

IMAGES OR SHADOWS

GERARD BYRNE
IRISH MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



You see? Gerard Byrne's reconstructions

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SPEAKING ABOUT THE WORLD

Error and Progress

If one thinks only of oneself, it is impossible to believe that one commits any errors and so one gets nowhere. That it [sic] is why it is necessary to think of the others who will carry on the work. Only in this way does one prevent something being completed.

—Bertolt Brecht¹

'Error and Progress', printed here in its entirety, is one of the 87 *Stories of Mr. Keuner* that Brecht published in various magazines and anthologies from the 1920s through the 50s under titles such as 'Organisation', 'The Right to Weakness', 'Hospitality', 'Success', 'Mr. K. and the Cats', 'On Friendliness', 'Architecture' and 'On Having a Stance'. Walter Benjamin was almost the only contemporary to take notice. He interpreted the name 'Keuner' as 'Keiner', German for 'no one', and 'Koiné', Greek for 'colloquial speech' or that which is understandable to all.² Mr. Keuner then is a person without particular characteristics, and Brecht used him like a mouthpiece, referring to him as 'the thinking one' through whom he offered parables, aphorisms and anecdotes to comment on a wide variety of subjects. Implicitly they correct a mistaken opinion, an all-too-comprehensible popular misconception. This aim to relate parable-like narratives on common topics is shared by Gerard Byrne, who works in film, video, photography and installation. While preparing the Irish pavilion for the 2007 Venice Biennale, he somewhere said: 'I'm trying very hard to find general starting points instead of engaging with art-specific questions of the particular media.'

Brecht's importance to Byrne has been commented on in various contexts, and the radical writer, dramatist and theatre director seems to have influenced the artist's general position for many years, as well as particular works.³ One technique that Brecht employed to achieve his *Verfremdungseffekt*—the famous estrangement or distancing effect—is the principle of historicisation. The content of many of Brecht's plays deal with the fictionalisation of historical figures or events, with the idea that a story set in the audience's time might defeat the desired critical perspective. Both Brecht and Byrne focus on historical stories—allegories that parallel current social questions—and in this way provide indirect illumination.

To derive the source material for his filmic reconstructions of dialogues and conversations, Byrne turns to magazines

opposite

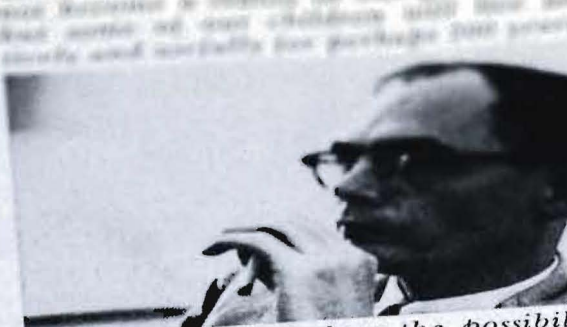
above We will explore the possibilities of sex multiplied by telepathy, so that you experience not only your own sensations but also those of your partner.

below June 2008; The Powerplant, Toronto, presents another permutation of 1984 and beyond.

such as *Playboy*, *Interview*, *Le Nouvel Observateur* or *National Geographic* from the 1960s and 70s, which roughly represent the landscape into which the artist was born. The discussants on whose words Byrne bases his scripts encompass an array of prominent cultural figures debating general social concerns, and the spectrum of these topics is broad. An earlier video piece, *Why it's time for Imperial, again* (1998–2002), reconstructs a conversation between the businessman Lee Iacocca and the singer Frank Sinatra, which itself was an invented dialogue published in 1980 as a four-page advertisement for the Chrysler Imperial in *National Geographic*. *Homme à Femmes* (Michel Debrane) (2004) is based on a 1977 *Le Nouvel Observateur* interview with Jean-Paul Sartre by the feminist journalist Catherine Chaine, focusing on the philosopher's complex relationships with women, feminism and femininity. The video installation *New Sexual Lifestyles* (2003) is named after a *Playboys* symposium made up of international sex experts, psychologists, journalists and critics, as well as porn industry professionals such as actress Linda Lovelace, all of whom debate emerging sexual behavior patterns, from open marriage to group sex. Most recently, for **ZAN-*T185 r.1: (Interview) v.1, no.4 – v.2, no.6... no.21 – v.3, no.9*. (2007), Byrne has turned to Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine for interviews with minor celebrities, including a conversation with Sacheen Littlefeather, a Native American activist and actress who donned Apache garb to reject the Oscar on behalf of actor Marlon Brando at the 1973 Academy Awards.

