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Demagogic Speech And Rhetorical Emptiness.

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Demagogic speech and rhetorical emptiness: minding the political gap through *Radikal karaoke* by Belen Gache

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INTRODUCTION

The third volume of the Electronic Literature Collection (ELC3) is home to *Radikal Karaoke*¹ by Argentine-Spanish artist Belen Gache, originally made in 2011. This work offers a criticism of political speech by transforming it into a karaoke, consequently posing a question about the decreasing “value” of this *locus* (Grossberg, 2012).

Radikal Karaoke is an interactive online device that displays a video in loop while the user/reader speaks/shouts using a microphone and randomly pressing the keyboard. Specifically, the video shows people applauding, explosions, spectators watching a show, aliens, slaves, etc., and at the same time, the user/reader is pressing the keyboard following some instructions and reading a written text passing along the bottom of the screen. Depending on the volume of the voice and the use of the keyboard, the video will produce different images, colors and sounds. We can observe performative aspects of the users who, when interacting with the machine, reveal “the monolingualism of the other” (Derrida, 1997).

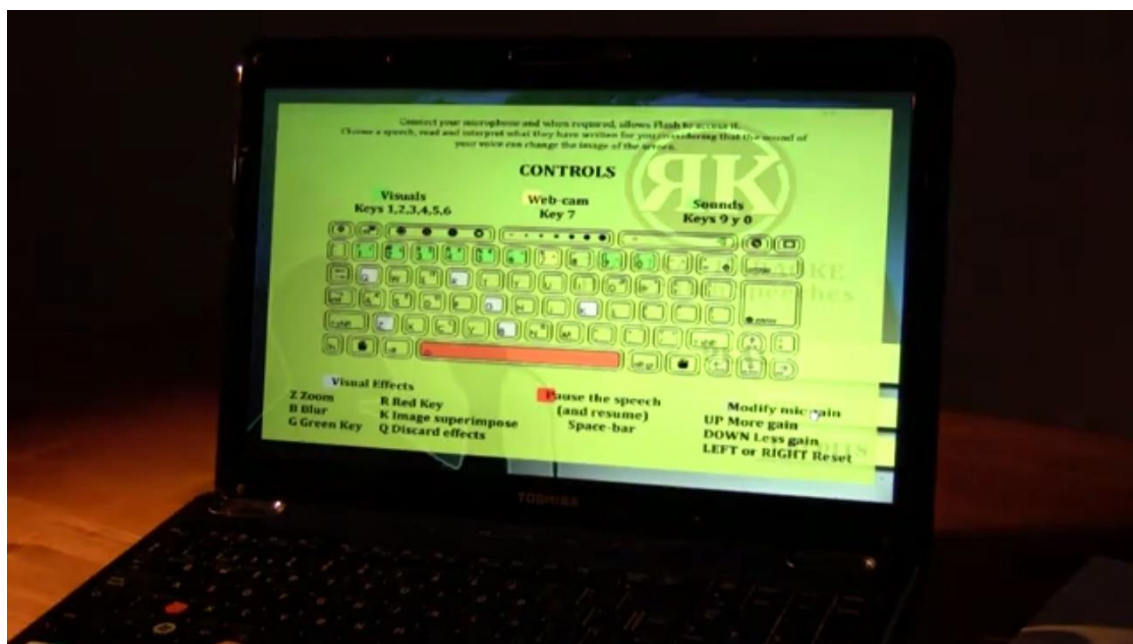


Figure 1: *Radikal Karaoke* screenshot: Controls

¹ Available here: <http://belengache.net/rk/> Also in this web page there are videos where Belen Gache performs her work herself. The work is part of the third volume of the Electronic Literature Collection (ELC): <http://collection.eliterature.org/3/work.html?work=radikal-karaoke>

The author clearly marks a position related to the need of intervention of those who consume this technopoetic (Kozak 2015). As part of an artistic program, Gache restores its specific place for political action in a world overrun by automated discourses that function mechanically as machines (Groys, 2016). Gache's work poses the question about the indiscriminate consumption of nonsensical political speeches and aims to involve us as part of this parody (Hutcheon, 1988). What is the relationship between current political practices and their social reception? Regarding this question, this paper analyses the way Gache focuses on the rhetorical emptiness of hegemonic discourses renewing the debate about the connection between demagogic politics and automated society (Berardi, 2014). The objective is to identify the strategic use of this device to make people take on an active role in the execution of poetry through karaoke and to denounce the political use of propaganda through an excess of linguistic nonsense and over-saturation of media space.

1. THE CONVERSION: from demagogic political practices to radikal karaoke

Here we will first develop what we call “the conversion” of demagogic political practices into radikal karaoke. In regard to this idea, *Radikal Karaoke* is a technopoetic (Kozak, 2015) that poses a question: what does somebody do when speaking as part of the political class? The work suggests that it is all built into demagogic political practices that focus on keywords and images leading to a passive reception: “Speeches are structured on emphatic and demagogic formulae and linguistic clichés reproducing themselves as viruses” (Gache, 2011, s/p). This is why the work aims to awaken the audience into a karaoke.

