

A COMPANION TO
THE BIOPIC

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Can the Biopic Subjects Speak? *Disembodied Voices in The King's Speech and The Theory of Everything*

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'Can you hear me?' asks Stephen Hawking towards the end of *The Theory of Everything*. Slumping in a motorised wheelchair, the theoretical physicist (Eddie Redmayne) poses the question in a monotonic, computer-generated voice with staccato quality through his voice synthesiser to an eager audience. Even though he is physically present, his disembodied voice fills the auditorium in ways that suggest both his earth-bound reality and transcendental status (Figure 15.1). The question 'can you hear me' is a profound moment that invites various levels of interpretation.

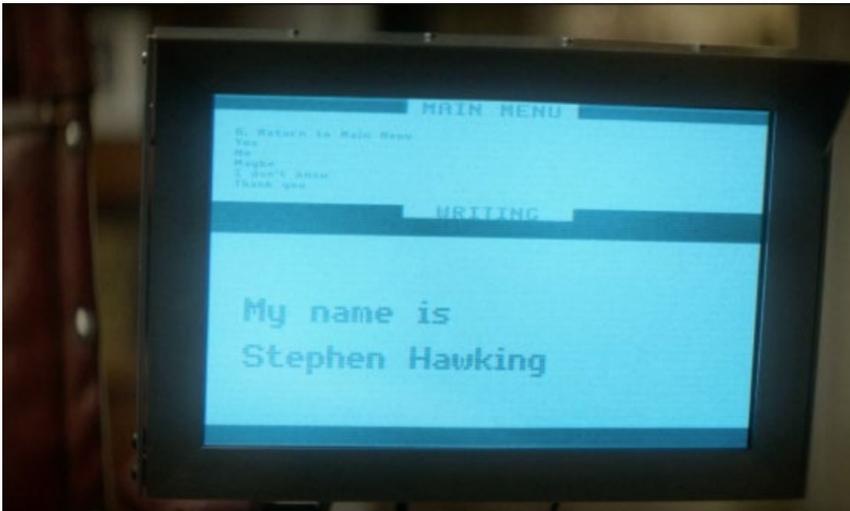


Figure 15.1 Stephen Hawking (Eddie Redmayne) gains a voice for the first time through a voice synthesiser computer in *A Theory of Everything* (dir. James Marsh, Working Title Films, 2015).

On a literal level it is a quotidian question about legibility and whether the speaker is audible. It is not unusual for speakers to begin their presentations with that question, but it bears symbolic significance at the end of this film, which generates consensual pleasure, as the audiences nod, acknowledge the presence of Hawking, and register their sympathy and admiration.

On a philosophical level, it asks both the audiences within and outside the film's universe whether they hear him and understand him after following the biopic subject around in his wheelchair through his tribulations and triumphs. Pity is easy to orchestrate with broad strokes of cinematographic moves, but empathy requires a deeper level of understanding and connection.

On a metacinematic level, it asks whether the biopic as a redemptive genre merely speaks for its subject or allows Hawking to speak for himself. *The Theory of Everything* seeks to make disability life narratives more legible and relatable through a more popular theme of romance. Disembodied voices often frame narratives about disabled figures. In the case of characters with speech impairment, communicating through a disembodied voice is not only an aspect of life but also a staple of cinematic narratives about them. The entertainment value of the film is balanced by its moral purchase, because the biopic is a genre that is self-aware, a genre that 'intently reflects on its own forms of life writing' (Vidal 2013, p. 15). Narratives of disability, like testimonies and coming-out stories, direct attention to 'the failure ... to address the particular needs of the disabled as denials of basic human rights' (Schaffer and Smith 2004, p. 2). In the case of *The Theory of Everything*, narratives of disability also betray their uneasy relationship to the 'troubled-white-male-genius' genre and taken-for-granted social privilege.

Perhaps a more urgent question for adaptation studies is whether the biopic subject can speak and be truly heard when their life story is adapted for the silver screen. Biographical motion pictures are fiction films dramatising the life of a historical or contemporary celebrity figure. As Robert Burgoyne suggests, the main drive in the biopic is reenactment, namely 'the act of imaginative recreation that allows the spectator to imagine they are 'witnessing again' the events of the past' (quoted in Vidal 2013, p. 3). The biopic as a genre thrives in the 'transformation of an image' rather than painting a stable, static one (Martin Barnier quoted in Vidal 2013, p. 3). This transformation is cinematic in nature, and it requires large-scale coordinated efforts of framing and choreography, which essentially creates a powerful spokesperson for the historical figure who is unable to 'talk back'.

