

# The Litigious Scene of Emancipation: A Political Analysis of Dissent in *Mouthpiece* (2018) by Kieran Hurley

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## Abstract

Which power mechanisms underlie the process of a story's transmission? Under which parameters can the theatrical space become a *locus* of contestation of a concrete regime of intelligibility, or rather a device of institutional cooptation? Departing from Giorgio Agamben's concept of the *apparatus*, I will use Jacques Rancière's concept of *the political* to explore the emancipatory potential of dramaturgical strategies which, rather than structuring the performance in a closed diegesis, crack it open to the possibility of its disruption.

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**Keywords:** Agamben, apparatus, the political, Rancière, political dramaturgies, emancipation

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*Science du fait, l'histoire n'aura jamais affaire qu'au représentable.  
Or n'y a-t-il mémoire que du représentable? Et toute présence s'y  
traduit-elle? Si la mémoire excède le représentable, si le temps excède sa version  
historique ou historicisable, n'y a-t-il pas des traces qui sont  
irréductibles aux marques, à ce qui se capitalise et se récupère?*

Collin, 1993: 18

*Mouthpiece* (2018), by the Scottish playwright Kieran Hurley, is a play that, as its title indicates, combines life and story in the key figure of the *mouthpiece*. The entire piece revolves around the dialectical tension between life as a purely immanent experiential phenomenon and the art of narrating, of telling stories, as a practice of (re-) presentation — and, therefore, as an apparatus-laden task of careful arrangement and selection — that gives way to the story. Theatre and experience, life and story, become processes that, although they inevitably drink from each other, are diametrically opposed on the fine line that links them: the political. The main conundrum announced by the two main characters — “we all have a story”, or “some of us only have lives” — already points to the idea that the story is not inherent in us but is an artificial and contingent apparatus, crossed by the primordial ethical-political dimension given by its inseparable correspondence with people. Thus, Hurley’s dramatic text makes us re-think the metaphysical-universalist impersonality of the symbolic transmission [story] from the situation and precariousness characteristic of its structuring modes. While proposing a correlation between the field of aesthetics and that of political philosophy, this article will argue that the locus of the political conflict unfolded in *Mouthpiece* lies in the incursion of an excessive element in the distribution of the sensible: the marginalised character of Declan, whose litigious act will involve both a detour with respect to the police apparatus of representation and an assertion of the political potential of dissent.

## Performance as a *Dispositif*: the Police Configuration of the Theatrical Space

Premiered in 2018 at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, *Mouthpiece* stages a furtive encounter between two characters: seventeen-year-old Declan from a working-class and marginal background – the Pilton suburbs of Edinburgh – and Libby, who, despite her youthful success at the cultural centre of London, has a failed artistic career that has led her, at the age of forty-six, to an erratic and uncontrolled life. The stage becomes a meeting point between two space and time coordinates: Salisbury Crags, the pinnacle of the iconic Arthur's Seat, which hides the discarded story of the Radical Risings – the workers' revolt led by unemployed Scottish weavers – and of the two characters who go there, two centuries later, to find courage. The initiatory uneasiness of their bond soon develops into Libby's clear interest in the life of the adolescent, who she recognises as an "untutored talent" (Fisher, *The Guardian*, 2019) with potential. The precariousness and violence of Declan's material and family conditions instigate in the former playwright a creative success that culminates in her choosing "to be his voice – the mouthpiece of the title" (op. cit.). Although class difference is evident from the outset – Declan does not even know what a play is, and has always been detached from the art world –, political conflict erupts when he is denied the rights of the play and realises that she will always "have the right to be heard and he will always be silenced, an outsider" (op. cit.). Beyond what could apparently be a mere conflict of interests, or the ironic fatalism of an unfortunate Pygmalionist love story, what concerns us is the incision that Hurley's play opens in settled notions about the nature of the political, emancipation and political subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, our interpretation will not be based so much on the analysis of the thematic conflict of the piece but on a political re-consideration of the dramatic elements that structure it.

