

On Listening, if you wish...

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Michel Foucault *Hermeneutics of the Self*.

3 March 1982: First Hour

"In this treatise *On Listening* Plutarch takes up a theme which he explicitly says he has borrowed from Theophrastus and which in fact arises, once again, from a wholly traditional Greek problematic. He says that audition, the sense of hearing, is basically both the most *pathētikos* and the most *logikos* of our senses. It is the most *pathētikos*, that is to say – we translate roughly and schematically – the most "passive" sense. That is to say, in audition, more than with any other sense, the soul is passive with regard to the external world and exposed to all the events that come from the outside world and may take it by surprise. Plutarch explains this by saying that we cannot avoid hearing what takes place around us. After all, we can refuse to look; we close our eyes. We can refuse to touch something. We can refuse to taste something. Furthermore, he says, the passivity of audition is proven by the fact that the body itself, the physical individual, risks being surprised and shaken by what he hears, much more than by any other object appearing [to him] through sight or touch. We cannot help jumping at a violent noise that takes us by surprise. The body is passive, then, with regard to the sense of hearing, more than with regard to any other sense. (334-5)

Make of me a citizen who can listen.

"On the other hand, the sense of hearing is the only sense through which we can learn virtue. We do not learn virtue by looking. It is and can only be learned through the ear, because virtue cannot be separated from the *logos*, that is to say from rational language, from language really present, expressed and articulated verbally in sounds and rationally by reason. The *logos* can only penetrate through the ear and thanks to the sense of hearing. The only access to the soul for the *logos*, therefore, is through the ear. Hence the fundamentally ambiguity of the sense of hearing: *pathētikos* and *logikos*." (338-9)

"Whether we take the aspect of pathos or the *logikos*, audition is in any case always subject to error. It is always such to misinterpretation or errors of attention. At this point Epictetus introduces an important notion, I think, which will lead us precisely to the theme of the

Genesis of the films: Responding to a demand to justify the project.

Why these men? Why these women? Why not others? Why do *they* get to have a voice?

Questions like these assume that there was a prior intention on the part of the artist to develop this project with this specific group of people. This is not the case. It began with an art programme in the prison and slowly evolved through conversation as men determined the questions they wanted and needed to address. They learn about film. Years pass. Slowly the project moves from an art class to a collaborative project with the artist. When asked "Would you have become involved in the project had you know what would emerge?", a man says, "Oh Jesus. No!" It was accidental, contingent, born of a pedagogical practice in a particular place. They turned up, and something happened through that process and practice.

We often seek a deeper logic, an ideological conviction, a grand narrative, a greater meaning, even a conspiracy. "Why didn't you do this rather than that?" "You should do this with them not with *them*." But these films were made simply because a group of people found themselves together and eventually decided to do something together. It was unpredicted and unpredictable. Life cannot be always asked to justify itself. Can we be asked to justify all of our encounters with others, all the work that we do? How could we ever begin? No one has asked me

to justify working in primary education, but I am asked to justify working in prison education. This seems to deny the inter-tangled and continuous nature of all our social relations.

This project might have been different. It was a contingent affair: this educational programme at this time in this place with this artist and these men. Need it be emphasised that there are many artists who work in many different ways with many different people? It just happened to be these men, and later these women. Who will refuse me my right to listen?

Pedagogy: An ethic of renunciation.

In an educational context, a teacher must come to learn to give space to the other, resisting the desire to impose his or her view, indoctrinate, convince, persuade or indulge in ceaseless monologue. This has been called an

asceticism of listening. He says: Basically, since we are dealing with a *logos* when we listen, and this *logos* is inseparable from a *lexis* (a way of speaking) and a certain number of words, we can see that listening is almost as difficult as speaking. For when we speak it has to be said that sometimes we speak usefully, sometimes we speak pointlessly, and sometimes we can even speak harmfully. In the same way, we can listen to our advantage, we can listen in a completely pointless way and without getting any benefit, and we can even listen in a way that is to our disadvantage.” (339)

“How can we purify logical listening in the practice of the self? Basically, by three means. The first, of course, is silence. [...] But of course this silence is not enough. More than silence, a certain active demeanour is called for. This demeanour is analysed in different ways which are also quite interesting, despite their apparent banality. In the first place, listening requires a quite precise physical posture on the part of the listener, a posture clearly described in the texts of the period. [...] Now a third set of listening rules: those concerning attention strictly speaking.” (340-48)

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“And I think that one of the most remarkable features of the practice of the self in this period [of Antiquity] is that the subject must become a subject of truth. He must become a subject of truth: he himself must be able to say the truth and he must be able to say it to himself.” (365)

“Etymologically, *parrhēsia* is the act of telling all (frankness, open-heartedness, plain speaking, speaking openly, speaking freely). The Latins generally translate *parrhēsia* as *libertas*. It is the openness which makes us speak, which makes us say what has to be said, what we want to say, what we think ought to be said, because it is necessary, useful, and true. *Libertas* or *parrhēsia* seems to be primarily a moral quality that basically is demanded of every speaking subject. When speaking entails telling the truth, how could there not be a kind of fundamental pact imposed on everyone who speaks that they speak the truth because they believe it to be true?” (366)

“Our discourse should strive not to please, but to be useful.” (402)

ethics of renunciation. Silence on the part of the educator can be the most effective pedagogical strategy. We may learn how to begin a conversation with one another. Educators listen to their students so they can then respond, though not uncritically.

Resonances of this listening remain in the fabric of these films.

Listening: They exist.

Why should I listen to *them*?

But do you know who *they* are..? Could you bear it if *they* were not as you imagine them, as you *want* them to be?

This is an invitation to listen, if you wish...

Should those who do not wish to listen have the right of response? It seems reasonable to delineate minimal expectations of what should constitute responsible speech for she or he who speaks. Likewise, if one wishes to attribute speech to another it seems reasonable that one be asked to do so responsibly; in order to comment on what is said, one must have listened. This is a responsibility: to be informed of that which we are to speak if we are to make claims about the other.

In turn, we too, may ask to speak and to be listened to, on our own terms.

What does listening demand? It demands acceptance of a most particular and minimal kind – *this* person exists, *this* person speaks. We move from ‘these people’ to *this* man, *this* woman. This encounter does not demand agreement, empathy or toleration. The primary demand is to acknowledge that *this* other exists.

Listening is very difficult. You have to accept you might be wrong. You have to accept that the other may have a different view.

Speaking: Will you hear speech or noise?

Jacques Rancière: “[...] Throughout our society there is speech that is heard merely as noise. [...] So you don’t have noise which is going to become speech, but speech which is always an issue of interpretation. Will it or won’t it be heard as speech? Where is it going to be heard as noise or as speech?”

This work is not about the right to speak. It is less grand, prescriptive or monumental. It involves accepting this simple statement: they speak. This trivial statement, we deny at our peril. Before us lies a dangerous territory with a brutal pre-history when those who speak and try to communicate are instead framed and constituted as animals, beasts, vermin, monsters, scum or savages.

Remembering Fanon. “For a long time I was crying and then I went back to living again. But I was haunted by a series of destructive clichés.”

They speak.

Listen, if you wish...