A karaoke is a popular form of entertainment, offered typically by bars and clubs, in which people take turns to sing popular songs into a microphone over pre-recorded backing tracks. In addition, Gache expanded the functions of regular karaoke - a vintage technology that had its heyday in the entertainment industry in the 70s, although it is still reverting as a practice-, using other tools of present times such as the computer itself.

Based on this reproduction device, Gache offers a Derridean idea: to reach the difference (*la différance*) in the repetition of texts -songs, discourses, poems. The fact that the author chooses to use a “k” in ‘radikal’ -instead of following the regular spelling “radical” with a “c”- could be related to the double “k” of karaoke, which seems the most visible cause for this choice. But also, this device of repetition always has moments of discourse deviation that are very productive in their excess, as we could see with the “a” introduced by Derrida (1967) difference / *différance*.



Figure 2: A user performing *Radikal Karaoke*

A deviation radically converts the political proposal by means of its stereotyped discourse: to make people drowsy with repeated demagogic “songs” that everybody seems to remember but nobody analyzes deeply. Through this operation, that seeks to plunge people into drowsiness, politicians and governments satisfy their main objective: to bring about lack of sense and hinder critical thinking in the audience. That is why karaoke seems both -a way to focus on the spectacularity of politics and the device to give the opportunity to people to have a voice in this decreasing *locus*: “En la era del teleprompter el discurso político es más karaoke que teatro y por más *gravitas* que el andamiaje del gobierno le otorgue, sería más honesto ver este espectáculo en un bar.”² (Flores, 2017, s/p)

Reshaping the textual past through a postmodern parody (Hutcheon, 1988), which entails an ironic rupture with the conscience of that past, Gache proposes three transcriptions -in Spanish [figure 3] or in English- we could perform to shake off drowsiness: SPEECH 1 “We are the charming gardeners” (in English); “Ex Africa semper aliquid novi” (in Spanish). SPEECH 2: “Things that you will never see in Australia” (in English); “Mirad cómo Kate presume de su anillo” (in Spanish). SPEECH 3: “We have no past, you have no present” (in English); “Es tiempo de escuchar a los guacamayos” (in Spanish). With these speeches Gache’s work searches to denaturalize clichés and stereotyped phrases that circulate as meaningless slogans, while being uncritically received (Gache, 2014).



Figure 3: Three speeches to choose in Spanish, in *Radikal karaoke* by Belen Gache

Ideally, karaoke seems to be a device that duplicates lyrics that are already known “by memory” and when playing the song, the singer completes the melody provided by the machine with words. However, Gache shows that what is important to say, is the translation of what we think we are repeating every time we speak. Therefore, there is no way to imitate speeches without a deviation, because the conception of language itself as a hallucination (Derrida, 1967) provides a critical view of stereotypes to current political practices. Gache is minding the gap by helping us not to be robots, not to be just passive listeners.

² “In a teleprompter era, the politic discourse is more karaoke than theatre and no matter how much *gravitas* the government scaffolding, it would be more honest to watch this spectacle in a bar.” (Our translation).

2. THE ACTION: facing rhetorical emptiness, introducing performance

Radikal Karaoke intends to elicit political speeches from its users. Gache built a machinery to perform the rhetorical emptiness related to politics with different voices and bodies, and in this search, the users subversively transform the discursive hegemony. As Flores admits: “Nuestra clase política nos lee frases trilladas y nosotros como público le damos una fracción de nuestra atención a ver si sale algo nuevo o por lo menos genuino.”³ (Flores, 2017, s/p).

For the work to exist, something stimulating has to happen, something related to our own bodies that has been repressed by the political “circus” that entertains us. When a speaker pronounces the discourse offered by the machine, he/she performs the words that subject himself or herself to stupor and uncritical attitude. This is the way in which performance turns emptiness into alertness, using the rhetorical mechanism of politics.

Traditions, conquests, revolutions: the active voice of people who play karaoke is the way to express a criticism of emptiness. The work welcomes the performance of those who -being fragile in their monoligualism- come as guests to the *locus* of politics. And although this is just a game -just a discourse and then it is over-, this language is hospitable *to the other* (Derrida 1996), making way for critical thinking regarding the lack of sense shown by politics. If we come back to the Japanese meaning of karaoke we will find, once again, the idea of emptiness in its morphemes: *kara* (empty), *oke* (orchestra). Gache seems to return to these etymological meaning to revert it, wondering why words do not matter. And in addition, Gache presents the music as a body that could be used as a partiture that gave ideal-universal instructions to an orchestra but played each time in a different way (Gache, 2014). What she tries to develop is certain consciousness about what we listen to and what we could say when we change back these stereotypes.



Figure 4: Images of explosions while performing the work *Radikal karaoke* by Belén Gache

³ “Our political class reads trite phrases and we as a public give a fraction of our attention to see if something new or at least genuine comes out.” (Our translation).