*Mouthpiece*, the title of the play, heads the opening of the first scene, and Libby, by way of a metatheatrical preamble, frames the events that will follow: "This is the beginning of the story, and it's vital. It should ideally set up the place, the world of it all [...] establish the theme and the tone, and give us a snapshot of the characters' struggles"<sup>2</sup> (2018: 1). The spectator is, from the very beginning, in a position of maintaining a distance from the play, while the paratext of the scene already anticipates the *artificial* character of the performance. It is important to consider some points: first, the ambiguity of the meaning of mouthpiece, which refers both to a transmission apparatus and to the person or organisation that speaks on behalf of another (ODE 2015); second, in the metatheatrical character of the scene, based on which an estrangement occurs with respect to the theatrical diegesis. In order to unravel the overlap between *mouthpiece* and *transmission apparatus*

1. The interest in the intersection between political theory and new methodologies of dramaturgical analysis can be seen in the publication of reference: Liz TOMLIN. *Political Dramaturgies...* And also in: Tony FISHER and Eva KATSOURAKI (Eds.). *Performing Antagonism...*

2. Kieran HURLEY. *Mouthpiece*.

suggested initially in the title of the play, we must pause briefly to set out Giorgio Agamben's analysis.

In *What Is an Apparatus?* Giorgio Agamben links the etymological origin of the term "apparatus" (L. *dispositio*) to the Greek notion of *oikonomia*: "the administration of the *oikos* (the home) and, more generally, management" (2009: 8). In this context, he defines apparatuses as a series of practices and strategies whose aim is to "model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings" (Agamben, 2009: 14). This perspective helps to conceptualise the dramaturgical strategy of estrangement [*Verfremdung*] as an apparatus that, in effect, distributes the roles of the characters on stage and governs their performance based on their usefulness in the plot/*fabula*. We see this in the fact that Libby does not only anticipate and configures, according to the rules of classical Aristotelian drama, what will happen on stage:

LIBBY: After the set-up comes the moment where your character must make a decision to do something that changes their reality [...] This moment is sometimes called the "break into two" after the moment we break into act two in a traditional three act structure (2018: 12).

but that this apparatus [*dispositio*] creates a regulatory axis of referentiality: a law that that must necessarily be enforced and enforce-able:<sup>3</sup>

LIBBY: The midpoint. The clue is in the title really; this bit is about halfway through. Depending on the story you're telling, everything at this point should be either brilliant, or terrible [...] The image at the midpoint should be a reversal of how the story will end, if you're really playing it to the letter of the *law* (2018: 41, our emphasis).

By withdrawing from the theatrical diegesis — and by un-incorporating herself as an actant/actress to operate as a demiurge — Libby anticipates, as a performative *coup de force*, the conflict that will be unleashed in the second part of the play. The idea that Libby governs the theatrical space is emphasised, on many occasions, both by the self-reflective parenthetical interludes — as we have seen above — and by the sceno-graphy: the text projections reveal that everything that can happen is a product of what she is writing. In this respect, both strategies would seem to indicate the artificial nature of the performance and the economic dimension of the writing apparatus — returning to Agamben: to its ability to capture and govern the behaviour of living beings.

However, in order to analyse the enforce-ability that gives Libby's voice an authoritarian centrality, and in order to understand the relationship of inequality that will run through both characters, we must consider Jacques Rancière's concept of "police logic".

The police, as he states in *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* are not simply the state apparatus charged with maintaining public order

3. See Jacques DERRIDA. "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority". Specifically: p. 6.

under “truncheon blows” (Rancière, 1995: 28), but a more general order of organisation:

[...] an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of seeing, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place or task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as a discourse and another as noise [...] Policing is not so much the “disciplining” of bodies as a *rule governing their appearing* (Rancière, 1999: 29, my emphasis).

The Rancierian notion of a police regime that acts, a priori, as a distributive principle of the sens/tible enables us to glimpse the dogmatic status of the law of classical Aristotelian drama — embodied, as I have just pointed out, by the figure of Libby. In this respect, we could argue that Libby’s orchestrating voice operates from the driving force of Rancierian police logic; that is, as a doxic regulation of what may or may not appear on stage. Thus, Libby stands as an authoritarian figure (author/*auctoritas*) not so much because she has an executive power but because she establishes a certain regime of visibility that organises, a priori, “what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière, 2004: 13). This is how we see it in the stage stratification, where the projected stage directions, Libby’s speech, and Declan’s consequent action come together:

LIBBY: *listening to recordings. She begins to type.* / *Projected text:* alright wee yin? / DECLAN: alright wee yin [...]? (2018: 33).

LIBBY: I write: He screams. / *He screams.* [...] / I write: Slumped on the floor, Declan sobs, alone. / *Projected text:* Slumped on the floor, Declan sobs alone. / *Slumped on the floor, Declan sobs, alone* (2018: 58).

