GIANLUCA SPOSITO

SPEECHES FOR OSCAR

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SPEECHES
FOR
OSCAR

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Rhetorically Series

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INTRODUCTION

The *Academy Award*, also known as the "Oscar Prize" or simply "Oscar", is probably the most prestigious and oldest film award in the world (it was awarded for the first time on May 16, 1929, three years before Venice Film Festival).

This, however, is not a book about the Oscar and its history; it is not even a book about its records, its names, its numbers and anything else that might in some way be 'its'. This is a book about people and especially about those who, over the course of almost a hundred years, have had the honor (and, why not?, the terror) of stepping onto a stage to receive it, of giving what is called the "acceptance speech". Right, I've decided: this is a book about their speeches. Why?

Because public speeches allow us to understand historical contexts and emotions. And analyzing a public speech allows us to understand, even more, how fundamental words are and their use, and how varied the ways of using words and linguistic-rhetorical patterns are. Moreover, we can add the curiosity of evaluating how words are accompanied, often, by elements that are called phonetic-prosodic and that are related to the sound-modulation of the voice (such as accent peaks, increase in speed, vocalic lengthening, dosage of pauses, etc.). These are considered elements used to impart something extra to the speech, if intended, or that leak something extra, if unintended.

And yet, in the United States (and elsewhere), it seems that the thank-you speeches by the winner of the prize following the awarding of the statuette have always been considered the weak link of the evening. Dreaded by the authors, often accused of failing to give the right pace to the show, as well as by the viewers, who wait for the moment of the speech to do anything else at home. This is because they are considered on average monotonous and boring, and often end with a list of names unknown to most people, that the winner is showing off by thanking them.

How can this merciless judgment be wrong? That's why this book on speeches proposes only a few of them (I know: some of you will say that there is not the one of your favorite artist, but you'll have to get over it), chosen on the basis of the interest that they can raise (therefore, not on the basis of the fame of its author) and of the possibility that you can have to lead them back to a context of particular interest to be explained. They have been chosen, above all, because they contain some valuable notes in the linguistic-rhetorical field. In short: chosen because they worked and they work even when put them in writing. And this, I must confirm, is certainly not true for everyone.

'Reading' the identified speeches also allows us to get a clear sense of how public speaking has evolved during the awards ceremony. Both in terms of the topics covered and the time taken. For example, before the winners were forced to leave the stage by an orchestra, actress Green Garson, winner of the 1942 Best Actress award for the film *Mrs. Miniver*, spoke to the audience for at least five minutes. It was right after her interminable list of thanks that it was decided to impose a maximum time limit on the winners, which for some years now has been only forty-five seconds.

You will understand that making your mark in 45 seconds is difficult for anyone, even if you are a talented artist. Because what is needed is a well-argued "script" of the

speech, not only well represented. Here, then, we have gone from absolute improvisation to the sometimes too aseptic construction of our intervention.

Certainly, in the last few years there has been a greater 'openness' of the organizers towards the artists and the themes treated (not sparing, however, the polemics afterwards). From rather stuffed speeches and behaviors, typical of some old editions, we have passed to rather frequent jokes, as well as warnings and invitations that, a few decades ago, would have involved the immediate intervention of the police on stage, dragging away the impertinent artist.

But this book about speeches also contains some natural yielding to statistics: how many Oscars, how short, how long, how many tears, etc. Because art is fun, even when we pretend to put in writing what these extraordinary artists have decided to say in the worldview. And so, we can also have fun pointing out how Joe Pesci's (for Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*) speech at the 1991 award ceremony was one of the shortest ever ("It was my privilege. Thank you" - I will quote it here because it is among those you will not find in this book...), beaten only by Alfred Hitchcock in 1968 (you will find this one instead).

It is also very amusing to know who is the most quoted in the speeches that have been given since 1929. Well, it is Steven Spielberg, quoted - until today - in 46 speeches; in second place we find - hear, hear! - Harvey Weinstein (does this remind you of anything?), a record that certainly matured before being erased from the memory of most people (even those who may have thanked him several times...). Then, again, in third place we find James Cameron (director of *Titanic* and *Avatar*), George Lucas, Peter Jackson and, finally, 'God' - who, despite his undisputed fame, had to settle for a place that was not exactly at the top.

All 57 selected speeches are proposed chronologically (ranging from the edition of 1940 to that of 2021). Each

segment is completed by a very brief caption with photos and technical data of the film of reference, if any (with all due respect to the romantic lovers of printed paper, readers of the e-book version will find active links to the official videos of the speeches, the awards ceremonies and other sites and fact sheets).

One last warning to all sailors: I have tried to avoid the tone and tools of a professor of language and rhetoric (which, I confess, I am). Rather, I have put myself in the shoes of one who loves the arts, and therefore also the word. At least on this, believe me.

Rhetorically Series

The Academy Award, also better known as the "Oscar" or simply "Oscar", is probably the most prestigious and oldest film award in the world.

The volume selects and analyzes 57 Oscar acceptance speeches (from the 1940 to the 2021 edition). From that of Hattie McDaniel, the first African American to be awarded in 1940 for Gone with the Wind, to those of Frances McDormand and Chloé Zhao in 2021, passing through Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin, Jack Nicholson, Meryl Streep, Leonardo DiCaprio and many other great protagonists of world cinema.

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