Two recent biopics, *The King's Speech* (dir. Tom Hooper, 2010) and *The Theory of Everything* (dir. James Marsh, 2015), deal with figures who suffer from speech impairment. In this chapter, I make some preliminary observations of the patterns of representation in these films.

In dealing with vocal disorders, the films first dramatise the traumatic loss of voice, which leads to the erasure of King George VI's self-identity and erosion of Stephen Hawking's self-worth. Next, the films delve into their tribulations and the

quotidian aspect of how they gradually gain a voice through therapy, technology, and privileged social status despite their disability. The third and final stage deals in their redemption and heroic transformation. King George VI, now almost cured of his stuttering, gains more sound bite through his microphone and radio broadcasting. Hawking, now seamlessly infused with his voice synthesiser computer, addresses large live audiences. King George VI, played by Colin Firth, and Stephen Hawking, portrayed by Eddie Redmayne, now gain a new level of transcendental freedom and authority despite and also because of their disabilities. The performances of Firth and Redmayne are embedded within collective memories of the icons.

The King's Speech opens with a close-up of a radio announcer who is warming up in the studio as light classical music flows in the soundtrack. He rinses his mouth, gargles, and, after putting the glass back on the silver plate held by a handsomely dressed assistant, sprays his mouth. All the while light, classical music signalling the natural flow of the announcer's actions fills the studio. He sits down in front of an imposing and ominous 'torpedo' microphone and measures with both palms an ideal distance from his mouth to the microphone. As we would learn later, he is part of BBC's 'National Programme and Empire Services' in 1925. The shortwave Empire Service, the forerunner of BBC World Service, was in fact launched on 12 December 1932, from Daventry, England. The film takes some liberty in adapting several historical events and transposing them to different times to suit its purpose of situating King George VI's struggle to find a voice on radio in an era of global broadcast.

Meanwhile, a calm voice announces to a nervous Prince Albert, Duke of York (later King George VI) that 'you're live in two minutes, your royal highness'. Known to friends and family as Bertie, he stands against the wall next to his wife Elizabeth. The ontological weight of the adjective 'live' is felt in the sequence in the crosscuts between shots of the radio host and Bertie who is clearly petrified by the notion of public speaking. The medium close-up shows his eyes rolling nervously while he clutches his script. The radio host's elegant, confident, and elaborate but routine preparation before going live forms a sharp contrast to Bertie's amateurish nervousness and otherness. He hasn't said a word so far, but his subordinate position is evident from other characters' pitying gaze. They cajole Bertie to go on: 'Let the microphone do the work'. 'I'm sure you'll be splendid. Just take your time'.

Bertie is to speak at the closing ceremony of the 1925 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley Stadium (Figure 15.2). The camera lens initially takes Bertie's perspective as he approaches the imposing microphone. This is followed by a reverse shot of Bertie from the angle of his live audience. As he takes his place at the podium, an extreme close-up of the carbon ring microphone shows the imposing device framing Bertie's face, eyes frozen in anxiety. He is told to 'let the mic do the job', which only heightens his anxiety, because the job the mic will do is to amplify his disability and humiliation in front of a large crowd.



Figure 15.2 Prince Albert, Duke of York (Colin Firth) addressing the crowd with a stammer at the official closing of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley Stadium. *The King's Speech* (dir. Tom Hooper, See-Saw Films, 2011)

Bertie's stammering speech embarrasses him and the royal family in front of the live audience and thousands of listeners by the radio. The film uses static over radio and uncomfortable silence to heighten the tension as Bertie is unable to smoothly begin or complete a sentence. In several scenes, technicians check their own headphones, turn up the volume, check the gauges, and wonder if there is a technical failure as they hear only static. Bertie complains later in the scene before coronation that 'there'll be Mad King George the Stammerer, who let his people down so badly in their hour of need'. The horror of a vocally crippled king in public is evident. Thus begins Bertie's journey of self-discovery through therapy. He would go through several therapists. Just as he is giving up, his wife urges him to try working with the Australian speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush).

