur, they supplement what is a primarily visual narrative. In short, speech is part of what we see.

In this article I want to expand upon the idea of films as the staging of situations in order to think about the rhetorical organization of subjectivity at work in cinema (understood as the wider framework of choices by which films are made). For in depicting fictional circumstances in which a rhetorical opportunity arrives, films make explicit what is often obscured in regular political encounters: namely, the role of desire in rhetorical action. The cinematic presentation of an exigence can be said to open a gap in the symbolic world, distorting the visual field in a way that provokes our interest. In Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory this distortion is named "the gaze", which describes an absence in the spectator's field of vision that instantiates a traumatic encounter with the "Real", or the collapse of symbolic meaning altogether. Film deploys this gaze in various ways in order to incite the desire of the spectator around the prospect of revealing the secret of the Other's "enjoyment". That is, the gaze holds out the possibility of knowing the true source of social authority's desire behind its symbolic façade. The cinematic exigence thereby places the spectator's desire *inside* the film narrative, so that it can then be coordinated by speech and action. This visual lure invites us to think about how political rhetoric, more generally, operates on a visual register.

To explore all this, I turn first to the idea that film offers up a form of dramatic visual argument that maps out the path to a tentative form of subjectivity. I then set out the Lacanian inspired film theory, just mentioned, which suggests, moreover, that the politics of cinema begins in evoking a *loss* of subjectivity to which it then may offer, via the speech moment, a fantasmatic resolution. To clarify my argument, I will use the example of two recent films about that great figure of rhetorical agency, Winston Churchill. I end by making some brief suggestive comments about the visuality of political rhetoric.

2. Rhetoric, Subjectivity and the Politics of Cinema

Part of the attraction of films is their ability to endow characters with unique, enigmatic qualities, typically revealed in their confrontation with intense and improbable circumstances. Out of these circumstances frequently arise memorable rhetorical moments when something is said that does more than simply continue the dialogue but, instead, announces a turn in the plot itself (see Yorke, 2013). Think, for example, of Darth Vader's shocking revelation to Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980, dir. Irvin Kershner): "No, I am your father". It is from such moments that characters come to externalise their new understanding of the qualities required to resolve tensions in the plot. Often it is a moment of self-awareness, or a key disclosure, that clarifies the situation and the relation of key characters to it. Sometimes it is a deliberation between a number of characters that reaches a climax, for example in the courtroom drama (such as *12 Angry Men* (1957, dir. Sidney Lumet) or *A Few Good Men* (1992, dir. Aaron Sorkin)). In other genres, it might be a final, revealing exposition, such as we find in detective movies.

Rhetorical moments of this variety are often momentary – but decisive – turning points that register stages in the process of cause and effect that fictional narratives depict (see Bordwell and Thompson, 1993: 68–74). Although "natural" dialogue may litter the drama with numerous conversations, rhetorical moments (and there may be several) stand out as interventions that propel the story in a specific direction and cue us to anticipate some part of the overall message or meaning of the film. As a consequence, films deliberately supply famous turns of phrase rather than lengthy speeches. These are designed to articulate in condensed fashion the central conflict of the drama. Such "take-away" phrases encapsulate character attitudes or qualities as verbal motifs that audiences enjoy and go on to repeat.

It seems, then, that rhetorical moments form part of the larger assemblage that make up a movie. Moreover, they provide a means for spectators to invest emotionally in the narrative and perhaps to identify with its major characters. But this is to suggest that dramatic speech gains its force less from its own linguistic content and more from a dynamic within the form of cinema film itself. Much depends here, then, on what we think that dynamic is and how it acts upon the spectator.

In the film theory of the 1960s and 70s, it was common to argue that most mainstream cinema was subservient to a dominant ideology. The spectator's identification with a film enabled accepted beliefs and values to be uncritically affirmed and thus commercial cinema could be argued to contribute to wider societal domination. Movies have always attracted considerable interest from governments, political parties or politicians who are drawn to (and threatened by) their capacity to sustain images of society, history or moral values (see Giglio, 2010). But how is this ideological function achieved? Film theorists argued that in a capitalist society forms of "mass" entertainment such as cinema undertake the role of "ideological apparatuses". In the wake of philosopher Louis Althusser's structuralist re-fashioning of Marxism, radical theorists of film drew upon the idea that mainstream cinema – the enormous industry of imagining and producing films, particularly of the Hollywood variety – was a cultural apparatus that produced ideologically conforming subjects (see, for example, Baudry, 1985; Heath, 1981). Cinema's formal techniques and modes of operation assembled films whose content masked the contradictions of capitalism and promised a "false" resolution to the dramatic narratives they depicted, enabling an illusion of subjective mastery by offering the viewer a misleading sense of "seeing and knowing everything". The medium of this ideological effect lay, for example, in techniques such as "continuity editing", which secures the illusion that events unfold sequentially in real time and lends an appearance of uninterrupted "everyday reality" to drama; the use of archetypal characters – often white, middle class and aspirational figures rather than the poor and excluded; and the reiteration of narrative resolutions in which conventionally-held universal principles – true love, justice, moral righteousness over evil, and so on – are declared supreme. Together these techniques encouraged mass viewers subjectively to identify with plots, characters and values that aligned them to conservative norms to which they were uncritically held captive.