From this concordance between the *fabula* and the events, the scene is shaped like an ordered cosmos, where each one plays the role that corresponds to them. In this respect, the stage arrangement [*dispositio*] responds to the Rancierian police logic “that distributes bodies within the space of their visibility or their invisibility” (Rancière, 1999: 28), insofar as it establishes a violently harmonic concordance between their “ways of being, ways of doing, and ways of saying appropriate to each” (Ibid.). Libby uses writing as a regulatory apparatus of what *may or may not become visible or perceptible* in the theatrical space, while governing the experience that is transmissible to the audience.

To recapitulate, the distancing between the law of the *fabula*, on the one hand, and the events that take place within the theatrical space, on the other, contribute to our conceptualisation of the performance as a *police apparatus*: that is, as a governing strategy that organises events following a compartmentalising logic. Here, the fact that Libby cites the classical law of drama is not merely a strategy of *Verfremdung*, as we might conclude if we look at its metatheatrical character, but becomes a central apparatus in the political structuring of the play, since her diegetic distancing distinguishes her as a

demiurgic figure and, as such, endows her words with a regulatory performative character. This is what the concluding sentence tells us: “Some things are just rules. There are rules to make things work and this is no different, really” (2018: 1).

### The Scene of Disagreement

After this first moment, however, the theatrical space ceases to be a cosmo-logical harmony — “the police distribution of bodies who are put in their place and assigned their role” (cf. Rancière, 1999: 33) — to give rise to *disagreement*: when Libby makes explicit her interest in the precariousness of Declan’s life, in their first meeting in the cafe in New Town, Edinburgh’s modern and posh neighbourhood.

DECLAN: I’m sorry to disappoint you right, but I dinnae have a story.

LIBBY: Everyone has a story.

DECLAN: Naw. Some ay us just have lives.

*Beat* (2018: 13).

Where Libby sees everyone as narratable (a story), Declan only sees lives. The conundrum that appears between the two characters reveals a fundamental difference between the expository position of the author/*auctoritas* (Libby) and that of the actor (Declan); a difference from which the regime of inequality with which Declan will be de-authorised and made invisible will be established. At a deeper level, the difference that divides Libby and Declan into a symbolic distribution of inequality is the value attributed to the word (the *logos*); while the creative (*poiesis*) quality of Libby’s words provides for an objectifying transcendence, Declan seems destined for the mere reproduction of life itself, irreducible to an order of symbolic meaning. What I suggest, in response to the reviews that see in it a parallelism with colonisation,<sup>4</sup> is that we are faced with an inequality that is very different from socioeconomic or cultural inequality, and also a much deeper one: it is not that Libby is appropriating a story that does not belong to her, but that, in the hegemonic regime of intelligibility, Declan has no capacity for action. In other words, a pre-constituted experience is not expropriated from Declan: its constitutive parameters prevent his enunciation and, therefore, need to be reconfigured.<sup>5</sup> Taking up the Platonic distinction between bodies destined for mere survival, endowed with an un-articulated voice — the *conatus*, the *phoné* —, and bodies that can be *more than bodies* and are capable of discursive articulation — the *logos* —, the inequality between Libby and Declan raises a question of ontological-political agonism,<sup>6</sup> insofar as the issue affects his potential for action and expression. This is how we see it in the midpoint

4. See Mark Fisher’s review:

<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/dec/09/mouthpiece-review-traverse-edinburgh>>.

5. “The ‘class’ of the *sans-part* expresses not unity, then, but on the contrary a disjunction, namely, between an assigned identity and an impossible identification” (Bon-Hoa, 2020: 187).

6. Chantal MOUFFE. *Agonism: Thinking the World...*

of the play — the epicentre of the conflict — when Declan challenges the neglect of Libby’s creative process:

DECLAN: Telling me what I can and cannae talk about, handing oot your fucking rules. Saying you want tae listen tae me, get my voice heard and look: you’ve already written my end (2018: 55).

And decides, in this moment of disagreement, to withdraw his consent to co-operate:

DECLAN: Fucking watch me. Here: I withdraw my *consent*. You like that?

LIBBY: Come on that’s different. That is different.

DECLAN: How?

*Beat*

LIBBY: Because. This is my story now (2018: 55).