Bertie's speech impairment becomes not just an annoyance or inconvenience but an insurmountable obstacle in public speaking and particularly radio broadcast where the voice carries all the weight. The new technology of radio is portrayed as both a powerful, enabling tool of empire building and an imposing threat for stutters. Throughout the film, from Bertie's first public humiliation at Wembley in 1925 to his first war speech at the end of the film, there are crane shots and close-ups of racked transmitter controls, each marked with remote locations. The radio control room mirrors a war room where the Empire exerts influence over and controls its territories from Jamaica to Kenya. If shortwave radio broadcasting is reaching every corner of the globe, so too is Bertie's public humiliation at a global media event.

Having worked with multiple therapists without any result, Bertie is reluctant to receive treatment from Lionel Logue. In their first session, Logue bets Bertie a shilling that he can in fact read without a stammer right away, and he would record his speech as evidence. Logue puts headphones on Bertie and asks him to read Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' speech into a Silvertone Home Voice Recorder. However, music is blaring through the headphones. Not only is Bertie not able to hear himself, the film's audience too can only hear the overture from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* with increasing volume on the soundtrack (Figure 15.3). From Bertie's point of view, the music is only blaring through the headphones he is wearing. He cannot hear himself, but Logue can. The film recreates the discrepancy between seeing and hearing, which Bertie is experiencing, by placing the audience in the visual perspective of Logue – who is present in the room – but giving us Bertie's aural perspective where the music drowns out his recitation. Believing that he has failed again and humiliated himself, Bertie stops half way and decides to leave without listening to the recording, only to be persuaded by Logue to take the record home as a souvenir.



Figure 15.3 Bertie (Colin Firth) reciting the speech 'To be or not to be' from Hamlet during his first speech therapy session with Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush) while hearing Mozart played on headphones. *The King's Speech* (dir. Tom Hooper, See-Saw Films, 2011).

Bertie's father King George V, who has mastered the genre of radio broadcasting, refers to radio broadcasting as 'voices out of the air', disembodied voices that, without corporeal presence and face-to-face interactions, serve as a technological extension of the royal presence. The mediated voice of a benign emperor can reach every

corner of the Empire. The listeners experience this 'voice out of the air' as a medium of authority and, in Jacques Lacan's terms, a 'catalyst of desire' (1998, p. 126). The listener is passive in front of the message being delivered. Sartre theorises the broadcaster's voice as a mystifying, univocal one: 'The broadcaster's voice is based on ... a reifying relation in which the voice is given as praxis and constitutes the listener as the object of praxis' (1976, p. 272). The domestic space where the speaker on radio is situated comfortably is linked up to a vast, imperial dialogic space. Aware of the fact that the king's symbolic role is far greater than his political authority, George V makes a landmark speech on Christmas Day 1923 (the film transposes it to 1934), in which he consciously showcases his personable and imperial personas:

Through one of the marvels of modern science, I am enabled, this Christmas Day, to speak to all my peoples throughout the Empire. ... I speak now from my home and from my heart to you all. To men and women so cut off by the snows, the deserts or the seas, that only voices out of the air can reach them; to those cut off from fuller life by blindness, sickness or infirmity; ... to all, to each, I wish a happy Christmas.

Immediately following this scene, the generous tone gives way to George V's complaint about having to 'ingratiate' himself with the public in a new age of global radio broadcasting, becoming 'one of the ... basest of all creatures, an actor!' He tells Bertie that 'before now all a king had to do was to look respectable and not fall off his horse'. Bertie joins his father immediately after the broadcast. The BBC microphone is still on the desk, serving as a reminder of his father's ability and his own impotence. As Bertie's older brother, the Prince of Wales, is deemed unfit for the throne, George V urges Bertie to overcome his stammer and fill in. The first task he gives Bertie is to read his Christmas speech for practice. His father's impatient and forceful coaching makes Bertie's stammer even worse, and Bertie stumbles over the phrase 'I am enabled'.