From this perspective – which as Rushton (2013: 4) suggests held for most radical critics and not simply Marxists – any rhetorical moment is continuous with the wider ideological function of creating a false subjectivity, both in the film and among its spectators. The film is an illusory representation of reality and viewers are effortlessly drawn into identifying with its dramatic elements, thereby securing their compliance with the "hegemonic" norms and values that sustain capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and so on (see, for example, Mulvey, 2009; Heath, 1981). Political critique thus "becomes a matter of administering a scorecard of ideology" (Rushton, 2013: 74) to gauge how successful such representations are. What is lacking in such films was felt to be a measure of what Brecht conceived as critical "distance" from the glossy and unthought assumptions that guide the cinematic image (Rushton, 2013: 45–9). For radical film critics, the proper cinematic antidote to subjective assimilation is, consequently, to sustain an "alienating" effect that dislocates the spectator's conventional point of view, refuses full mastery to its knowledge and vision, and confounds conservative expectations of resolution and universality (see Clayton and Mulvey, 2017). While such a critical distance from hegemonic norms may be achieved in "experimental" films – by, for example, Jean-Luc Godard – Rushton notes these deliberately alienating films are often hard to watch.

Indeed, for Rushton the problem with film theory of this variety is simply its effort to “escape subjectivity”. That is, all positive representation in film is taken to entail a process of fixing the spectator’s subjective awareness into determinate parameters that refuse the contradictory reality of oppressive society. Thus, the only way to evade capture is to defy the comforting appeal that inclines audiences to align with false images. By contrast, Rushton suggests we might treat subjectivity in film not as a form of capture but, rather, as an achievement whose path to realisation is depicted in narrative form. A narrative typically presents a situation in which some element undergoes transformation over time as the consequence of causes that are either displayed or inferred. Fictional narratives, particularly those of contemporary film, present this transformation from the subjective point of view of characters whose motivations and perceptions are themselves both its cause and consequence (see Branigan, 1992). Drawing upon the work of Robert Pippin and Stanley Cavell, Rushton argues that many mainstream films supply narratives in which spectators follow the gradual emergence of a new sense of subjectivity by characters, frequently one in which an awareness of occupying a shared space with others comes to be recognised as liberating (Rushton, 2013: 10–30). Here it is precisely the fictive (rather than realistic) nature of the narrative that allows us to focus on how characters psychologically learn and develop through the plot, eventually coming to open realisation that they can only be free if they become different kinds of subject. But this is not a freedom from structure or convention as such, as radical film theory claimed, but freedom understood as dependence on others (Rushton, 2013: 23, 31–2). In that way, for Rushton, cinema films present us with arguments elaborated in melodramatic form, where characters exemplify personal struggles and choices as they learn to become new subjects alongside others (Rushton presents the much derided *The Sound of Music* (1965, dir. Robert Wise) as a case study in this respect. See 2013: 73–8). Here, he argues – and not in some effort to represent the contradictions of a non-cinematic “reality” – lies a genuine democratic politics of film.

Rushton’s critique of “political modernism” in film theory encourages us to conceive rhetorical moments in cinema as part of a potentially emancipatory process of re-forming (rather than uncritically fixing) subjectivity. This is a process that cannot be aligned simply with bourgeois ideology. Indeed, it helps explain why certain examples of cinematic speech are experienced by audiences as profound statements of liberation: by externalising a subjective attitude through which they identify and imagine their own independence.

