

Watch Your Words: A Manifesto for the Arts of Speech (2025), by Geralt Garutti³³⁹

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In *Watch Your Words* (2025), Gérald Garutti presents a powerful ethical manifesto on the use of communication in our highly mediatized society³⁴¹. Garutti warns readers that the degradation of public discourse must under no circumstances reach the arts: they must be protected from the increasing distortions and violence exhibited in contemporary speech acts. Garutti's register is not overtly academic, and thus renders his terminology and reflections accessible to a broader readership, whether or not familiar with linguistics or the performing arts.

One of the most relevant assertions Garutti makes is the following: "People don't listen to each other anymore. No one cares – and why care anyway? They also don't speak to, but at, each other. This is the exact opposite of speech in the true sense."³⁴² This concern aligns with ideas that have been developed by philosophers, linguists, and sociologists. For instance, in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), Judith Butler explores how speech acts—once charged with the potential to build community—are increasingly becoming instruments of insult, harm, and exclusion. Spaces that could foster genuine dialogue sometimes turn into mere exchange of opinion, with limited room for listening. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman argues in *Liquid Life* (2005) that the spoken word has lost its permanence and force in today's society. In this sense, *Watch Your Words* joins a broader

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³⁴¹ A "highly mediatized society" refers to a society in which life is deeply overwhelmed by the presence of social media that displaces or weakens face-to-face interactions.

³⁴² Geralt Garutti, *Watch Your Words: A Manifesto for the Arts of Speech* (John Wiley & Sons, 2025), chap. 2, VitalSource Bookshelf.

critical tradition, offering an updated and artistically grounded view on the ongoing degradation of speech.

In order to provide a better understanding of Garutti's arguments and how these are unfolded throughout the book, I will briefly outline its structure. *Watch Your Words* is divided into three parts: Part I, titled "The Diminishment of Our Humanity" where Garutti diagnoses the decline of meaningful communications and how it used to work in the past, thus, stating that speech has become increasingly careless, disconnected and inhumane. This section is further divided into three chapters: in Chapter 1, "Watch how you speak," Garutti states that speech has resolved into something mechanical, aggressive and shallow by eroding our ability to truly engage with others; Chapter 2, "The Other does not exist," draws on the disappearance of the Other in contemporary discourse reflects a growing inability to recognize others as subjects worthy of engaging in dialogue and deserving attention; and Chapter 3, "Subject not at home," remarks that individuals feel estranged from themselves and from their community, weakening the authenticity and responsibility of their speech. Part II, titled "For a Humanism of Speech" deals with the author's advocacy for a renewed ethical approach to speaking in which language becomes a tool for connection, instead of domination. This section is also divided into two chapters: in Chapter 4, "We need to stand up in the full sense for what they say," Garutti claims that we must fully assume the moral and social responsibility of our words, standing behind them with coherence and conviction; and in Chapter 5, "Elevating speech" the author reclaims elevated speech means nurturing discourse that aspires to clarity, honesty, depth and care for the other. Finally, in Part III, namely, "Humanity Lost, Humanity Regained," Garutti offers a practical vision for restoring the dignity of speech through the arts, discipline, and institutional cultivation of eloquence and listening. This last part is structured in two more chapters: Chapter 6, "The seven arts of speech. Cultivating our humanity" where this author outlines seven essential practices that can help us recover meaningful, humane and transformative modes of speaking; and Chapter 7, "The Centre for the Arts of Speech," which ultimately contributes Garutti's new proposal for an educational space dedicated to training individuals in the art of speaking well and ethically, fostering civil and personal growth.

Garutti further critiques the idea that loudness equates to communication, so that digital “connection” may be understood as a form of human bonding: “To shout loudly is not to speak to someone, and to be ‘connected’ is not to have a real bond with them. Speaking to each other in the full sense of the term is a way of establishing a bond. Only when someone is listening does speech get its resonance, and only through speech is a bond established.”³⁴³

The book reflects extensively on electronic communication—texts, social media, and other digital channels—and on its entailing erosion of presence and responsiveness. Garutti stresses the importance of feeling the receiver and/or interpreter’s reaction and intention of the message: its irony, humour, sincerity, or ambiguity might be difficult to perceive without physical or vocal cues. For him, communication without embodied experience falls short of true interaction.

Watch Your Words’s critical perspective on the social and political impoverishment of language is complemented by a strong aesthetic proposal. Garutti calls for a renewed appreciation of the poetic power of speech. As he puts it:

In the aesthetic dimension, we must treat speech as an act of creation, as the art which can evoke things, as a poetic power, a form of expressive vitality. This is the dimension of symbolic elaboration, of placing reality in a wider perspective provided by the imagination. It is also the place for an art of interpretation, the unfolding of possible meanings which opens us up to an infinity of plural worlds.³⁴⁴

Here, Garutti positions language as *poiesis*—not just as a medium for conveying meaning, but as a space of imaginative creation. This approach is particularly significant given the author’s background in dramaturgy. Speech becomes not just a communicative tool but an aesthetic event, which is rich in polysemy and interpretive potential. Against the flattening of language into slogans and derogatory remarks, Garutti defends the expressive density of performed speech, which is capable of opening new worlds instead of closing them. Then,

³⁴³ Garutti, chap. 3.