Frustrated, Bertie goes to his study to replay the disc from his first session with Logue. Again another imposing device overshadows Bertie. This time it is the large bell of the gramophone, shot from above, which echoes the opening sequence of the film where Bertie is diminished by the large ring microphone. While the microphone collects and transmits sound, the gramophone reproduces and magnifies the recorded sound or radio signals. The audience, Bertie, and his wife Elizabeth hear for the first time the recording where, as all are pleasantly surprised, Bertie reads the 'to be or not to be' speech fluently without stammer. Hamlet's question has one obvious answer: go back to Logue, overcome the stammer, and 'be' a radio voice rather than 'not be'. Of course, radio is more challenging because it is live, while the replayable medium of record grants the speaker more control. Logue's choice of the soliloquy from *Hamlet* may seem random, but it is uncanny and apt in the context of the biopic, because the play is about voices in the air and a father's imposing shadow and demand. An amateur Shakespearean actor while in Australia, Logue plays educational games with his children. The kids have to guess the Shakespearean

character and play he is portraying. Now, through Shakespeare's curative power and Logue's therapy, Bertie, too, can be enabled by radio technology like his father, paralleling Hamlet's journey, and, more importantly, consolidate and sustain the image of the Empire and British identity.

While Logue's experiment might work even if the text is not Shakespearean (because the key is isolation of the potentially stuttering subject from any disturbing feedback), Shakespeare here has important symbolic value. Ironically, it is also precisely when Bertie cannot hear himself and thus Shakespeare's text that his stammer stops. Cursing has been shown to have the same 'curing' effect in another scene where Logue deliberately provokes Bertie to curse, telling him a public school boy could do better.

The King's Speech appropriates Shakespeare's cultural capital and reparative function in this therapy scene. There are other cinematic instances where Shakespearean texts are bestowed curative power, such as the stuttering Chorus in *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden, 1998) As he moves along in delivering the Prologue of *Romeo and Juliet*, the Chorus's stammer gradually disappears. Eventually he is able to finish reciting the speech in front of the live audience. Another example is the Singaporean film adaptation titled *Chicken Rice War* (dir. Cheah Chee Kong, aka CheeK, 2000). In a high-school rehearsal of *Romeo and Juliet*, a stuttering student, Fenson Wong, asks his drama coach if he can play Romeo. The young lady playing Juliet, Audrey Chan, rolls her eyes and challenges her classmate: 'What makes you think that you can play Romeo? You don't have the looks, and you can't even speak properly'. Eventually, Fenson wins the role and gets rid of his stutter through reciting and performing Shakespeare. While recitation of Shakespearean passages seems to have 'cured' Fenson of his stuttering, other scenes expose the instability of any illusion of Shakespeare's universal utility. *The King's Speech* is simultaneously a reenactment of George VI's stammer and of the value of Shakespeare.

In the final scene of *The King's Speech*, George VI prepares to address the country on radio in 1939 when Britain declares war with Germany. Logue is present again, just as he would be during the king's numerous speeches during World War II. The king and his therapist move through Buckingham Palace to a small studio with padded walls. In this carefully orchestrated third and final stage of the biopic subject's redemption and triumph, the king runs into Winston Churchill (Timothy Spall) who reveals that he too has overcome a speech impediment, a lisp (a speech defect in which *s* is pronounced like *th*). Significantly, the same reverse shots around the large ring microphone in the opening sequence are used in this scene. Bertie goes into the small studio with only Logue. Bertie not only speaks into the microphone but looks through it to his therapist, now friend, Lionel Logue, as Logue urges him: 'Forget everything else, and just say it to me. Say it to me as a friend'. Bertie's script has been so meticulously marked up that it resembles a musical score. The cues signal not only dramatic effect in delivery but elocution and letters or words that Bertie tends to stumble over.



Figure 15.4 Logue (Geoffrey Rush) ‘conducts’ King George VI (Colin Firth) during his first wartime speech on radio in *The King’s Speech* (dir. Tom Hooper, See-Saw Films, 2011).

The soundtrack is as important as silence, static, and stuttering. With the rhythmic second movement of Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 7* on the soundtrack, Logue conducts the king as he reads the speech to the compelling pulsation that persists throughout the piece (Figure 15.4). Logue’s hand gestures and the pauses the king takes synch up with the symphony, beginning with a repetitive rhythmic figure in the calm melody played by cellos. The tempo of this particular movement is a moderately paced *allegretto* that hints at an underlying melancholy but not depressing sorrow. The constant repetition of themes and rhythm interweaves counter melodies, rising up through the instruments and sustaining an ominous undertone. Just like in the ‘to be or not to be’ scene, music here is both a cinematic element and a heuristic curative device for the character. The king’s measured, slow-paced delivery of his speech ‘in this grave hour’ is well received, and he uses his impairment to his advantage. As the king and Logue leave the studio, Logue points out that the king still has difficulty with ‘w’, to which the king responds that ‘I had to throw in a few so they’d know it was me’. The light-hearted response reveals a dilemma in the redemptive transformation of an iconic image – the stuttering king. It is a dilemma of authenticity and representation. Without his stammer, is King George VI still the worthy, marketable biopic subject? If a new accent or voice takes over Hawking’s robotic voice, will he be as recognisable in popular culture as he is now?