Twice the artist has dipped into *Playboy* from an era when the magazine produced progressive, culturally relevant debates; the first time to consider historical documents that pose as a site of 'expert' and 'serious' opinion, the second time to consider the topic of where we are and where we are headed as a species. These topics were debated in the magazine's 1963 'Future of Life' discussions, which brought together twelve well-known science-fiction writers to speak not as popular writers but as experts on 'the future'. Over the course

of a day they casually rambled through a variety of issues, from sexual habits, ageing, longevity and mass utopia, to space travel and the possibility of alien life in the world of 1984: looking back, it is a vision of the way the future was. As Byrne says, 'What most interested me about the 1984 text was how it tried to speak about the world in its entirety. This quality is very particular, and almost unimaginable today.'⁴ Rather than offering an exchange amongst specialists who move assuredly in their own fields, these people are presented as public intellectuals who speculate and invent while they speak, moving across terrain at once novel to them and available to the general public. Even at the point of conception of the *Playboy* symposium in 1963, when invitations were extended to Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov and others, they were addressed not as popular authors but as mouthpieces, as abstract representations, speakers about 'the future', and therefore, in a way, the present.



POHL: We will explore the possibility of sex multiplied by telepathy, so that you experience not only your own sensations but also those of your partner.

[illegible]

July 18th, 1980—*Come on, Lee, this country can put a man on the moon, but we can't build an automobile right. Where's our technology when it comes to the things we use every day?* Sinatra (Bavier) and Iacocca (Keegan) discuss important national issues, in *Why it's time for Imperial, again*.

THE FUTURE THAT WAS

The ephemeral nature of mainstream magazines, which are rarely reprinted or revisited, distinguishes them from other genres of popular culture, such as pop songs or TV shows, which may be re-released and become subject to nostalgic adoration. It is a particular treasure to find a trace of conversation, a fragment of cultural discourse, within a dusty pile of magazines in a library basement—in pages that would otherwise remain lost in recent history. 'One of the things that interests me about old magazines is that they evidence aspirations and self-identities, all offered within the pluralism of the capitalist newsstand. They chart shifts of consumer identity and differentiation across decades,' says Byrne.⁵ Always generic, this ever-shifting identity of the average consumer, dreamt up by marketing consultants and magazine editors, in a way is the mass cultural version of Brecht's Mr. Keuner. Mr. No-one—ie. Mr. Everyone—is a cipher wandering through daily life, used by the author to make observations on a range of topics about which people tend to have strong opinions—which Brecht, through Mr. Keuner, subtly contradicts.

The site of the magazine is also relevant in relation to Brecht: not only did he publish his self-contained and aphoristic Keuner stories mostly in magazines or journals, but, as Fredric Jameson pointed out in *Brecht and Method* (1998), the function of Mr. Keuner himself was linked to that of a topical journal, which 'comments punctually on a matter that has caught your attention'.⁶ Brecht employs Mr. Keuner to dramatise an observation, to take it from an empirical starting point into some more vivid form in which—most importantly—the gesture of the demonstration is contained. This specific *gestus* is a kind of flagged-up pointing. Jameson explains: 'The narrative is not empirical: it includes the "You see?"'.⁷ This 'You see?' indicates what Brecht's Mr. Keuner stories and Byrne's videos have in common: an inclusion of something parable-like. Jameson comments: 'The narrative articulates the conceptual position and

thereby proves that it can have historical evidence—it is an alternative form of argument, implicitly as valid as the abstract philosophical'.⁸ Like Brecht's unpackings of popular belief, Byrne turns opinions into proofs that unfold progressively.