The material of the poem (orality, writing, drawing), the performance of readers/users, the interaction, the generativity, the listening, the form acquired by the discourse point to a deconstruction of the entertainment industry used by politics. The author clearly marks a position related to the need of intervention of those who consume these speeches without playing any role but that of listeners. Karaoke forces you to say something with your own voice, using the same device you used before, when you were just a receptor. As a consequence, poetic language restores the possibility of political action through the same machinery that causes the rhetorical emptiness denounced before. In the repetition of those three discourses of the contemporary highly urbanized society, Gache recovers an organic form of language that allows the appearance of new senses and provides a place for a rebellious poetics. These speeches are pirated, showing how, once given, the giver of information loses control of the way it can be used by the performer (Errington, 2008).

The body becomes a place of enunciation of the demagogy of political *locus*. The work invites us to attend a costume party where all voices are heard and the same discourses get repeated once and again until all sense is lost. The parody consists in facing the distortions of what seems to be a “serious truth” -the political speech- by repeating common sense not only with words but also by means of images and sounds (Taylor, 2017). Here Gache is minding the gap of our past turning us into protagonists of our present through a parody.

3. THE PROJECTION: from the decreasing of politics to the increasing of art

To conclude, we describe two inversions that are very productive to expand the use of art by means of new technology, to change the demagogic speeches denounced by Gache.

Firstly, what contemporary art can achieve is a reversion of the unidirectional movement of the political discourses that dominated the way of making politics in the 20th century i.e., a leader appealing to the masses through the new technologies of the time -radio and television-. Now, that multitude uses the technical possibilities in the opposite way: it demands from politicians through an insubordinate use of art (Brea, 2002).

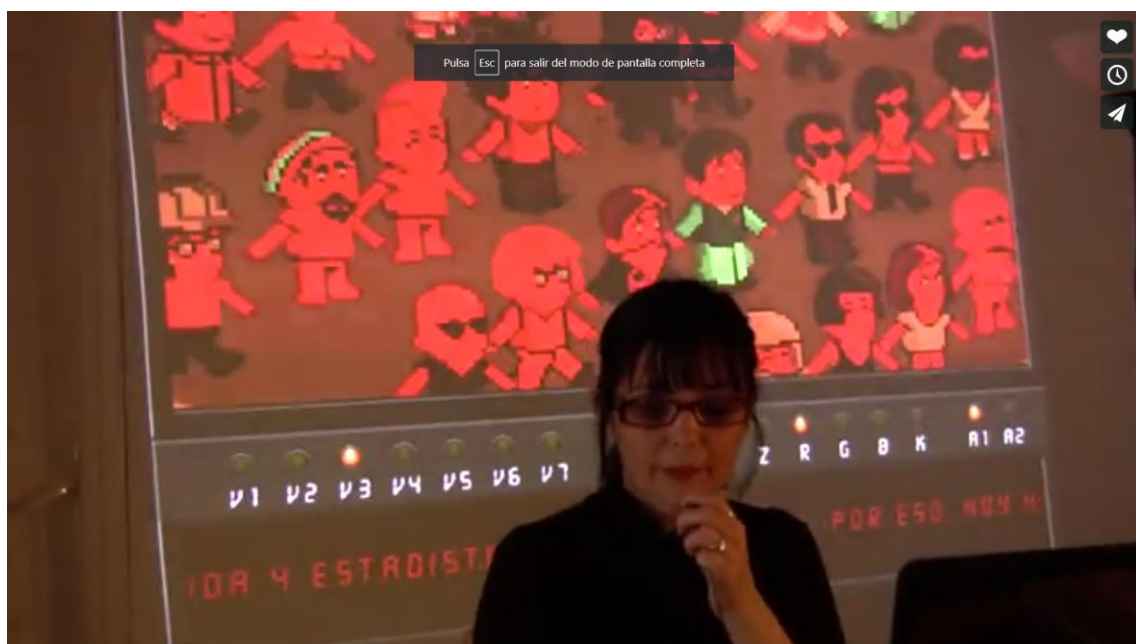


Figure 5: The insubordinate use of art in *Radikal karaoke* by Belen Gache

In the second place, there is an inversion of the artist as a hacker (Gradin, 2015), achieved by making new contents –that have been silenced by political interests– go viral. Gache suggests using “the other side of technology” to subvert passive listening and to give speeches new and unthought-of senses that turn art into a territory to experiment upon. Drawing a parallel with the incipient growth of electronics during the last decades of the 20th century, Burroughs stated in the seventies that language was a virus whose only cure was silence or literature: “Borren las palabras para siempre’ (...) la palabra literaria fortifica el organismo contra las formas más insidiosas del mal; las palabras de los políticos, de los militares, de los comunicadores sociales, de los médicos, los psiquiatras”⁴ (Gamerro en Burroughs, 1970, 26).

In this inversion, we could find the political projection of art when interacting with machines. As Brea (2002) says, the key is how to subversively intervene in the processes of social construction of knowledge, speaking the language of the same system that produces a uniform and unique instrumentalization of the work of the people. Finally, Gache is minding the gap in machines to allow us to be heard.

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⁴ “Delete words for ever’ (...) the literary word fortifies the organism against the most insidious forms of evil; the words of politicians, military men, social communicators, doctors, psychiatrists” (Our translation).

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