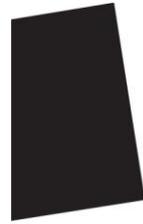


Mark Boulos, Dwight Clarke,
Stephen Connolly,
Ben Rivers and Stephen Sutcliffe
Essay by Gareth Evans
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Crossing the Bridge: What Matters in Contemporary Film and Video

“Why do I make films? I think it is out of necessity. A necessity with which we try to establish a relationship with others, through a dialogue with the secret interlocutor we all carry inside ourselves. And as Jean Renoir said, many years ago: “a film is made to create a bridge.”

Renoir spoke these words in a time when, for authors and spectators alike, one could maintain an existential relationship with the cinema in a natural, spontaneous manner without intermediaries. Today, it becomes more problematic to speak in those same terms, when the cinema as we have known it from its time of origin – that is, projected onto a screen – runs the risk of disappearing.

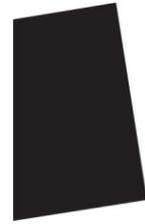
And if, in spite of everything, a person insists on the beautiful expression of Renoir, he or she cannot avoid asking: between which two shores will this bridge stretch; with what images and sounds will it be built; what relations to producers will condition it? The same questions could be asked of a period of crisis which is clothed in a certain intellectual pessimism, and which frequently embraces a dark fear: the fear that the shore where we hope to arrive is already an occupied territory, where a strange force has kidnapped, for the great majority of spectators, the ability to choose, to maintain a critical stance, and to experience an authentic sense of pleasure.

From these restless doubts – but also with the personal conviction that Renoir’s proposition continues to be fully valid – I have tried with all my limitations, to make films, to place myself in relation to others, to extend a bridge.”

Víctor Erice

The above was written by the remarkable Spanish feature film-maker Víctor Erice (*Spirit of the Beehive*) as a response to the question, ‘why do you make films?’, asked of international directors by the French newspaper *Libération* in 1987. It seems to me a statement of startling clarity, luminous in its faith, invigorating in the directness of its complexity, in every sense a challenge to which one should rise. This is not surprising, given it comes from the maker of one of the most fully realised, whole and open works in the history of the moving image.

In short, the text asks, ‘what matters?’ It asks this question implicitly on every possible level and to all participants – makers, audiences, all those involved in the chain of production and, of course, of Erice himself. In our times, there seem to be few more important questions, not because its answer means the end of enquiry but because, without its asking, no meaningful direction forward can be identified and taken.



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Lying somewhere between elegy and the stated call to action, 'what matters?' is a question that migrates across all territories of human existence at the present time. Its inevitable ongoing relevance speaks directly to both the issues it might consider, but also the means by which those issues could/should be addressed. If we cannot agree on what matters, how then can we enact its salvation? Culture, communication fora, media of all kinds: never have these arenas, at once personal and collective, been more important, speaking as they must both for the myriad diversities of our species and in acknowledgement of shared and indivisible aspects, traits and pressures. Never has it been more necessary that they work favourably and contribute to the resolution of any number of impending crises.

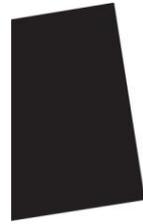
Taking the artworks assembled in *if – people and places in recent film and video* as an especially telling indication of the aesthetic zeitgeist and its preoccupations, it seems very possible to draw certain conclusions about some of the strategies by which contemporary film and video makers are raising, and tentatively edging towards answering this question.

First then, what are some of the commonly held qualities that these artists manifest, on the evidence assembled here? The idea of evidence itself seems relevant as the pieces very much present their material as found/sought, ready for decipherment. Here are narratives, stories even, but tentative, immersing their 'grander' arcs and trajectories in the flotsam and grit of the personal. There is an intimacy both of the subject matter and of the maker-observer. The boundaries here are fluid, but a commitment has been made. There is an act of witness at work. The visible becomes explicitly empathetic. Time is in the frame and it is not to be wasted on what is not important.

Thus there is attention. There is the close looking that, in past practice, came from drawing. From taking a line for a walk around its object. The hand would look, the better to understand its role and its own subsequent movement. Now the lens gazes like a protégée on what it finds, and it can be made great by the degree of its watching. To pay attention is to join what one looks upon..

Here the moments of detail and their attendant revelations build to a sense beyond attention, to testimony and the offering of witness to history. The gathered image is ordered into argument and aspiration. It becomes a document. This is not to say that these are documentaries. They do not seek to speak with the authority of a single truth, however welcome. They offer themselves as texts to be read, with the reader bringing their experience to the page as an essential component in the process (important, because it is ongoing) of understanding.

So, to the title of the gathering, *if*, with its cinematic insurgencies in mind. 'If' is of course its own question. But *what* if...? It embodies alternatives. And that is the secret. Another world is possible, if we believe it is and act. Any moment contains a multiplicity of other moments, but it also contains that moment, that moment and the next which, taken together, become the story that is told, the one that persists, the days that are welcomed or endured. The tension that can be suggested between the actual and the potential is one of the great assets of the moving image.



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That such moments are presented within the Bloomberg nexus is important. They both lean against the implications of the larger building and, in an intriguing way, strangely heighten its presence. By offering snapshots of the lives that breathe behind the consequences of the numbers in permanent flow around the atria and corridors, these works challenge the anonymous markets to recall their source humanities – that every individual and their life (or the selection here presented) reveal landscapes and legends that cannot be read by the silicon soothsayers.

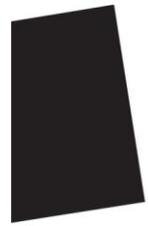
If there is a nostalgia in these works, albeit differently painted, it lies in this: that once there was a world where the overarching structures, the pressing global weights were not the only ones; that a lived and local order once existed – of land and love and longing – and that it can do, must do, again, if we are to make it through.

The margins become central. The overlooked is looked over. The man from the forest, the supermarket shelf-stacker, the murdered maverick, the anonymous resident, the utopian poet – all step in from the street and wander through the great halls.

Briefly a balance is rectified. There is resistance. Something new is set in motion. Something that matters.

In summary, the text by Christopher Logue, which gives Stephen Sutcliffe's eponymous work its voiceover, seems to offer itself as the ambiguously affirmative call to action that perhaps all these makers, in their various and singular pieces, would be willing to endorse. (Interesting to note that Logue wrote these words in that year of global upheavals, 1968, also the year *If...* was released). If one, as an artist, as a citizen, has arrived at an edge, in art or life, the personal or the social, the political or the metaphysical, then it can reasonably be assumed that they stand on the threshold between what matters and what might matter *more*. The choice and the response to that choice are the first steps across the bridge from that edge to what might be. Or rather become. Being, however active, is a state. Becoming is a process. Becoming is life as it needs to be lived, and now more than ever. What is clear: the present state of things cannot continue. That way lies oblivion. In their own, often very personal and illuminating ways, these artists know that. The future isn't what it used to be. Yesterday is dead and gone. So they step out, they start to cross the bridge, not knowing how long it will take to reach the far side, or even if there is indeed a side to be reached. They step out and, by doing so, they start to create the bridge.

*Come to the edge.
We might fall.
Come to the edge.
It's too high!
COME TO THE EDGE!
And they came,
and we pushed,
and they flew.*



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Christopher Logue

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