The failure of his performative locution — “I withdraw my consent” (op. cit.) — reveals the unequal distribution of enunciation, action and speech between the protagonists: while Declan’s retraction has no perlocutory value, Libby exercises her authority to impose herself as the owner of *Mouthpiece*. In fact, a performative act of speech is subject to conventional norms and to the authority of whoever issues it, so that its illusory force depends directly on the legitimacy conferred by the power of the convention, the doxical consensus and institutional verification (Fisher, 2017: 202). Under these parameters, the relationship between Declan and Libby goes from being co-operation to a hierarchised relationship of oppression, which would seem to point to the triumph of the *oikonomia* — “a pure activity of government that aims at nothing other than its own replication” (Agamben, 2009: 22) — and, consequently, to the eclipse of any political possibility.

### **Dissensual Acts: Equality and the *Law of the Anyone at All***

It is not until the end of the play that, once Libby premieres *Mouthpiece* under her full authorship, political action is unleashed. Faced with the injustice of the headlines — “a mouthpiece for generation austerity, a voice for the lost and the voiceless” (2018: 59) —, Declan feels pushed towards the theatre: “I was goin tae the fuckin theater” (2018: 60). The seemingly circumstantial decision to go to the theatre implies, however, a transformation of the fabric of his experience, as well as that of the current spectators of the play, on the one hand, because it radically re-shapes the prevailing order of the apparatus of representation — with which the police regime of the occupation of bodies in space and the legitimate authority of Libby’s word [*logos*] have been delimited, as we have seen in the previous points — and, on the other, because it triggers what Rancière defines as the moment of politics: “the meeting point of police logic and the logic of equality” (Rancière, 1999: 62).

In order to move away from the settled notion that something is political insofar as power relations operate within it, Rancière defines the status of the political as a *meeting* between two heterogeneous logics: police logic,

which distributes the bodies and assigns them a function, and the logic of equality. Instead of corresponding to a pure ontology — the representative institutions of Democracy — “politics exists when the natural order of domination [the apparatuses of government, the police] is interrupted by the institution as a part of those who have no part [the logic of equality]” (Rancière, 1996: 11).<sup>7</sup> In other words, political praxis fractures and reconfigures a certain order of domination in unpredictable ways — be it symbolic, scriptural or perceptual. However, this distortion, as unpredictable and immeasurable, is never pre-constituted, so that there must be a higher assumption sustaining it. This presupposition is, for Rancière, the radical equality *anyone at all* of the speaking beings: “the law of mixing, the law of anyone at all [*n’importe qui*] doing anything at all” (Rancière, 1999: 19).<sup>8</sup> There are two points in the Rancierian concept of the political that are fundamental to our analysis: the first is related to the configuration of the theatrical space, because politics is born out of a contradiction, that is, of “the opening of a dispute over each distribution and its arrangement” (Birulés, 2014: 19 [own translation]). The second is the anarchic logic underlying the notion of the “law of equality of anyone at all doing anything at all,” which allows, in unpredictable ways, the police order that assigns the bodies to their function to be disrupted. This *disruption* would correspond to the mismatch triggered by the establishment of “a part of those who have no part” (Rancière, 1999: 14); that is, by the action of the speakers who, despite being un-counted, “are counted” (Ibid.).

From this theoretical framework, Declan’s decision to go to the theatre could be understood, on the one hand, as a dissenting — or catachrestic gesture —<sup>9</sup> that establishes a “litigation” from which to enunciate himself; and, on the other, as an update of the supposition of equality — “the voiceless also have a voice and may want to use it” (op. cit.). We see this in the fact that his action is a dislocation of the role that had been assigned to him within the diegesis — orchestrated by the arrangement made by Libby, as I pointed out in the first section of the article — and his displacement to the position of spectator reconfigures the theatrical space itself. Given Rancière’s premise that political action does not involve the call for an arithmetical re-distribution of the social field — as do the proposals of inclusiveness and recognition — but by the excessive action of the uncounted parties in this configuration (Rancière in Genel and Deranty, 2016: 93), in the following section we will see that the detour<sup>10</sup> that Declan embodies can be read as a potentially emancipating political act.

7. Cf. Rancière, 1995: 37.

8. Op. cit.: 39.

9. Judith Butler defines “political catachresis” as a “chiasm” produced in institutionalised language by the action of those subjects from whom humanity has been expropriated. The political power of this trope lies, according to Butler, in its ability to show the limits of intelligibility, on the one hand, and its ability to enable new political spaces outside institutions and legitimacy (*Sittlichkeit*), on the other. The parallel between the rhetorical figure of Butler’s “catachresis” and Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “fracture / difference / deviation” [*écart*] that I suggest is a debate that I will leave for future interventions. See: Judith BUTLER. *Antigone’s Claim...* (specifically, p. 82), and also: Emma INGALA. “Catachresis and Mis-being in Judith Butler and Étienne Balibar”.