³⁴⁴ Garutti, chap. 4.

he outlines what he calls the “seven arts of speech”:³⁴⁵ theatre, narrative, poetry, eloquence, oral presentation, dialogue, and debate. Each of these arts represents a distinct modality of spoken interaction; yet, all converge in their capacity to shape, transmit, and contest meaning through language. Garutti defines them as follows: (1) *theatre*, as the art of presence and embodied performance; (2) *narrative*, as the imaginative construction of fictional or factual worlds; (3) *poetry*, as the decentering of speech through rhythm and metamorphosis; (4) *eloquence*, as persuasive oratory; (5) *oral presentation*, as the didactic articulation of ideas; (6) *dialogue*, as reciprocal listening and exchange; and (7) *debate*, as agonistic confrontation aimed at persuasion.

While Garutti’s taxonomy is both rich and evocative, it sometimes leans more towards poetic intuition than theoretical precision. For instance, the boundaries between eloquence, debate, and oral presentation are porous and could benefit from clearer conceptual distinctions. Additionally, some contemporary forms of speech performance—such as sound poetry, auto fiction, or digital storytelling—might challenge and stretch these categories. Nevertheless, the proposal is compelling in its effort to reclaim speech not just as a tool for communication, but as a field of ethical-aesthetic practice. By identifying these seven modalities of speech, Garutti invites us to reimagine language as action, relation, and creation—anchored in presence, yet open to transformation.

He is equally careful to emphasize the ethical stakes of these arts. While speech can be used to connect and to imagine plural realities, it may also be weaponized:

These seven arts give us the power to use speech as a way to reconnect with each other, provided only that we are willing to devote ourselves fully to them and to employ them in the way I propose. This qualification is necessary because, as should be immediately obvious, each of these arts can pass over to the dark side, and find itself in the service of destructive forces. Think of the perverse eloquence of Nazi propaganda, bellowing horrors through loudspeakers. Are these disciplines, then, to become weapons of mass destruction or arts which we can all use in a constructive

³⁴⁵ Garutti, chap. 6-7.

way? It's up to us to choose. This is why the arts of speech absolutely need to be grounded in speech in the full sense of the term.³⁴⁶

By invoking this historical example, Garutti shows how language, far from being inherently virtuous, has often been co-opted for domination and violence. The arts of speech, then, must be cultivated with responsibility and ethical awareness; they must serve connection, not subjugation.

One particularly striking aspect of Garutti's manifesto—especially given his background as a theatre director—is the near-exclusive emphasis he places on the act of speech itself. His focus on the deterioration of spoken language into empty slogans and performative aggression is persuasive; however, it is surprising that he does not extend this reflection to encompass the value of *silence*. Contrary to the conventional view of silence as mere absence, Dauenhauer offers a compelling reconceptualization of silence as an active performance act. In *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance*, the philosopher distinguishes various forms of silence and argues that they all share key characteristics that distance silence from passivity. Silence can be understood as a culturally situated performance—as opposed to a reflex or biological behavior—never radically autonomous and always unfolding in relation to an Other. In this case, silence becomes a form of yielding, motivated by the awareness of one's own finitude and by an attitude of awe towards that which lies beyond the self. This yielding is not an act of submission but rather an expression of ethical responsibility: in remaining silent, the subject creates space for the Other to emerge. Finally, Dauenhauer highlights the structural function of silence by noting how it binds what has been said to what remains to be said, thus operating both discursively and existentially. Understood in this way, silence is not a void but a meaningful and deliberate practice, deeply rooted in listening, openness, and a recognition of shared significance.³⁴⁷ In a society increasingly overwhelmed by noise, silence offers a space for ethical resistance, a pause that restores weight and depth to language. If Garutti invites a

³⁴⁶ Garutti, chap. 6.

³⁴⁷ Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance* (Indiana University Press, 1980), chap. 1, 3–25, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84734>.

revitalization of conscious, embodied, and responsible speech, Dauenhauer reminds us that eloquent silence can be just as ethically and artistically powerful.

Watch Your Words will be of particular interest to scholars working at the intersection of language, performance, and ethics. The book offers valuable insights for artists and educators seeking to reframe their communicative practices in more conscious and responsible ways. Garutti writes with clarity and conviction, making the text accessible not only to academics but also to theatre professionals, educators, and general readers interested in the ethics of speech. At times, however, Garutti's vision borders on idealism. His call for a revival of "speech in the strong sense"³⁴⁸ presupposes a degree of individual and collective agency that may underestimate the structural forces shaping contemporary discourse—such as media algorithms, economic precarity, or systemic forms of silencing.

In short, *Watch Your Words* offers a thoughtful and engaged contribution to contemporary discussions on language, ethics, and performance. While some of its claims may be open to debate, the book presents a fertile ground for reflection and dialogue. It invites artists, thinkers, and readers alike to reconsider *how* we speak, as well as *why* we do so—and after all, what new worlds emerge.

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³⁴⁸ Garutti, chap. 7.

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