



Gerard Byrne

IF I CAN'T DANCE,
I DON'T WANT TO BE PART OF YOUR REVOLUTION

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Gerard Byrne developed two projects for *If I Can't Dance...*. Beginning in May at **Festival a/d Werf** with a project called *Exercise For Two Actors*, Byrne took advantage of the apparatus of a festival with its busy central square to stage a live conversation between two actors who talked in an improvised way about their presence there. To the audience who could listen to the piece they were invisible and indeed could have been any of the many people standing and walking around the festival square. This led in turn to a heightened awareness of ones own context and situation at the festival itself. The piece was immediately edited as a video work and on display in the Festival house.

Byrne's second project was developed in two stages as a live reading at the **Theaterfestival Boulevard** and in the form of a new film, which was exhibited at **De VeenFabriek**. The piece called *1984 and beyond* was an enactment of a text from *Playboy Magazine* in which 12 science fiction writers were invited to talk about their vision of the future. In 's-Hertogenbosch, Byrne developed a live reading in which the fully costumed actors enacted the script. In the background Byrne projected a series of black and white slides, recently shot in the United States, which could be seen as archetypical American scenes and which could connote a time from the late fifties or early sixties, similar to when this conversation actually took place.

In Leiden **If I Can't Dance...** premiered Byrne's new film. Here Byrne projected both the film and the series of slides in a two-room installation.



1984 and beyond



"We earthbound men, we have had it, the next century belongs to the space farers." Algis Budrys, "1984 and beyond", *Playboy Magazine*, July-August 1963

Published in 1963 across two issues of *Playboy's* interview section "1984 and beyond", invited twelve science fiction writers - including Arthur C. Clark (a regular contributor to *Playboy's* fiction section) Robert Heinlein (author of *Starship Troopers*) and Rod Serling (creator of *The Twilight Zone*) - to talk about their visions of the future of society circa 1984. Forty-two years later, Gerard Byrne resurrected this article, editing it into a screenplay and re-enacting it with a group of actors in the Netherlands, reworking the piece in two stages, beginning with a live reading, which was developed into a subsequent film.

Where George Orwell's 1949 vision of the future sees a dystopian totalitarian regime, *Playboy's* group of writers see immanent sexual, scientific and social liberation. At the same time they appear steeped in political tensions and social and ideological anxieties surrounding the cold war, their visions of the future simultaneously unfold fears of the present. Opening with a discussion about the Russian - American race for the moon (Clark predicts a moon landing circa 1970, and Venus circa 1980) the writers debate the likelihood of the Russians not only capturing the moon, but the "entire orb", before proceeding to imagine its commercial potential, and to speculate over lunar real estate and tourist travel. Ideological fears of Communism and

discussions of racial issues only too easily translate into imagined alien presences, as the writers gauge how their appearance might "horrify humanity", however they conclude that "few aliens are apt to be more startling than man himself."

What kind of race will inhabit the moon is also debated, both as a place for the elite or alternatively for social minorities and disadvantaged, as well as a site for a new race of "lunarians". In science, narcotics are predicted to intensify sexual gratification and the elimination of disease. The need for sleep and the secret of eternal life are also key developments seen to be upon the horizon, as well as population growth problems, Algis Budrys predicts that some of their children would live "actively and usefully for perhaps 200 years." When asked their predictions for "the life of an affluent city-dwelling bachelor at the turn of the coming century", their subject is a white collar worker whose possession of "the commodity in great demand on the labour market of the 21st Century: originality and freshness of thought" is a prediction that was not far wrong considering the knowledge economy of today, although his working week of four days per week, unlimited sick leave and three month vacation, was a little far fetched for the contemporary subject that would ultimately become caught in the clutches of high-capitalism.

Although the discussion reveals how politically and scientifically in tune the writers were, some moments

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of wonderfully far-flung speculation reveal that they are after all in the business of creating fantasy fiction. The conversation does, however, come back down to earth, as it ends with a discussion about whether man really has the capacity for such change. With the benefit of hindsight one sees the speed of human and scientific development was somewhat slower than this group had imagined, and if it had taken place after the first moon landing they might not have envisaged it as such an attractive place to be. Future developments that were not addressed in the conversation are also striking, most notably the civil rights movement and the effects of feminism, which were already well underway by this point in time (perhaps not that surprising given the fact that at this time, science fiction was a notoriously white-male-dominated genre), and the extremity of the effects of high-capitalism and climate change.

The future that the writers imagine is of course the one we are living out today, and through the process of re-enaction Byrne inverts the text by imagining the past, re-activating it in the here-and-now by re-introducing bodies, voices, objects and surroundings, in order to create a sense of reality out of textual material. Editing down the original interview without adding any extra words, Byrne's reconstruction is by no means seamless, it contains numerous discontinuities that disrupt the linearity of the article - itself an edited version of the original conversation. Furthermore, by the siting of the work in the Netherlands, and working with Dutch actors, a dislocation in time and space occurs that acknowledges the impossibility of faithful representation. The script also becomes a vehicle to test out different genealogies of performance both through the live spoken word and in film, the

work becomes as much about the process and implications of the act of re-enaction as the end result.