Hollywood films regularly supply emancipatory narratives in which different positions contest a situation and then key characters come to realise the urgency of transforming their attitudes in order to liberate themselves from its constraints, with rhetorical moments encapsulating stages of self-realisation in this process. These are moments in which new subjectivities (and, in Rushton’s view, public and therefore potentially democratic positions) come into view. Aspirations for liberation and self-transformation are therefore not reducible to the trivial fictions of bourgeois ideology but can be expressive of an emergent subjectivity where specta-

tors follow one or more characters' eventual realisation that to defeat their personal alienation they have to adjust themselves positively to being with others. This, for example, is what occurs in President Whitmore's pre-battle speech in the Sci-Fi action film, *Independence Day* (1996, dir. Roland Emmerich), a "classical" oration that assembles the recognised tropes of a rousing ceremonial speech proclaiming the virtues of a common struggle for freedom, culminating in triumphant music and vocal acclamation from his audience. As Rushton points out, the pleasures of cinematic productions are integral to the narrative depiction of becoming a subject with others, however absurd they must seem when held up to "reality" (Rushton, 2013: 78). Other people's dreams and aspirations, articulated in such moments, give voice to a potent democratic sentiment concerned with escaping the restrictions of fixed and isolated identities and, instead, coming together. Unlike the political modernism of film theory, then, Rushton rejects the view that pleasure is something that captures us and tightly conditions our subjectivity. Rather, it enables spectators to affirm the prospect of discovering a new subjectivity altogether – and it is here, he implies, that a distinctly cinematic politics inheres.

3. The Cinematic Gaze

Rushton helps explain how an argumentative stance might be elaborated in film not in the form of a single speech but as a story about the subjective development of characters, at least in certain films. But he neglects to explore closely one of the important conditions noted by rhetorical theorists for making an argument plausible: the "exigence". In Lloyd Bitzer's famous account, the rhetorical exigence is the pressing dilemma or problem that demands resolution and thereby generates an urgency to which an argument aims to respond (see Bitzer, 1968). In non-cinematic conditions the exigence is typically a crisis, policy failure or unforeseen disruption to the usual sequence of events that generates the symbolic gap that rhetoric seeks to occupy. In a film narrative, we might initially regard this exigence as part of the opening scenario, where a disruption to normality initiates the unfolding of the narrative (for example: the heist, a murder, or the erupting volcano). The plot, like a rhetorical exigence, presents causes and constraints arising from this disruption in light of which leading characters are required to confront various obstacles that reveal different opportunities and choices, eventually offering up a resolution. But in cinema the exigence is not just for the fictional characters; it also works upon the audience to draw them into the narrative and invest in the film.

Although Rushton is critical of psychoanalytical film theory (especially the work of Žižek) for its part in the political modernism he criticises, it is difficult to understand the ways movies work without inciting and sustaining the desire of the spectator (see Lebeau, 2001). For psychoanalytic theory, "desire" describes the unconscious motivation that propels subjects from object to object in search of a satisfaction that constantly evades them. Importantly, desire is not exhausted in

a conscious awareness of “need” or a specific goal but, rather, is driven by something “obscene” that is refused access to consciousness. We cannot be aware of what motivates us unconsciously, though we may feel its force indirectly in how we are attracted to certain, sometimes unacceptable, objects. Desire operates fundamentally as an underlying urge for an indeterminate “something”, a “lost object” of which we find only traces in the actual objects we come across, but which never itself fully appears. While many things give us pleasure – a passing gratification that is usually acceptable to society – our desires are, at their root, motivated by the drive towards a satisfaction beyond mere pleasure. This is what Jacques Lacan called *jouissance* or “enjoyment” – a strangely alluring orientation to self-obliteration that excites and frightens us at the same time (Braunstein, 2003). We can never realise this (not without destroying ourselves) but are profoundly attracted to it nonetheless. Indeed, the pursuit of our desires is itself strangely satisfying, precisely because it sustains us in a condition of frustrated anticipation that approximates the enjoyment we feel we have lost (see McGowan, 2013).

For Todd McGowan (2007), it is the arousal and sustenance of this desire that attracts people to cinema films. Like Freud’s account of dreams, he argues that films arouse our desires not by giving us what we want but, rather, by constantly creating obstacles to their realisation. Our desire properly exists only as an unrealised longing, not as a realised satisfaction. Both dreams and films therefore dwell primarily on the *failure* to achieve satisfaction; they devote most of their content to depicting obstacles to the goal sought, thereby satisfying desire simply *as* desire. This suggests that the argumentative process that Rushton explores emerges only by recruiting spectators through the activation and sustenance of their desire. The explicit exigence that drives a film to resolution works not just by presenting a fictional scenario but by constantly making spectators invest psychically in the gaps it opens. As film theorist, Elizabeth Cowie, puts it: “The pleasure of representation lies not only in what is signified – a meaning – in the traditional, realist, sense, that is, a coming to know; it also lies in a coming to desire made possible by the scenario of desire which I come to participate in as I watch a film, view an image, or read a text” (Cowie, 1997: 4).