10. The translation of *écart* is suggestively controversial, given that the term in French encompasses both the notion of “deviating” and “difference” and “fissure”. To avoid interferences from other schools of thought (Jacques Derrida’s *différance* or the sexual difference school), I have decided on the “neutrality” of the word ‘detour’.

## Political Acts: The Emancipation and Establishment of the Litigation of the Performance

After the moment of disagreement of the last scenes, Declan leaves his role as an actor and goes to the theatre, this time as a spectator. If throughout this article we have spoken of *Verfremdung* as merely diegetic, the demolition of the fourth wall triggers a double *Verfremdung*, which points to both the artificial economy of the performance and that of the audience.: “DECLAN: It’s aw tere eh. Siân. Gary. Me. Except no me. They even got a fucking ginger cunt tae play me, I’m no fucking ginger man, fucksake!” (2018: 63).

While Libby unfolds, on stage, the ending she had written for *Mouthpiece* — Declan kills himself in the face of injustice — Declan’s action, from the seats among the spectators, contradicts him:

DECLAN: Fuck! Off!

*Projected text:* DECLAN violently thrusts the knife across his neck

DECLAN, *still screaming, does not thrust the knife across his neck. A sharp change in the space, in light and sound* (2018: 69).

If Declan becomes a political subject at this point, it is not so much because he claims a part due to him — the equitable distribution of the profits of the play, or his recognition as a co-author — but because he establishes, through “[redefining] the field of experience” (Rancière, 1999: 40), a crack in the police distribution of the scene. In other words, his interruption introduces a litigation into the symbolic field of the performance, the result of the assertion of an irreducible disagreement — which we see in his challenge to the text projected on the stage. Thus, Declan’s intervention as a spectator leads to a meeting between police logic and the logic of equality; that is, between the prescriptive apparatus of representation and the radical idea that *anyone at all*, as a speaker or spectator, can interfere with it unpredictably.

From this perspective, Declan’s intervention reveals the hierarchy underlying the apparatus of representation, but also the possibility of challenging it: “LIBBY: I’m the writer. My job is to tell stories. “ / “DECLAN: What happens next is up tae me” (2018: 73). The fact that he can enunciate from the position of spectator — that is, from a space of litigation, outside the representation — suggests to us that, in the face of police compartmentalisation, a certain capacity for appearance and action prevails “without licence, without authority” (Fisher) by anyone of the speaking beings (Rancière). We see, then, that the establishment of the “voice of the voiceless” (the part of those without a part) works as a displacement operator both for the triggering of the end of the play regulated by Libby and for the institutional configuration of the theatre space in the dichotomous logic of “performance” and “audience”.

Finally, the play ends in a vanishing point: “because there’s never really an end, whatever happens / Stories don’t just end where you say they do. They keep going and they’re messy and they’re *real*” (2018: 73). *Mouthpiece*’s ‘reality’ is not exhausted in the ‘failure to represent’, or in its interruption, insofar as it makes clear the residual cuttings of its own unrepresentable dimension;

an “indeterminacy that must be preserved, which means the need to protect ourselves from power and, at the same time, the possibility of participating in it” (Birulés, 2007: 185 [own translation]). This is also expressed by Aragay, quoting Butler, in relation to the fundamental difference between representing the precariousness of the Other or showing the precariousness of representation in itself, which “cannot be fully exhausted in representation, but neither is it to be identified with the unrepresentable” (Aragay and Midekke, 2017: 6). The precariousness of the representation — the apparatus of distribution of the sensible, in our analysis —, as well as its opacity, provide for the detour and “the crossing of its borders, perforated here and there, in unpredictable ways” (Rancière to Quintana, 2018: 453 [own translation]). Hence Declan’s dissent can be seen as an act of political emancipation, not so much because it imbues a recognition of the marginalised figure of the Other as a difference but because it re-structures theatrical space in a heterogeneous clash between two worlds<sup>11</sup> without the need for a closure:

DECLAN: What happens next is — / Black out.

LIBBY: Black out.

*Black out* (2018: 55).



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11. The space limitation of the article makes me leave for future interventions the debate between “recognition” and disagreement, two concepts of central importance in the critical theory of contemporary society. See: Axel HONNETH. *Kampf um Anerkennung...* 1992; 2008; 2018 for a development of the critical theory of recognition, and the response produced by Rancière in the dialogues included in: Katia GENEL and Jean-Philippe DERANTY (Eds.). *Recognition or Disagreement...*

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