The first stage of Byrne's production took the form of a public reading before a present audience with eleven actors arranged in a row of armchairs, heavily lit by stage lights. Through the very act of restaging it, small details were introduced, such as clothes, mannerisms, tones of voice and their relationships to one another, the actors developing their characters from the given facts, venturing beyond the borders of the documentary. Where stage performances in their very nature simplify and over-exaggerate details and gestures in order to resonate before a live audience, the film developed this into a more complex and layered interpretation of the script. The camera penetrates tiny movements, the fragmentation of the scenes leading to a further loss of linearity, moving further into the realm of fiction.

While the original article was most probably sandwiched between bountiful soft-focus images of nude women, in Byrne's film the writers are set against the cold, stark architecture of Hugh Maaskant's *Provinciehuis* in 's-Hertogenbosch and Gerrit Rietveld's sculpture pavilion in the garden of the *Kröller-Müller Museum* in Otterlo, shifting the discussion from the context of *Playboy Magazine* to equate the writers' ideas with the futuristic, utopian visions of contemporaneous avant-garde architects. The latter site is itself a posthumous reconstruction of Rietveld's temporary *Sonsbeek Pavilion*, and is an entirely open structure, which Byrne

sees as a kind of ruin, both in its structural configuration and in the use of pierced blocks (evocative of Arabic structures), and in its function as a memorial to the architect. Byrne cites these two locations as reflecting the different aspects of attitudes present in the text: the more American-looking **Provinciehuis** summoning a sense of the 'organisational man', a term coined by late 50s American culture (as expressed in their description of the white collar worker), and the **Rietveld Pavillion** effectively as a pre-meditated ruin complete with its monumental effigy-like sculptures by Barbara Hepworth, giving a sense of how contemporary man might have wanted to be perceived in the future.

The conversation unfolds over various spaces both inside and outside of the buildings, merging two distinctive sites into one. The men loiter in the transitional areas of vast lobbies, stairwells and porches as well as outside in the pavilion. In the original publication and in Byrne's orchestration of a live public reading, there was no clear articulation of breaks, or the passing of time. In the film the characters are brought together in different constellations, which are announced at the beginning of each section, although there is no clear indication of who is who, and some of the characters barely enter into the conversation. These breaks and long silences become a noticeable departure from the stage play, playing with what one can see and not hear, with characters talking in the background, on the telephone, and outside windows creating the sense that more than one conversation is taking place at the same time. On the other hand, fervent discussion is frequently interjected with jovial laughter that cements the characters' lively relationships to one another.

As with the Modernist architecture, Byrne introduces a series of almost incidental-looking objects into the background of the film, which add a further sense of continuum from the time that the article was produced, honing a strongly Modernist aesthetic sensibility that enhances the performance of the actors and the text itself. When the writers stand around in the **Rietveld Pavillion** deliberating on the possibility of extra-terrestrial beings in the universe, the looming Barbara Hepworth sculptures in the background cast a silent presence, appearing almost as alien in form as the strange beings discussed by the writers. Byrne points out a kind of forwards and backwards vision that is encapsulated by these sculptures and their positioning in the pavilion in their futuristic form simultaneously combined with the fact that sculpture at that time was often understood in relation to archaeology, with the idea of how a civilisation might leave itself for the future to interpret. Standing face to face with one of Hepworth's large rounded bronzes, Bradbury remarks that, 'the study of aesthetics, I think, will be essential to the task of comprehending the bizarre life forms we are going to be encountering, just as aesthetics has a lot to do with the problem of assimilating the various coloured races here on earth.' thus equating the shock of the avant garde forms with notions of social acceptance, pointing to the intrinsic conservatism of society that fears difference and change.

Further on in the film the smooth progress of the conversation is punctuated by a lone saxophone player giv-

ing a rendition of Gerry Mulligan's 1959 *Take Five* at the side of the street with the writers circled around him. At the time this was a breakthrough in the popular embrace of Jazz, effectively mediating it for the middle classes, however it has now become more associated with elevator music and buskers. Other objects also have an invisible presence, such as the frequent mentions of the writers' books, and of course, *Playboy Magazine* itself. In the very act of mining old issues of a mainstream magazine without an intended lifespan, Byrne not only resurfaces a significant text, but also re-addresses *Playboy's* history as a publication that, in this period, actively engaged in liberal politics and in the practice of defining the present as well as envisioning the future. In fact, the very nature of magazines is that their aim is to be of their moment, to represent the current, so that they quickly become out of date and disposable. When aligning these more ephemeral artefacts alongside avant-garde art and architecture Byrne highlights differing sets of cultural values, showing objects which are deemed worthy of preservation alongside those that have fallen by the wayside as a way of rescuing their historical plight.

Thus Byrne's *1984 and beyond* is by no means a simple reconstruction of a document, but a collection of multiple narratives and parallel histories that lead tangentially outwards, forming connections between three time periods, 1963, 1984, and 2005, as well as forming loose associations between isolated cultural events. Viewed with the benefit of hindsight there is an element of pathos in the sense of optimism found in the reconstruction of a conversation that imagined what our contemporary condition became. Through the process of acting this out, Byrne builds what he describes as "a provocative model of how all representation work",

forming a speculative, multivalent, and compelling image of how an unremarkable moment from the recent past (1984), now only half remembered, was imagined as a future by a slightly more distant past. Simultaneously looking backwards and forwards, Byrne's piece reflects upon the role of the imaginary in the way in which we position ourselves between past and future, and the place of the subjective viewpoint in the process of historical reconstruction.