How does this “coming to desire” work? For McGowan, we can think of the subjective attraction of cinema in terms of what Lacan called “the gaze” (see Lacan, 1977: 67–90). In film theory the gaze is often mistakenly associated with the spectator’s own view of a movie. Like Rushton, McGowan is critical of the claim in radical film theory that the viewer is promised some kind of illusory visual mastery. Paradoxically, this claim was made by way of psychoanalytic theory, relying on Lacan’s idea of the “imaginary” as a false sense of unity and integrity that conjoins the viewer to bourgeois ideology. But for McGowan, that interpretation fundamentally misunderstands Lacan’s theory of the gaze, which is not about the viewer’s subjective mastery but, rather, about its submission (McGowan, 2007: 8–12).

The gaze in Lacan refers not to what the spectator sees but, instead, to something the spectator assumes is *watching it*. This is not a subjective “look” but an

objective experience of being “looked at” from somewhere in the film. That is to say, the spectator is drawn to the film by way of something that it cannot see, some indeterminate presence that distorts its view of what it can see, and makes the spectator ask what it wants. The gaze in Lacan’s work is a formulation of what he calls the “*objet petit a*”, a dimension of “the Real” – that is, the unsymbolisable, excessive impulses refused access to consciousness – that arouses the desire of the subject; it presents itself as something that seems to be “in” the image but cannot be positively identified. The *objet petit a* designates that aspect of the Other (an authoritative point of reference in the symbolic world) that evades our grasp but seems to call up our desire – like the mysterious qualities of “national” identity in social traditions, the ineffable but “adorable” quality in a loved one, or the intense promise of fulfilment offered by the acquisition of riches. It is an indeterminate quality that is “in an object more than the object itself” (see Lacan, 1977: 268) – what gives ordinary objects a fleeting but viscerally intense appeal beyond their symbolic meanings. The gaze names the peculiarly visual form of this dimension that incites our desire, even though (and indeed because) it cannot actually be seen. For Lacan, the *objet petit a* stands for the prospect of enjoyment that forever evades our grasp. We are drawn to it because we unconsciously feel we lack it and that if we can have it, or know what it is, we might enjoy it too (Lacan, 1977: 77). This, however, is not a promise of mastery but an invitation to submission, to surrender ourselves to a much deeper satisfaction.

In McGowan’s argument, it is the lure of enjoyment that pulls us into cinematic films. Because films can show us more than ordinary reality – that is, they present a visual abundance that can take us into parts of the world we normally cannot see – they promise insights into the secret working of things. The gaze is deployed in movies to arouse our desire by stimulating a visual uncertainty around which characters and plots develop. As Joan Copjec (1994: 35) puts it: “The subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation, what the subject, therefore, wants to see”. It is the attacker we cannot identify, the monster that has no proper form, the enemy whose purposes we don’t yet understand, and so on. In each case it is what we cannot see in the image, something that “stains” its transparency, that raises our investment in it (Lacan, 1977: 74). That investment revolves around the unconsciously posed question of what the character – the enemy, the monster, or the Other – “enjoys”. The cinematic gaze is thus organised around the erotic possibility of revealing a secret enjoyment beneath the surface of the symbolic order. This is why films hold off for some time answering this question so that the spectator’s desire can be recruited.

Now films rarely work by sustaining the gaze throughout the narrative. The film usually offers clues or answers to the question raised by its distortion. For McGowan, this is where desire meets “fantasy”. For it is fantasy, in Lacan’s sense of the term, that supplies an answer to the question of the gaze. Fantasy is commonly understood as an unrealistic or fantastical world. But, in Lacan, it refers to the way the gaps in the everyday experience of symbolic order are covered over or explained away in order to give some consistency to our experiences. Fantasy sup-

plies an image of harmony or smooth normality rather than unreality. It depicts a scenario through which we come to know the source of the gaze and the object of the Other's enjoyment. That way, we evade the traumatic encounter with the Real that otherwise upsets our vision of the world. In concrete politics, fantasy typically involves locating the true object that is enjoyed against our will (unearned welfare for the immigrant, wealth for the greedy banker, or power and control for the heartless and self-interested bourgeoisie). The obstacles to our desires thus turn out, it seems, not to be psychical in origin but actually, empirically resolvable, once we unmask the secret enjoyment of our adversary (see McGowan, 2007: 16; 2013: 31–9). In film, fantasy is similarly the presentation of a scenario in which the enigmatic lure of the Other's enjoyment is resolved by overcoming obstacles – for example, in finding romance by acknowledging a secret love, defeating the enemy by discovering the treasure it really wants, killing the monster by working out its intrinsic weakness. Having discovered the actual nature of the Other's obscure enjoyment, its subversive attraction as an unknowable dimension dissipates, our desires recede and a pleasurable outcome is achieved as “normality” (that is, the restoration of the symbolic order) is allowed to return.

