

‘Come in, the word hole is about to begin’.

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1

In a short book written in August 1968, sociologist and historian Michel De Certeau claimed that: ‘In May 1968, speech was taken the way, in 1789, the Bastille was taken’. This argument is as inspired as it is doubtful. Imagine that the Bastille had been captured the way people in May 1968 captured speech. The Jacobins would have chewed on the word ‘bread’ until they starved to death. Once the Bastille had actually been stormed, however, quite some material advantages were to be had: bread, for instance, and the beginnings of equal rights for everyone. On the tangible benefits of the May 1968 protests, De Certeau is brief: a valued salary increase for workers and some education reforms. *So much for that*. Room enough *still* in the revolutionaries’ trophy cabinet. But De Certeau does something peculiar. He starts measuring that empty spot in the trophy cabinet and makes it sing as if he were rubbing his finger around the rim of a crystal glass. He makes a lasting and intrinsic deficiency ring out. As a result, a penetrating and enigmatic power emanates from *The Capture of Speech*. De Certeau gives an almost *performative?* description of a revolution that is disturbing and confusing. Is this cowardly and uncommitted? Or is he testing a secret weapon? Is he merely depicting a historical and sociological curiosity? Is it a superior form of nostalgia? Or is he thoroughgoing and on to something radical? During those days in May, he writes, a fundamental experience emerged: the capture of speech was collective, poetic, contradictory, irresistible, moving, funny and obstinate. De Certeau attempts to clarify the event’s practical and theoretical implications but in doing so, he says, he immediately comes up against a language deficit. The experience of capturing speech is itself impregnable with words. That didn’t prevent him from writing about it extensively, however. He describes Paris in May 1968 as a theatre in which the spectators suddenly discover that

1

they can in fact also act. The city as a stage in which, bursting with collective joy, a display of speech was performed. It was in all respects a failed revolution, a revolution that missed out on what it was meant to be: a purposeful event. It was a revolution of language which failed to speak in a single voice. Its programme was not the enunciation of a programme, but the beginning of speech itself. A revolution of speech, rather than what was said exactly. A symbolic revolution, a revolution of the symbols. A movement from the bottom up which escaped the existing frameworks and forms of organisation. Moving along secret paths, nibbling away at the margins, they eroded the familiar frameworks. They started to prattle on and to contest, bourgeois students and workers together, often in disagreement, with differences which sparked until the whole system was lit up. Even though May 1968 was itself perhaps only a time of short-lived collective insanity, sometimes insanity heralds new forms of rationality. It was a defining moment, a dangerous moment; laws were pushed through which no one had ever imagined that they would be set in motion. The unthinkable was mobilised.

I read that book today and walk through the city where I live. High-pressure cleaners are used to wash away the remains of the last demonstration, a few months ago already. Stickers reading ‘This revolution will not be privatised’ fade under the steel brushes of the private cleaning company hired by the city. It is, in the words of Žižek, a ‘year of dreaming dangerously’. The wave of demonstrations has died down these last few months. The at first promising initiatives for citizen participation are now mainly supported by the missionaries and teachers who started them. Accusations that the Occupy movement cannot present a clear programme don’t even hurt anymore; the movement is as good as shut down. It is undoubtedly seeking new forms of existence, but they are not yet visible.

I walk down the street at a steady pace; the alternating black-and-white front doors of the houses slide under my fingers like keys on a silent piano. And then I see, above a basement, an orange sign that reads, in yellow and blue circus letters: ‘Come in, the word hole is about to begin’.

And before I can even think about it, I've descended the steps and I stand in front of a red curtain. I push it aside, and I'm in.

2

I find myself in a small theatre I didn't know existed. Men and women sit next to tramps, hip teenagers, believers of all sorts and punks. A small but diverse audience, the kind of social mix you only come across in the waiting room of a hospital's emergency ward. I doubt for a moment as to whether this is really a theatre. And yet people are seated side by side in rows, and turned towards a lit-up scene. A man stands alone on stage. I've just ambled in, and I have no idea how long the show has been going on, nor when it shall stop. When I entered it was 11:30 in the morning, not a usual hour for a theatre show. The man speaks. I don't know where he started, nor where he's headed. I can make neither head nor tail of what he's saying. If I turn my head to the left, I hear him talk about an old man sticking a needle through his reflection; if I lean forward I find myself immersed in a story about a fly producing too much saliva; if I move to the right, I hear the rousing story of a revolutionary beaver who made a skateboard out of a crocodile. I sit down next to a young man in the back row and ask in a whisper what the purpose of this is. 'This is the story with no beginning and no end', he says. 'Funny', I tell him, 'there are billions of stories that begin without a beginning and end without an ending; is that what you've come to the theatre for so early?'

'You're mistaken: this story doesn't end and it doesn't begin'.

'Did you miss the beginning?'

'No', the man says, 'when I came in he was already busy'.

'And why did you come in?'