As Jen Harvie writes in *Staging the UK*, biopics often participate in the creation of national identities which are ‘neither biologically nor territorially given; rather they are creatively produced or staged’ (2005, p. 2). In the years leading up to Brexit, films such as *The King’s Speech* choreograph a sense of belonging and national identity, building imagined communities through the literary and cinematic genres of celebrity biography and biopic.

The three teleological stages of the downfall of an icon, the heroic struggles to overcome the impairment, and the eventual redemption of the figure can also be observed in *The Theory of Everything*, which is based on Jane Hawking's 2007 memoir. Like King George VI who scrambles to overcome his stammer when he is called upon to prove he is royal material in order to supplant his brother and father, Stephen Hawking is diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a motor neuron disease, just as he is on his way to a promising career as a physicist and beginning a romantic relationship with Jane. As he rises to fame, his condition deteriorates and, together with his wife, they fight a losing battle that also leads to the deterioration of their marriage. While George VI is no longer around to endorse or repudiate the biopic about his life, Hawking visited the set a few times and, after seeing the film, reportedly said to screenwriter Anthony McCarten that the film is 'broadly true'.

While *The Theory of Everything* does not focus squarely on voice and speech in the same way *The King's Speech* does, the robotic computerised voice has become such an iconic part of Hawking's image in popular culture that the scenes where he loses and gains a voice bear symbolic weight in this biopic. Both films dramatise the disjunction between the mind and the body. Oral communication is regarded as more authentic, more immediate and instantaneous than writing. Without the crucial function of speech, an individual would not be able to share their thoughts or demonstrate the intelligence they bear in spite of their physical disabilities. *Theory of Everything* chronicles the deterioration of Hawking's conditions from his days as a doctoral student in Cambridge, to when he starts using a wheelchair, to the period when his speech slurs so much that Jane, the only person who can understand him, translates much of his speech for him.

It is important to note that speech is the last of Hawking's autonomous abilities to go. He loses the ability to walk without aid, and then he loses the ability to stand up. However, he is still able to talk even if his body is gradually immobilised. Similar to the paralyzed Will Traynor (Sam Claflin) in *You Before Me* (dir. Thea Sharrock, 2016) who is able to talk and has a sharp tongue, Hawking may be trapped in his wheelchair and require round-the-clock care, but he is capable of oral communication which, as the film suggests, is his last piece of humanity. Being able to speak allows characters around him to humanise him and to respect his intellectual prowess even if his body is paralysed. As Jean-Dominique Bauby points out in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly: A Memoir of Life in Death*, life in paralysis is torture. After suffering a stroke to the brainstem, Bauby is completely paralysed except for his left eye, but his intellect is intact. What is cruel is that he is fully aware of his surroundings, but he cannot move or talk. He refers to his paralysed body as his diving bell, while his mind takes flight like a butterfly. A pivotal scene in *The Theory of Everything* is Hawking's initial diagnosis after he falls in the college courtyard one day. Hawking seems more concerned about his brain than his deteriorating muscular function. The doctor tells him that the ALS doesn't affect the brain, and his thoughts would remain intact, but over time 'no one will know what they are' as Hawking loses the ability to talk or swallow.

To highlight this dichotomy of mind and body, *The Theory of Everything* carefully contrasts scenes of Hawking's tribulations with scenes dramatising his achievements

in physics, such the domestic scene when he realises that he needs a wheelchair during the family celebration of his passing his doctoral thesis defence, and the scenes of his continuous rise to fame thanks to his pioneering work on the black hole.