For McGowan, it is the articulation of the gaze with fantasy that is important in distinguishing the different ways that film narratives operate: “The way in which a film deploys the gaze is, I would argue, the fundamental, political and existential act of the cinema” (2007: 18). Film is the site of a struggle between the disruptive possibilities of the gaze and the effect these might have on how common fantasies of social order are imagined. There are, he continues, various ways that our desire can be recruited and aligned (or not) to fantasy scenarios. McGowan identifies four: the gaze might be deployed to disrupt known fantasy scenarios, revealing that “reality” is itself founded upon excessive enjoyment; sometimes, films sustain the gaze as an uncertainty that haunts the story but refuses easy resolution; or, as is most common, films deploy the gaze only to resolve it into restoring the fantasy of a harmonious reality; finally, films might refuse fantasy altogether and simply sustain a gaze without any fantasmatic resolution (McGowan, 2007: 18–20). The true “politics of cinema”, he argues, lies not in the fantasy element of the resolution but how the fantasy is related to the gaze.

McGowan's account of the cinematic gaze offers us a way to connect narrative, subjectivity and rhetoric in film that differs significantly from Rushton's approach. His point is not merely that film narratives manipulate or withhold certain details of the plot until the end so as to keep audiences in suspense. Rather, he argues that narratives present a concealment that is fundamental to subjectivity and that can never actually be revealed. The gaze describes “the absent object that constitutes the field of representation itself” (McGowan, 2007: 74) and we should not mistake this for any positive object (such as friendship, self-awareness, or the defeat of an enemy) that a narrative might reveal at its close. Nonetheless, he underlines, “desire is inextricably linked to narrative structure” (2007: 72) because narratives present spectators with absences in their knowledge that, in triggering a desire to know the secret of the Other's enjoyment, destabilise subjective closure. The im-

portant rhetorical manoeuvre here lies not in how films realise the pleasure of a liberated subjectivity but how effectively they manage the cinematic exigence that encourages spectators momentarily to withhold their stance towards symbolic “reality”. We might say that all cinema movies undertake an argument within themselves; that is, they set up an internal dispute – between what they show and how they manage what they cannot show – that is fought out via the subjectivity of the spectator. And it is within this argumentative space in cinema’s visual form that we might discern its relation to rhetoric.

4. Watching the Leader Speak: *Darkest Hour* and *Churchill*

I now want to illustrate the relation between the gaze, fantasy and rhetoric in relation to two recent films exploring the war leadership of Winston Churchill: *Darkest Hour* (2017, dir. Joe Wright) and *Churchill* (2017, dir. Jonathan Teplitzky). These are not exhaustive of every issue raised above but they do relate to the depiction of political rhetoric. Each film narrates a brief, yet decisive, moment of Churchill’s premiership during the Second World War: *Darkest Hour* focuses on his arrival as Prime Minister in Summer 1940 and *Churchill* on his role in the decision to launch “Operation Overlord” in 1944. Each is therefore concerned with his leadership at key moments in the war effort; and each deploys Churchill’s famous, defiant oratory as emblems of his leadership qualities. *Darkest Hour* opens with his “Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat” speech to the Commons on 13 May and closes on his “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” speech in the same venue of 4 June. *Churchill*, on the other hand, presents just one, fictional radio broadcast at the film’s close. Nonetheless, whereas *Darkest Hour* employs the cinematic gaze only to resolve it in a classic fantasy of heroism announced by his final speech, *Churchill* presents a more ambivalent case by sustaining the gaze, so displacing (if not entirely dispensing with) the fantasy narrative.

It is clear why Winston Churchill might be an appealing figure for dramatic treatment in cinema. His war time leadership was arguably decisive in resisting the advance of Nazism across Europe and his speeches have become definitive statements of moral defiance in the face of the fascist threat. Churchill’s intransigent spirit on this occasion, his distinctive gruff voice and widely recognised image as a stocky, cigar smoking, victory-v gesturing figure have been iconic in the post-war world. In many ways, Churchill has become a cultural motif for popular sovereignty in the UK, projecting an “island” mentality and invincible faith in the autonomy and integrity of the British union. This cultural appropriation is, not surprisingly, somewhat at odds with the known facts. Churchill was widely held in suspicion by his party colleagues (he was once a liberal and was part American), his speeches were not uniformly or universally admired at the time (see Toye, 2013), and after the war he supported the end of the British Empire and the pooling of sovereignty in the emerging European community. Nonetheless, for all its distortions the cultural imagination has made the figure

of Winston Churchill a constant point of reference for fantasies of leadership and national “spirit”.