'I wanted to ask you the same thing'.

And I answer truthfully that I was walking down the street when my attention was caught by the sign reading 'Come in, the word hole is about to begin', and before I knew it here I was.

'That's exactly what happened to me'.

'How long have you been here?', I ask.

'I can't remember', he says.

3

His answer doesn't reassure me and I decide to leave the fellow. A lady in her fifties sits on the steps. I ask her what she thinks of the show. She looks at me amiably and says slowly, with a remnant of unconsummated lust in her hoarse voice: 'It's obscene, it's an attack on reality as we know it'.

'Do you remember when you came in?'

She shrugs her shoulders with a smile.

'And when are you going back out into the street?'

The woman ignores the question, stares at the podium and lets out a cooing little cry.

I see the speaker stand, and I hear him give telling details of the Batavian revolution, of which he was a privileged witness as the dog of a Cananefate. This makes me ill at ease, almost panicky, and I decide it's time for me to visit other shores. But I stumble over a satchel lying across the aisle. I land on a young mother's lap who watches the speaker breathlessly with her six-year-old son in the seat next to her. The speaker is in the middle of a story about the origin of the idea of the final purpose for young little ducklings that ignore that they are destined for the hunt. I shrink back in horror as I hear the speaker sketch the colour of the prison wall of the last biological child; he describes in horrifying detail the crying fits of this newborn boy in his cold cell, a boy whose DNA matches no one's wishes. My head aches; it feels as though my skull is being vacuumed. I seek my way to the top in the dark; I search for the exit but bump into an obese teenager. 'Why are you leaving?', he asks when he notices that I'm about to leave.

I tell him this is not good for my equilibrium.

He laughs and asks what is good for me then.

I tell him I can't answer that just like that.

'Come here for a minute', he says, pointing to the place next to him.

'Why should I?', I ask.

'Come on', he says.

He takes me by the arm and sits me down in the seat he chose for me. He places his plump, sweaty hand before my eyes and I hear the speaker tell the story of this story. I tear myself loose.

Minutes, perhaps hours pass – or was it days or weeks, perhaps even years.

Among other things I hear and see in that time how the speaker tells the end

of all possible stories in a single story. As I finally make my way to the exit, I hear at the last minute his story about the roguish foreskin of the prophet Mohammed and how that little piece of skin – he evoked an actual veil – led to the headscarf debates, terrorist attacks, censorship and reconciliation around saccharine mint tea. When I at last reach the exit in a state of fright, I hear him tell the story in which all stories come together and start over.

3

I'm back outside, shivering. I've never seen a more gruesome performance. I've never experienced a play that covers the history of our whole story so accurately. I want to rinse my mouth, splash my face with water. This performance didn't describe our history; it neither imitated nor represented it; it coincided with it to the utmost. It makes me sick. Nothing happened in the speaker's mouth but the merciless grinding of everything that endlessly plays itself out in our time and space. I realise that this is completely inconceivable. But it is not because something is inconceivable that it doesn't happen. The weight of our history presses down on my neck, history which just keeps hurtling forward on the strength of the same change of the same. I look up, and I see the cloudless blue sky like a lid on my nose. Shouldn't a play that can bring about something like that be illegal?

I now stand outside the theatre, but I ask myself here in the street, as in the theatre a minute ago, how I get out of here. I am just as lost here in this infinite space as in there; I here find myself at the same random spot as there. That bright little door, I realise, turned out to be the door to hell, to our own historic inferno which daily repeats itself. No remote hell from old books, but a hell which unfolds itself here, there, yesterday, today and tomorrow. That little performance encompassed not only the collected works of Shakespeare and Brecht, medieval plays and Noh plays, not only all vaudeville, slapstick and stand-up comedy, not even all Greek, Roman and French tragedies collectively and not even all funny avant-garde experiments taken together; every movement of every pore of every person and every animal from the past, present and future played a part in the play I just saw. Every thought, every feint, every incitement to dream and every illusion, every drop of blood and every leaked seed, every worm and every flake, every fibre and every plant

5

appeared in that play with no beginning and no end.

I feel seriously dizzy. I lean against a newly planted little beech tree on the footpath. I've never experienced such truthful theatre. This was the ultimate true-to-nature theatre, the performance that coincides in a totally totalitarian manner with our fatally self-repeating history. But from philosophers and playwrights I have learnt that no one will ever be capable of distinguishing between the total mirror image of reality and reality itself. If everything is represented, then everything is fully interchangeable with its representation. And you never know what side you find yourself on. With my ridiculous little life, I, here, may be no more than a little performance happening in the reality of the speaker's speech. Why does that make me sad? Where does our desire to live in truth and reality come from?