This sense of being proof rather than representation is seconded by the awkwardness of watching actors speak about the world, of watching them enact a script that grasps a moment when a discussion—historically speaking—has just made the leap from a debate among specialists to a conversation directed to a mass audience. In a recent catalogue essay, Lytle Shaw also noted that the articles that Byrne uses stem from 'a moment when an emergent cultural fascination has reached the stage where it can be administered to mass audiences through the pages of a wide-distribution magazine'.⁹ The self-imaging and self-construction of bourgeois culture can be found, and actually is reconstructed as such, in the buildings and sites, the costumes and styles that frame Byrne's re-readings. These elements are culturally coded and Byrne's reconstructions, which would be a bit hollow or empty by themselves, grasp our own emergent cultural fascination with modernist architecture, itself codified and administered. The artist feeds it back to us as consumers of some idea of Modernism, in parallel with the original idea that sci-fi authors represent 'futurism' inherently, rather than if *Playboy* had invited some government scientist and random academics to speculate on future life.

In general Byrne works in a collage mode of sorts, forming images of citations. *1984 and beyond* (2005-07), the work that he fashioned from the sci-fi authors' discussions on the future, poignantly engages Modernist iconography—itself inseparably linked to utopian form—through the actors' clothing and hairstyles, the architectural environments, public sculptures and even the flair of their overconfident masculinity, all of which suggest an arguably utopian element, the belief in progress and the possibility of eventually finding the right form to improve life and society. Byrne takes the structure



apart and puts it back together again: clothes and sets play into clichés of the 1960s Modernist period, as does his choice of medium—film shapes for us ‘the 1960s’, a dream that came to us through celluloid.

1984 and beyond reconstructs a certain cultural imagination of the future, but it is set within the material evidence of these ideas and attitudes of the recent past. In Byrne’s reconstruction, the speculations of the sci-fi authors appear closely paired with architectural and sculptural evidence of a vision of the world and its future. They are set within a series of iconic Modernist settings which could not have been the actual sites of the *Playboy* symposium: the Provinciehuis in Den Bosch, the Netherlands, which was designed by Hugh Maaskant and built between 1959 and 1971, and the Gerrit Rietveld sculpture pavilion at the Kröller-Müller Museum, among bronzes by modernist sculptor Barbara Hepworth. Gilmore Clark’s Unisphere from the 1964 World’s Fair in New York crops up in a sequence of video, a short vignette of detailed shots of some of the countries depicted on it. An inter-mezzo-like sequence was filmed in a housing estate in the south of Amsterdam, dating from the early 1960s in which a busker plays Dave Brubeck’s ‘Take Five’, which was, in 1959, the first instrumental jazz record to become a mainstream American hit. Couched within the structures ‘sophisticated music’.

In the original magazine, as well as in Byrne’s filmic form, the *1984 and beyond* symposium is presented in twelve different chapters, each under the heading of a particular question added to the heavily edited transcript as a structuring tool. One gets a sense of how many decisions, inventions, slippages and re-imaginings must have taken place between the actual encounter of the authors, its transcribed format in the magazine and Byrne’s filmed reconstruction, thereby making the actual encounter nearly unimaginable. This is one of many reasons why Byrne prefers to call his works ‘reconstructions’ rather than ‘re-enactments’.

THEATRE VERSUS FILM

Byrne has recently said: ‘My attraction to theatre is connected to its provisionality, to the notion of repetition and re-interpretation, which are rites within theatre... the pinnacle of bourgeois culture’s self-imaging, and simultaneously the nemesis of Friedlandian Modernism.’¹⁰ The term ‘theatre’ goes back to the Greek *theatron*, meaning ‘a place to see’. For Byrne, the set and setting for where a certain discussion may or could have taken place shapes the piece as much as the words themselves, and this makes his videos appear to be made of citations, a collage of aesthetic ideas from a different moment in time. You could say he does the minimum, finding iconic settings of the era and lending the conversation a dress rehearsal atmosphere. He doesn’t bother to explain how or why the actors in *1984 and beyond* gather in certain public buildings or under a pavilion in a rainy park. Disparate sites are placed next to each other in the final edit, which jumps from one place to another, grouped together only for the reason that each of the

below

Louis le Brocq’s set for *Waiting for Godot*, sits patiently on stage, with the house lights up and the Gate Theatre auditorium empty.