After Hawking receives a tracheotomy in Bordeaux due to pneumonia, he wakes up unable to speak. Jane insists on the surgery to save his life, for 'Stephen must live. I will see to it that he gets everything he needs'. Loss of speech has the most profound impact on Hawking even when compared to his physical paralysis. For once in the film's narrative, he is depressed and passive. Jane tries to train him to use a spelling board to communicate, and even though Hawking has memorised the locations of each letter on the board, he refuses to play along. Eventually, a new nurse, Elaine, shows up and is able to get him to open up.

In a later scene he receives a built-in voice synthesiser attached to his wheelchair which he could operate via a clicker with his thumb. Hawking quickly masters the synthesiser, which becomes an extension of his self. Interestingly, his first sentence is a form of assertion and self-declaration: 'My name is Stephen Hawking'. He announces the authentic presence of his self as a human being. Jane exclaims, however, that the accent of the synthesiser is American, as if it erases Hawking's English identity at the cost of the emerging self. By contrast, in the parallel, equally magical moment of redemption, George VI reads the most iconic passage from Shakespeare, 'to be or not to be'. At the end of the day, neither American accent nor English canon matter because self-identities are always already artificially and technologically constructed. The scene where the mute Hawking speaks again cements the icon around which the film revolves. The scene also calls to mind George V's Christmas speech in *The King's Speech* where the 'marvels of modern science' enable individuals and become not only a prosthetic device but also an integral part of a new self.

Unlike *The King's Speech*, which spares no effort in showcasing George VI's therapy, *The Theory of Everything* does not delve into details of how Hawking masters the voice synthesiser and his new mode of existence. The film, however, does spend time canvassing the more iconic images of his wheelchair and robotic voice, and the more palatable moments of triumph and redemption. As part of the tour of his book *A Brief History of Time*, Hawking addresses an enthusiastic live audience.

Two moments stand out in the extended sequence in the auditorium. Upon appearing on stage, Hawking asks if the audience can hear him. The monotonic, robotic voice from the synthesiser provides a stark contrast to his animated facial expression and a grin of mischief. Posture and camera angle create and reinforce the most familiar image of the genius physicist in popular culture. Above all else, the question draws attention to its own metacinematic ontology. In the beginning of Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), Alisdair asks his new wife rather unsympathetically and impatiently: 'Can you hear me?' The mute Scottish pianist Ada just arrived on the New Zealand beach after a long voyage. She has been sold into the marriage. Ada relies on her daughter Flora to translate her hand gestures. Similar to *The Theory of Everything* and *The King's Speech*, the film dramatises the popular assumption that someone with speech impairment must be less human, barbaric, or less

intelligent. There is an implicit civilised-savage binary in the perception of speech impairment. The question ‘can you hear me?’ therefore takes on a sense of urgency.

Later, during the question and answer session, a woman drops a pen, and for a brief moment Hawking fantasises standing up with ease and reaching over to pick up the pen for her. He goes on to deliver an inspirational short speech: ‘There should be no boundaries to human endeavor. . . . However bad life may seem, there is always something you can do, and succeed at. While there’s life, there is hope.’ The film makes a clearly redemptive move when Hawking is introduced before his lecture as having defied ‘every expectation both scientific and personal’.

The positive portrayal of Hawking’s personality and the overall optimistic tone, especially in the film’s ending, reveal the fundamental dilemma of representing disabled biopic subjects on screen. The entertainment industry embraces disabled characters – both historical and fictional – who transcend their limitations in one way or another. However, disabled biopic subjects can’t speak, even if they are still alive. Able-bodied actors playing disabled characters often win Oscars because it is reassuring to see them convincingly portray disability and get up on their feet to accept the award.

The Theory of Everything navigates the fine line between public disgust of voice disability and the craving for what might be called ‘supercrip’ figures – figures who are defined by their physical limitations but who, because of their disability, are perceived as possessing extraordinary talents and abilities. By painting the ‘crip’ figure as inspirational, the supercrip narrative makes the stories more palatable to the able-bodied viewers. Their stories become more than just unredeemable physical suffering. At first blush these narratives seem to be engaged in a move of reclamation, but as Robert McRuer demonstrates, disability narratives can betray a sense of compulsory able-bodiedness.¹