For a moment I can't remember where I went and where I came from before I was sucked in there. That charming little flight of steps introduced me to our personal and collective terrors, and yet it was very ordinary, familiar even. No matter how strange, there was nothing new. I look at the tips of my shoes. I retch when I realise that every step they have ever taken and every step they will ever take appear in the play I have just seen. I have never made the mistake of elevating my own experience and knowledge to the level of standards. But that there is absolutely nothing new makes me choke. I see a woman on the other side of the street – she must be a lawyer, with her robe on her arm, but her dignity on the edge of the abyss – and she crosses a man who is fiddling around with plastic bags full of empty bottles he has fished out of glass containers in the hope of getting a few coins for them in the supermarket. There is nothing new.

4

I take a deep breath and straighten up. I again remember the little book I was reading before I tumbled into that theatre: Michel De Certeau's *The Capture of Speech*. A yapping little dog pisses against the tree, splashing the tips of my shoes. I find that the time is ripe for me to speak. I turn around and walk back. I search for those steps leading down but can't find them. I only vaguely recall where it was; I recognise the façades I passed, but every time I think I'm in the right spot, it seems I'm mistaken. Just when I'm on the verge of despair,

6

I see a postman across the street with a lump on his eye. Both the man and his bump correspond exactly to the description given in one of the speaker's stories, and I turn around and suddenly remember that everything and everyone I see around me happened exactly like that in the speaker's story. And I decide to speak myself, and I say: 'There's the sign!', and indeed there's the sign that reads 'Come in, the word hole is about to begin'. I go down the steps, push aside the red curtain and I'm in again. The theatre is still quite full; I clear a path for myself as I head down and step onto the stage without the slightest hesitation. 'Move aside', I say, but the speaker continues unperturbed. I say: 'And now I'm going to speak'. The man falls silent, an interruption which is not to the liking of his audience. As the booing gets louder, I say: 'And now, time for something completely different. Ladies and gentlemen...' The speaker gives me a polite but explicit tap on the shoulder. I turn around, grab him by the waist, turn him upside down and throw him onto the floor. I place my foot on his head, as he tries in vain to get up. 'Ladies and gentlemen, we're going to put an end to this game here'. 'That's impossible', the speaker manages to utter. 'History will continue to write itself on and on!' 'Fine', I say, 'and now I'm speaking. So let me outline the theatre I wish to make room for'.

The crowd boos.

'Dear junkies', I say, 'of course you want your daily shot of spectacle, but listen, from now on this is the programme: there must be some play between starting over and starting at the Beginning'.

'We don't understand any of that stuff!'

'And yet it's very simple. Day after day, virtually everyone starts over. This demands practice, perseverance and a certain cheerfulness, but this discipline is as widespread as having soles on one's feet. In this theatre, as on the rest of the planet, people widely start over day after day, but without a Beginning. No one can begin at the Beginning. Unless you're a god or a mythological figure. Despite their violence and avant-garde insanity, neither can bloodthirsty visionaries begin at the Beginning, although they like to pretend the opposite. The Beginning is ungraspable, unnameable and not mobilizable. Ergo: between the beginning and the beginning of the Beginning there must be some play. Amazingly enough, that play has hardly been explored. And yet

that is the theatre I wish to focus on.

‘That is the play area. No scene filled with opinions or points of view, no oppressive arena in which people fight for the last word, but a possibility for the first word. How do you do that? Our culture is keen on being right, on having the last word – whoever has the last word always wins. But perhaps those winners can make room for a new little game. A game in which we present inventions, routes and possibilities to one another. The speaker, or player, with the first word doesn’t know the misplaced triumphalism of the moralist who demands to have the last word for himself. The speaker or player with the first word is only accountable to the Law, the Law which is itself unknowable, the Law which only lets itself be known in the cloud of dust hanging above all conflicting moral commandments. (But if necessary, the speaker or player with the first word will not refrain from getting his hands dirty and will state briefly and clearly what it comes down to.)

‘The speaker or player with the first word is not the prophet who brings perspective. He offers views, insights, prospects, another view. (But if it’s not possible otherwise, then the speaker or player with the first word will not refrain from presenting frightful visions or *paradisical* prefigurations.) He plays around with the first word without being able to grasp it; he is a playful fool and a wise scout; he advances into territories we have never visited before; he returns to places we no longer dare visit or which we boldly forgot. He wishes to begin.

‘Speaking the first word is not a matter for the theatre alone; it is not a matter for a man, woman or company alone. When a community speaks, as De Certeau described it, that community becomes a theatre in which spectators suddenly become *actors* of their own history. That is the power of the first word in a community. And when in the theatre the first word is spoken, then the first word opens a breach in the walls of the theatre’.

‘AA!’, the audience screams out in panic.

‘Bravo’, I say.

‘AAAA!’

‘You’re doing an excellent job’, I say, ‘the first letter of the first word’.

‘AAAAAA!’

And then I see how the first letter of the first word drives a hole through the walls of the theatre. And the punk and the obese teenager and the believers of all sorts and the lady getting on in years and the mother with her little boy crawl through the hole in the wall, go out into the street – and they begin.