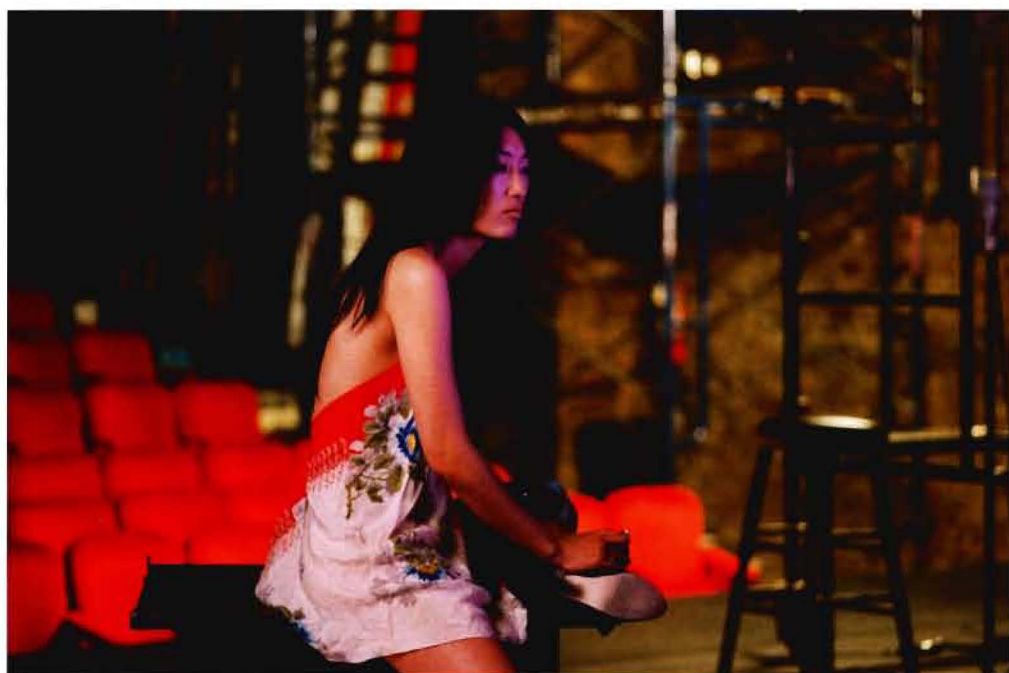


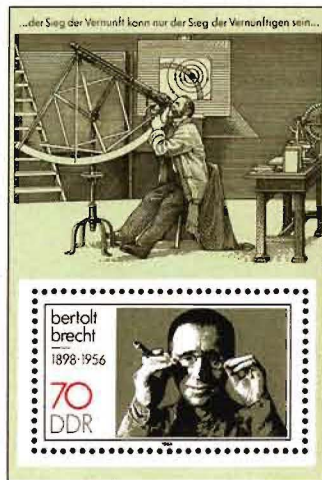
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Our protagonists discuss the finer details of fuel economy in a diner.

right

'The Galiano Stinger stung by David Croland'. An interview with actress and socialite Angeleen Galiano, from the pages of Warhol's magazine *Interview*.





Playwright Bertolt Brecht is celebrated in a stamp issued in the GDR in 1988.

sites embody the imagination of a moment in time. According to Byrne the sites—and perhaps this goes for other elements as well—‘are not understood as locations, but more as complementary ‘facts’ that sit alongside the text. They are equally artifacts of a time close to our own time, but somehow no longer understood as part of our time.’ He also speaks of ‘a sort of endless day, full of ennui as well as interest’, which led him to try to ‘stage the idea of drifting in time during the discussion—actors occasionally leave or arrive mid-conversation.’ There is no particular place or time here, even as it is being stylistically pinpointed. This helps to give Byrne’s pieces their awkward, distanced feel, which is foreign to much contemporary video art.