Churchill’s place as an imaginary figure of authority readily lends itself to dramatic treatment. His speeches, in particular, have helped to tell a wartime story of national gravity, noble resistance, and solemn duty. These have contributed to a mythical (and often highly selective and hence misleading) post-war narrative of a steadfast British character that has fed into the rhetoric of other post-war leaders, such as Margaret Thatcher. Yet all the actual wartime fighting was done by others and elsewhere. His speeches might serve as a useful narrative overlay on images of combat, but what can they tell us of Churchill? What is interesting about these films is that they employ his speeches and his fame as a rouser of other people’s emotions as part of a story about the man himself and his own struggles to become the leader we have since taken him to be. Because cinema allows us to look “behind the scenes”, to see the truth beneath the fantasy, the focus of the two films is on revealing how Churchill comes to take up the subjectivity of leadership. These are not “biopics” telling us a story on the grand scale about Churchill’s life and career, but snapshots in a timeline with which we often presume ourselves familiar. We know Churchill was a great leader but how did he get to be so? Where, in the extreme jeopardy of wartime government, did he find the qualities to stamp his own mark on events? In short, what was the nature of Churchill’s secret enjoyment and how did he find it? Both films deploy the gaze to ask this question of his leadership role and both rely on fantasy to answer it, though perhaps in different ways.

Darkest Hour deploys its gaze around the question of Churchill’s leadership in the early, uncertain steps of the war. It constructs this question through his relationship to other members of his war cabinet (notably Lord Halifax and Neville Chamberlain) and their preferred option of opening negotiations with the advancing Nazis, rather than confronting them. The film dwells on the obstacles those figures presented to Churchill’s determination to resist Nazism. It allows us to see the secret doubts that many had about Churchill’s capacity to lead effectively: he is distrusted by eminent Conservatives, the King, the House of Commons, and ultimately by himself. Churchill’s American family, his readiness to cross the benches from the Liberals, and his past inglorious history in the Gallipoli campaign in World War One are all offered as evidence of uncertainty about his general character. Indeed, it is this narrow, elite frame of reference that helps focus the gaze on what it is that motivates Churchill as a political leader. We are constantly in doubt as to the source of his inspiration, a doubt that is frequently depicted by the presence of sharp, blinding beams of light through curtains and in the Commons chamber that Churchill constantly evades. The light gestures a threatening encounter with the Real, a laser-like shaft that plunges everything around it into dark and obliterates clarity of vision. Much of the film’s dialogue and movement therefore occurs in the semi-darkness of enclosed rooms and halls, bunkers and tube train tunnels – all markers of the isolation and labyrinthine confusion of political decision-making in war time circumstances. This visual blockage is a figuration of the *objet petit a* – the “blind spot” in our vision

that distorts our view of Churchill as a leader by simply withdrawing him from clear view. That lack of clarity is reinforced by Churchill's own statements about not knowing his own mind, how "the right words won't come".

But Churchill eventually overcomes his self-doubt. We finally reach a fantasmatic resolution which permits us to discover Churchill's true enjoyment. In a series of meetings, first with the King (who tells him to go to "the people") and secondly, in a most improbable sequence, with ordinary Londoners in an underground tube train where Churchill learns of the true determination and steadfast spirit of resistance of normal citizens. Asking the people for their views on whether or not to negotiate with Hitler, they respond with revulsion and assertions of "never"! Churchill appears to find the mettle he was looking for and, with renewed resolve gained from his exchanges with the King and the people, he makes a statement to the Commons, declaring that "we will fight them on the beaches". The cinematic gaze is thus resolved by the heroic figure stepping in to the light to deliver the declaration of defiance at the dispatch box for which he subsequently became famous. The Commons roars its approval and even the Conservative benches rally to Churchill's speech.

Churchill, on the other hand, takes its point of departure not from the arrival on the scene of our hero but, conversely, from his increasingly diminished status as the war approaches its final, decisive stages. The figure of Churchill depicted in this independent film is similarly required to make a decision yet now he is not about to come into the light but, rather, to stand on the margins. Indeed, the motif of beaches is employed throughout the film as a signal of his tragic, Lear-like marginality. The war effort is at this point dominated by the US, the "war in the sky" has been won, and the allies are readying for the final but destructive confrontations on land. Churchill struggles in this film not to find a way to lead but, instead, to commit himself to a way to end the war. The explicit obstacles depicted in the movie are with the military commanders – led by the US General Eisenhower – rather than political rivals. But Churchill's indecision this time revolves around his personal struggles in accepting the necessity of the land war; he is haunted by the memory of World War One and the tremendous loss of life in the Gallipoli campaign. The imagery of blood in the tide water, the battlefield scene in his mind, his frequent references to the lives lost thirty years before, his lingering refusal to accept the decision-making of the military, and his eventual bout of depression, make Churchill seem a figure hopelessly lost in his past. Tormented by the memory of "so much waste" he is unable to find the spirit to commit himself to a new confrontation.

