Formal Analysis of *The King’s Speech*

By

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The psychological turmoil of the main character of *The King’s Speech* is visualized through the artistic and symbolic use of many aspects of mise-en-scène such as framing, camera angles, and shallow and deep focus. The film’s subjective point of view is also emphasized and projected using these techniques. Much of the film is shot from the perspective of “Bertie,” who later becomes King George VI. The progress made by Bertie in order to overcome his lifelong and debilitating speech problem is shown through the way he is framed throughout the film along with the subjective point of view that emphasizes his inner struggles.

Tom Hooper’s *The King’s Speech* tells the true story of King George VI (played by Colin Firth) and how he came to power at one of the most formidable times in England’s history. Right on the cusp of World War II, his brother became the first royal to abdicate the throne after their father’s death. This transition from Prince to King is made even more stressful by his lifelong and incapacitating stammer. Many attempts have been made in the past to improve his public speaking, but to no avail. It is only when he meets Lionel Logue (played by Geoffrey Rush), an unorthodox but highly successful speech therapist from Australia that Bertie finally begins to gain confidence in his leadership skills as well as his public speaking. Lionel insists on total equality, a concept that Bertie has clearly never had with his previous therapists or anyone in general. This disparity is shown explicitly in one of the first scenes in the film, especially when contrasted with Bertie’s interaction with Lionel later on in the film.

Throughout the film Bertie is usually framed unconventionally, often symbolically portraying him to be smaller and weaker than the other characters in the scene. This is sometimes shown through an unorthodox use of the rule of thirds that places Bertie so close to the edge of the frame that he feels almost trapped against it. He is often shown from high angles, emphasizing his powerlessness against his impediment. These all symbolize his inner battle
against his stammer and the everyday psychological turmoil that comes along with this battle. In
the second scene of the film we get a glimpse at the measures he has taken to try and overcome
this particular ailment when we meet one of his many speech therapists. There is an establishing
shot and then immediately after is a shot of Bertie in which the camera is angling down at him,
smoking a cigarette.

There are a number of shots such as this, helping to establish and convey Bertie’s internal
struggle, in the following sequence. There is a short series of wide shots establishing the room
and the space. Bertie is seated in front of the speech therapist in the middle of the room while his
wife, Elizabeth the Duchess of York (played by Helena Bonham Carter), is seated against the
wall, a corgi sitting by her chair. The speech therapist himself is shot with a wide-angle lens that
is shooting him from below. These two elements combine very precisely to give a distinct
impression of dominance and intimidation. Since the subjective point of view has already been
established, this view of the speech therapist makes sense in context of the scene. To Bertie, at
this exact moment, the speech therapist is something of a threat. He has spent his entire life
trying to cope with his stammer. He has seen multiple speech therapists, and has become so
jaded and cynical about the whole process that he usually gives up before he has even started.
His distorted view of the speech therapist portrays these feelings as well as his fear of
embarrassment and humiliation by someone who he clearly views as intimidating and looming.

The initial wide-shots are followed by a rack focus shot from Bertie’s worried expression
to the tray where the speech therapist is putting some marbles on a platter. This effect
emphasizes Bertie’s worry by showing an object in the physical world to be the concentration of
his apprehension. What follows supports the intimidating way in which the marbles have been
introduced to this scene. After he puts the marbles into his mouth the close up shot of Bertie is
not only angled down at him, but also blurry around the edges as the camera zooms in even more. This use of a very shallow field of focus demonstrates visually something that every person with a stammer has experienced. It is simply the complete inability to speak fluidly. It is a feeling of being locked inside one’s own head. Bertie is struggling through the marbles in his mouth and this effect only isolates him further.

As Bertie struggles more and more against the marbles in his mouth, the speech therapist is still speaking. He is presumably attempting to be encouraging, but his words are just the tiniest bit condescending and only prove to push Bertie more and more inward, making speech more and more impossible. The angle of the speech therapist is still high and looming, and the camera is even closer to his face, distorted by the wide-angle lens. He has become less of a man and more a symbol of all that Bertie fears when he is put into these situations that force him to confront his stammer head on. The camera also zooms closer to Bertie’s face, creating an even shallower depth of field as he struggles against the marbles in his mouth and the scene comes to its climax. Only a small portion of his face is in focus as the scene comes to its end.

This pressure from the speech therapist and from his own insecurities eventually culminates in the sudden termination of the therapy session by Bertie as he storms out of the room in a notorious loss of temper. The relatively static non-movement of the camera is suddenly pulled back just slightly and follows him in a small, jerky, handheld tracking shot as he storms out of the room. The scene ends with Bertie smoking another cigarette as the score plays in with soft strings all centered around one repeating note. It is as though the music is unable to move forward, stuck on that one note, a clear musical symbol of the act of stammering which follows Bertie throughout the film as his musical theme.
To contrast the way Bertie is framed and shot with the first speech therapist, later in the film there is a scene in which Bertie returns to Lionel Logue a second time to finally accept his help. A gentle smash cut to a shot of the Duke and Duchess against the immediately recognizable wall of Lionel’s rooms shows the audience this progression of the story instead of telling it. Once again Bertie is shot in order to look smaller in the frame. There is an abnormal amount of headroom that puts the eye-line practically in the middle of the frame. This almost gives off the effect of Bertie being crushed under such a large amount of negative space within the shot. The Duchess is even sat forward on the sofa to reduce his size further. However, the series of eye-line match cuts as he has his conversation with Lionel show them to be equals. Instead of using high and low angles, a more traditional, level angle is used. Bertie is still looking up while Lionel is looking down, but neither is in such an extremely wide angle as to look distorted. This scene shows the progress that Bertie has made on his road to, not necessarily recovery, but a better control and understanding of his struggles with speech.

These are only some of the most basic storytelling techniques involved in filmmaking. In *The King’s Speech*, Tom Hooper manipulates the components of mise-en-scène in order to better portray the psychological elements of the character of Bertie as he interacts with two very different types of speech therapists. These seemingly small decisions such as camera angles, depth of field, and unorthodox framing all coalesce to form a very distinctive approach to the subjective point of view that is the character of Bertie. The way in which he interacts with the world centers on his view of it, depicted through this point of view shots. The psychology of his inner-self are shown through these technical elements as well. All of these points come together to better establish the theme of the film and better understand the characters through storytelling.