This is a form that lies somewhere between theatrical staging and educational film, with purely stylistic or formal concerns, to be distinguished from ideological or methodological elements of Direct Cinema, the North American documentary mode that originated around 1960 with film-makers such as Robert Drew and Albert and David Maysles. In order to disrupt the magical flow of narrative *re-enactment*, to return an awkwardness to the moving image, Byrne relies heavily on theatrical forms. His filmed dialogues have the wooden feeling of Brechtian epic theatre, and one’s experience is continually intruded upon by sudden and unexplained disjunctions: the costumes, which in some pieces don’t fit with the period, or the accented English of 1984 and beyond’s all-Dutch cast, which contributes to a sense of the outsider, of those who are introduced to an already existing story—be it the actor, the artist or the audience.

Sometime in the 1950s, Robert Bresson wrote in his notebook: ‘Cinema, radio, television, magazines are a school of inattention: people look without seeing, listen in without hearing.’¹¹ While one can hardly imagine a film-maker with intentions more different from Byrne’s—Bresson believes in immediacy and the magic of naturalness as a means of cinema—on this point they would certainly agree. In a book-length interview with Jean-Luc Godard,

Youssef Ishaghpour further develops the idea that inattention is a form of time warp that mass culture produces, and that this is cinema’s core challenge. ‘Isn’t it that very disappearance of time,’ he proposes, ‘which could be said to be an effect of “real time” information technology and the generalised circulation of image communication merchandise through the television screen and its ephemera that destroy the present by obscuring it continuously as it occurs, isn’t it that urgency of the present, the disappearance of time and even the hopelessness it engenders, that also determined the existence of [Godard’s] *Histoire(s) du cinéma* as a memoir of the cinema and the country, a memoir of time inside time?’¹² To peel out and perform ‘time inside time’ is at the heart of Byrne’s project. ‘The Future of Life’ discussions have produced his most complex and charming work to date, where the speculative utopian form, which has been linked to the genre of science fiction, is grounded in the past, the present and the future ‘to defamiliarise and restructure our experience of our own *present*, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarisation’.¹³

The directive that concludes Brecht’s story ‘Error and Progress’ is to consider those who will continue their own work as a way of preventing completion. It is a simple and challenging idea for an artist. Seen in this light, Byrne’s turn to just-past debates in order to translate the tonality of these arguments into the present moment is a way of testing the lifetime of ideas, their historicity as well as their endurance and possibility of completion. Perhaps it is also a demonstration of the impossibility of realising any creative endeavour, which might include philosophical ideas and political discussions as well as the aesthetic proposals of architecture and sculpture, theatrical plays and films.

1. Bertolt Brecht, 'Error and Progress', *Stories of Mr. Keuner* (trans. Martin Chalmers), San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001, p.60.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (trans. Anna Bostock), New York and London: Verso, 1998, pp.5, 28 and 68-69.
3. At greatest length in George Baker, 'The Storyteller: Notes on the Work of Gerard Byrne', in Nicolaus Schafhausen (ed.), *Gerard Byrne: Books, Magazines, and Newspapers*, New York and Berlin: Lukas & Sternberg, 2003, pp.7-88.
4. Gerard Byrne, email to the author, September 2007. All quotations by Byrne without reference are taken from this email exchange.
5. Gerard Byrne in an interview originally published in *Untitled*, no.32, Summer 2004, available online at http://www.extracity.org/dedicated/dedicated_byrne.htm (last accessed on 5 September 2007).
6. Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, London and New York: Verso, 1998, pp.109-10.
7. *Ibid.*, p.110.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Lytle Shaw, 'The Utopian Past', in *The Present Tense Through the Ages: On the Recent Work of Gerard Byrne*, London: Koenig Books, 2007, p.122.
10. Byrne, quoted in Catherine Wood, 'Two-Way Theatre', in *The Present Tense Through the Ages*, *op. cit.*, p.73.
11. Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* (trans. Jonathan Griffin), Copenhagen: Green Integer, 1997, p.109.
12. Youssef Ishaghpour, in Jean-Luc Godard and Y. Ishaghpour, *Cinema: The Archaeology of Film and the Memory of Culture* (trans. John Howe), New York: Berg, 2005, p.20.
13. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London and New York: Verso, 2005, p.151.



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above

The street scene—Greenpoint neighbours piece together what may have happened the morning after at an accident scene in the shadow of the Brooklyn Queens expressway.

below

Davis St. off Long Island City's Jackson Avenue, is evaluated as a potential location for the re-staging of the Chrysler Imperial advert.