The gaze in this account is more a psychological one than in *Darkest Hour*. Unlike the darkness of the latter, Churchill is often bathed in light. Many scenes are shot outside in the bright countryside. Whereas the Churchill of *Darkest Hour* is an appealing, soft-skinned and round-faced man (played by Gary Oldman, who won a Best Actor Oscar in 2018), that of *Churchill* (played by Brian Cox) is an exhausted, frail and corpulent figure. His attire marks him out as a man of the previous century (especially the opening scenes where he dresses to meet the

military commanders). Churchill's reputation as a once rousing speaker is frequently mentioned with irony; his current abilities dismissed by military figures as "doubt, dithering and treachery". His hastily agreed plans to lead the D-Day landings in a separate ship alongside the King are ill thought-through signs of desperation. This forlorn figure is not the emergent saviour of *Darkest Hour* but a man in decline who has lost his capacity for incisive judgement and cannot act "like a hero" as his wife, Clemmy, exhorts. In this account the gaze works not to prepare a fantasy resolution but to undermine the fantasy of the great leader. Our view of the hero is not characterised by darkness so much as excess – we see too much of Churchill lost in bleak thoughts, barking furiously when he cannot focus, anxiously recalling the past, repeating his fears and refusals, and eventually prostrate on his bed unable to communicate. These images contrast with the decisive, chiselled featured and uniformed figures of military command with whom he clashes. This Churchill cannot find the source of his enjoyment and the length of his indecision threatens to make the film a rather frustrating experience.

But, once more, the fantasy is eventually restored, at least partially. Again, Churchill's mettle is recovered following an intimate conversation with the King and, this time, a moment of revelation from his female secretary. The King reminds him of the necessity simply to "exist" rather than seek a "thrill". And his secretary reminds him of his public image as "the bravest man in history" as well as her wish to believe in a future. Churchill's job, she reminds him, is to give people like her some "hope". Enjoyment is thus to be found in adherence to duty not in the transmission of popular feeling as in *Darkest Hour*. These sympathetic urgings lift Churchill from his dark mood and bring him to rediscover his sense of duty, whatever the cost. He then sets off to write his speech for a radio broadcast, which he delivers with confidence, saying "We shall never surrender. I shall never surrender ...". The heroic image seems restored but, in the few silent moments following his broadcast, Churchill sips his whisky and gestures his satisfaction as if to suggest that what he really enjoys is his reward for a dutiful performance. This implies a remaining gap between the actual figure and the fantasy orator that the narrative refuses to resolve, permitting us to witness in this moment of secret enjoyment how Churchill does not quite coincide with his mythical image as the heroic war leader.

Both films, then, deploy the gaze as a visual exigence to open up the question of the leader's enjoyment, thereby activating the audience's desire and, consequently, its investment in the narrative. Both also offer an answer to this question in the form of a fantasmatic resolution expressed, in each instance, as Churchill "finding his voice" so that he can occupy the place of the authorial father figure with conviction. These are not unfamiliar steps in historical film dramas – a similar problem of a leader without a voice is found, for example, in *The King's Speech* (2010, dir. Tom Hooper) – which serve a rather conservative ideology that eventually reinforces an image of paternal control. In the two films examined, the closing oratorical moment is a demonstration of the personal victory of the hero over his opponents and, of course, his own demons. The final speeches herald the apparent coincidence of Churchill with himself: in Rushton's terms, he has

demonstrated that he has become a subject (though not quite in the “democratic” sense that Rushton explores). But if the eventual achievement of Churchill’s subjectivity is the final reward of each film, the audience’s enjoyment arguably derives from the blockage of its desire rather than its realisation. The set-piece oratory we actually witness is the signal that the drama – and hence our investment – is over. Nonetheless, the speech at the end of *Darkest Hour* ensures the narrative closes on a rhetoric of acclamation (or *acclamatio*) that uncritically affirms Churchill’s achievement of his leadership (see Lanham, 1991: 1), whereas the speech moment near the end of *Churchill* sustains a rhetoric of doubt (or *aporia*) whereby we remain uncertain of his true disposition (see Lanham, 1991: 19).