Narratives of disability also betray their uneasy relationship to the ‘troubled-white-male-genius’ genre and taken-for-granted social privilege despite the obstacles they face. The male biographic subjects of both films rely on their wives in their struggle, and yet both films sidestep their wives’ efforts. As Dennis Bingham’s (2010) study of biopics demonstrates, disturbingly women’s biographies on film often displace their subjects’ achievement onto their male partners or gravitate to ‘women more famous for suffering than for anything they accomplished’ (p. 214). That is certainly the case in the *King’s Speech* and *The Theory of Everything*. Hawking’s first wife Jane (Felicity Jones) chooses to stay with him despite familiar and social pressure about the pessimistic prognosis of Hawking’s condition. However, the film does not offer a sympathetic portrayal of the divorce of Jane and Stephen Hawking. As a result, in real life after the release of the film, Jane Hawking has been vocal about the film’s misrepresentation of their marriage. Bertie’s wife Elizabeth plays an active role in locating an appropriate therapist for him but does not receive any credit. In the final scene after Bertie’s successful radio broadcast, a new musical motif is introduced in the soundtrack to accentuate the moment where Bertie becomes kingly, the second movement of Beethoven’s piano concerto in E-flat major, op. 73, the ‘Emperor’. As Bertie and Elizabeth walk onto the balcony, the piano motif emerges from a

sustained orchestral hymn, weaving fragile figures in sixteenth and triplet eighth notes. The film concludes with a shot of Bertie waving at the crowd from a balcony with his family, fading out on Logue in the background with a satisfied look, thus excluding Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter) quite literally from the picture. The epilogue titles state: ‘Lionel was with the King for every wartime speech. Through his broadcasts, George VI became a symbol of national resistance. Lionel and Bertie remained friends for the rest of their lives’ (01:51:50).

Such films create a collective feel-good factor in some form of social work through cinematically produced fictitious memories that are mired in the genre’s own sense of self-importance. As Belén Vidal theorises, the biopic ‘trades on a sense of authenticity that stems from the actor’s body itself’ (2013, p. 11). Through the actors’ embodied reenactment and through the disembodied voices of King George VI and Hawking, the films engineer social consensus among audiences who may not agree with King George VI’s politics or Hawking’s atheism. In addition to capitalising on audiences’ voyeuristic desire, *The King’s Speech* as celebrity biography also transacts in assumed links between national pride and the privilege of the royal character who ‘has always [already] been a privileged discursive site that can keep together narrations of self-development as well as of nation-formation’ (Pennacchia 2014, p. 35).

Of all the faculties, the human voice in particular is most often taken for granted. It is an invisible but most fundamental extension of a person’s self and identity. Having a voice, both physically and metaphorically, is the foundation of one’s human identity. Like all able-bodied privileges, possessing the ability to speak is as essential and natural as breathing, and one would not notice it until one is silenced or otherwise unable to speak. Vocal deficiency can be as unsettling as corporeal otherness, even though expressive language disability is less immediately obvious. Patients suffering from speech and language impairment face prejudice from all sectors and are often assumed to have low intelligence. King George VI, working with his speech therapist Lionel Logue, and Stephen Hawking, relying on the care and translation of his slurred speech through his wife, speak in disembodied voices through cinematic technologies of representation. The disembodiment signals both their disabled status and transcendental status. In the case of Hawking, after he loses his voice due to tracheotomy and pneumonia, he speaks more fluently than before through a human-machine interface and with the help of nurse Elaine Mason. The films carefully skirt the edges of public disgust and pity of differently abled bodies: how the stuttering King George VI struggles to find his voice and adapt to the then emerging and increasingly important radio broadcasting technology and how the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking speaks through his now iconic voice synthesiser.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks the rhetorical question, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ in her famous essay on the construction of colonial subjects. Colonialists often claim that they ‘come in peace’ with benevolent intentions to civilise or rehabilitate the local population. However, even the most benevolent effort to give the oppressed people a voice can end up replicating the silencing effect it attempts to combat. Similarly, as an immersive representational practice with a worldwide audience, narrative films and documentary films, such as Benjamin Cleary’s *Academy*

Award-winning *Stutterer* (2015), have the power to raise awareness of critical issues by giving voice to socially marginalised groups. In the case of mainstream biopics, there are two strains of narrative, namely aestheticising suffering and political condescension, as in, for example, glorifying the sufferings of disabled figures while taking over their life narratives without their own voices. In their effort to make life narratives relatable to the broadest audience possible, biopics sometimes rob their subjects of their voices.

Note

1. For further analysis of this issue, see Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, New York University Press, 2006.

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