If the general narrative components of the films are similar, then, the manner in which the gaze operates in each film is different. *Darkest Hour* has us believe that Churchill’s obstacles are largely political and he needs to find a new source for his conviction, which he discovers in the wisdom of ordinary people. *Churchill*, by contrast, plays on the wartime Prime Minister’s obsolescence and his need simply to offer “hope” by taking up his symbolic role. The closing images of his radio broadcast and the final shots of him on the beach raising (and losing) his hat to those fighting across the Channel suggest that the fantasy of the war leader is precisely that. Not surprisingly, the first film was a financial and artistic success, perhaps because it reactivated a mythology with which many audiences were already familiar, while the second was more controversial and brought criticism of an absence of “realism” (see Roberts, 2017). These contrasting reactions seem to mirror the films’ different narratives: whereas *Darkest Hour* neutralises the gaze by restoring the fantasy of the leader that is commonly felt to be “real”, *Churchill* deploys the gaze so as to question, if only in part, that image.

5. Conclusion: Visualising the Political Stain

Cinema enables us to understand how rhetoric relates to desire. In this article I have tried to demonstrate the point not by dwelling on the technicalities of speech but, rather, on the way subjectivity is given visual organisation in film. The Lacanian theory of the gaze – the deployment of a distortion in the visual field that attracts our interest in the Other’s enjoyment – permits us to conceive rhetorical moments as elements of a cinematic politics of activating desire and relating it anew to the fantasies that support our perception of symbolic reality. Importantly, desire and fantasy are not the same thing: desire is the manifestation of a libidinal sense of lost enjoyment that is opened up by a disruption to the symbolic order; fantasy, however, is a way of organising that desire and reinvesting it in particular objects (such as individual characters and their goals), thereby reducing the discomforts of desire. The incitement of desire therefore need not be uncritical of fantasy nor entirely a means to support ideology, as radical film theorists once assumed. Instead, it provokes spectators to raise the question of what, if anything, gives consistency to reality and the authority on which it is claimed to rest. In that way, the cinematic exigence momentarily subverts our acceptance of

symbolic authority and its fantasmatic support, thereby offering an opportunity to adjust our attitude towards authority. In film, spoken rhetorical moments may work in a number of ways in this respect: to activate desire, to question fantasy, or to reinvest it. In the two Churchill movies examined, it serves to restore to us the mythical figure we already think we know – but not without a significant divergence in how we relate to the fantasy that supports that assumption.

Regular political speech is not quite the same as the cinematic variety. As part of the routinised exchanges of public culture, it tends to presuppose the solidity of the symbolic order with which it engages. In democratic cultures especially, this solidity commonly enables a robust, “deliberative” rhetoric centred on disputing what it is that public authorities should do. Cinematic rhetoric, on the other hand – especially in the fictional dramas of mainstream film – is dominated by character-led narratives where everything hangs on personal qualities and choices. That inclines movies to an “epideictic” rhetoric in which spectators are invited, ultimately, to allocate praise or blame to characters, as we saw in the example of the Churchill movies (see Lanham, 1991: 164).

Nonetheless we might consider that political speech shares a similar interest to cinema in seeking to refigure or revitalise the public’s libidinal connection to the social order. To do this, speakers must on occasion directly incite desire by drawing attention to threatened or actual disruptions to our image of social reality. In that respect, political rhetoric can also be visual in character, alerting us to the distorting presence of “stains” on the political horizon that prevent us from seeing government, or ourselves, properly. Political speeches rely substantially on contingent irruptions of scandal, crisis, or venality to capture our attention and, by then narrativizing our perception of the situation, activate our desire for resolution. While resolution may come in the form of fantasies incarnated via new policy programmes, different leadership, or visions of a new society altogether, the root of our initial investment lies, as our discussion of cinema suggests, in the distorting presence of the stain that raises the question of what the Other enjoys. Alongside the alternating positions of deliberative oratory, typically found in parliaments and assemblies when they deal with identifiable problems and solutions, we also find narratives that dwell on what can’t be seen – and so can only be inferred – about the motivations of social and political actors. Our psychical investment in practical answers, policies, or political figures is enhanced by this distortion in the visual field that disrupts an assumed condition of transparency. Political rhetoric is thus perpetually revealing “secret” motivations or undisclosed “truths” about institutions and figures of authority to remind citizens that they have not been seeing reality properly and need to adjust their outlook and allegiances accordingly. Like cinema, this rhetoric draws upon what can’t be seen in order to question what kind of enjoyment sustains the symbolic order.

Cinema might therefore be regarded as an important source of rhetorical instruction. But it is not simply because we so frequently find in films memorable examples of oratory, representations of speech situations, or dramatically conveyed arguments, though that is certainly true. More than this, cinema il-

illuminates the way that subjects are lured into narratives, not merely by what they see and hear but by their attraction to what is absent. For it is this absence that, at least on a Lacanian reading, is the unconscious stimulus to subjectivity as such. In that respect, cinema offers an invaluable rhetorical lesson in how political speech might activate desire.

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