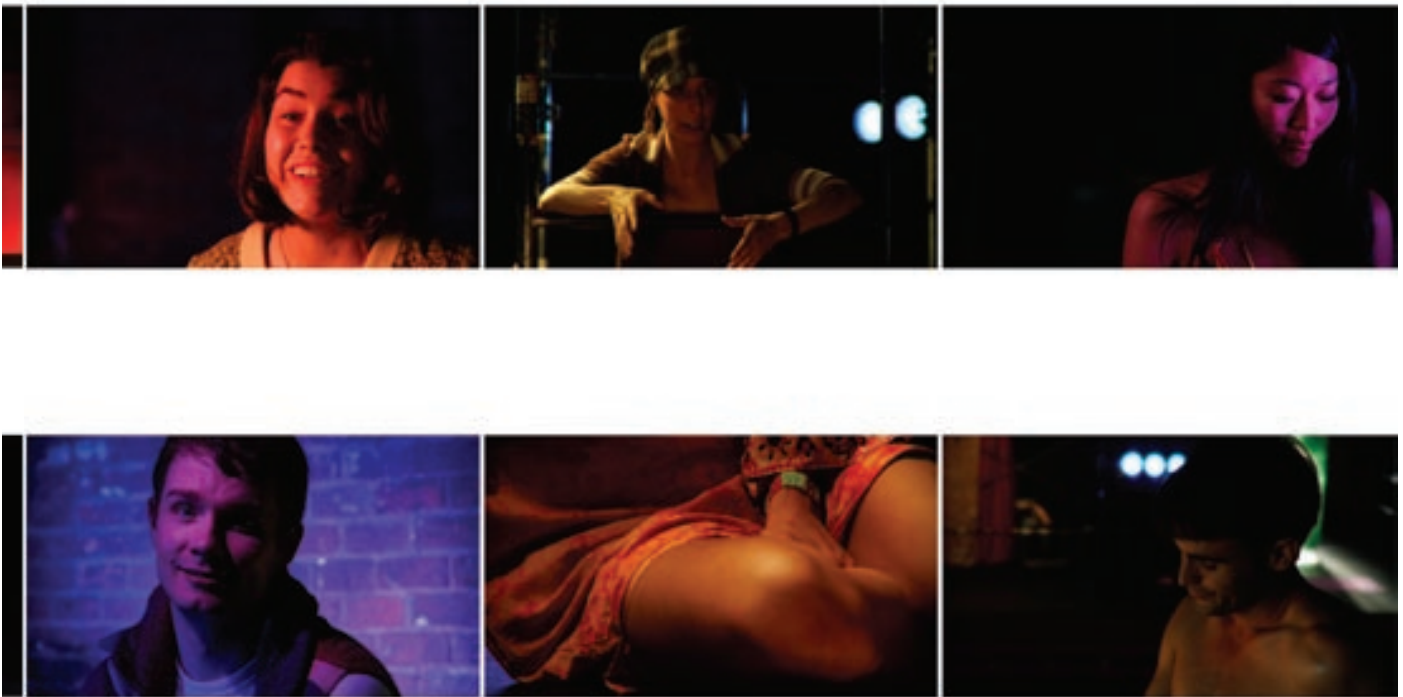


'Driver killed in B.Q.E. Truck Tragedy', *New York Post*, 23/7/2000 and *View from the southeast corner, Meeker and McGuinness*, are a reconstruction of sorts of Brecht's manifesto 'The Street Scene' (1938).³

The colour photographs show the aftermath of a traffic accident on a street corner, exactly like the one Brecht uses as an example in his text, and are accompanied by a long quotation from the manifesto in which Brecht explains the basic principles of epic theatre: the lack of emphasis of the actors, the production of an explicit account instead of an illusion and the complete absence of mimesis. Byrne's images show a burnt green traffic signal and a group of people standing by the street corner, on what looks like the access ramp to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in New York. Like in 'The Street Scene', the images illustrate what Brecht calls the 'most natural' example of epic theatre, as one of the bystanders seems to be telling the others about an accident that has just happened. By referring directly to Brecht, the photographs embrace the playwright's manifesto on non-illusionistic theatre, and propose it as a theoretical background for the rest of Byrne's works.

Why it's time for Imperial, again is based on an advertisement for the Chrysler Imperial published in 1980 in the *National Geographic* magazine, and features a dialogue between Frank Sinatra and Lee Iacocca, president of Chrysler at the time. The dialogue revolves around the new Imperial, a car that, according to Iacocca,



*ZAN-*T185 r.1:
(Interview) v.1, no. 4
 — v.2, no. 6 ... no. 21
 — v.3, no. 9., 2007,
 single-channel DVD
 projection, dimensions
 variable, stills

'the world had been waiting for'. He goes on to list the characteristics of this 'electronic marvel' to Sinatra, and describes its mechanical features and additional commodities, which, he says, are all factory standards (except for the 'power sliding roof'). In the screen the two actors can be seen repeating the dialogue several times while wandering through a depressed American suburb, walking along an abandoned rail track, sitting in a diner or hanging out in a children's playground fitted with brightly coloured plastic

3 Brecht, in 'The Street Scene', proposes a 'simple' model for epic theatre, which is presented as the opposite of Aristotelian theatre. The latter aims to provoke an empathy between the audience and the protagonist, and a subsequent resolution through catharsis: actors are meant to faithfully mimic the characters they represent, so that the audience is irreflexively transported to a fictional world. Brecht maintains that theatre needs to do the opposite: it has to be clearly recognisable as theatre, as artifice, as fiction. Epic theatre needs to abandon classical theatre's fourth wall, and present situations in such a way that the audience realises that there is no necessity to them, so they become aware of their own social context and of the possibility of political change. See Bertolt Brecht, 'The Street Scene', *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic* (trans. and ed. John Willett), London: Methuen Drama, 1964. Byrne also references Brecht explicitly in *In Repertory* (2005) — this time *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939).

statuses. Here, as in *ZAN-*Tr85 r.1, the ‘stage’ is both sparse and devoid of people, and the actors simply read their text without creating the illusion of a *mise-en-scène*, an event or a fiction. But, in this case, the sparseness is not that of a theatrical stage, but the ‘real’ world.

Unlike *Homme à Femmes*, and perhaps also *ZAN-*Tr85 r.1, *Why it’s time for Imperial, again* shows a blatant lack of correspondence between the text that the actors read and the setting where they do so. This disagreement exposes a disconnection between people and their context that constitutes a typical ‘modern disease’, and exposes a gap between a certain modernity (Imperial as an example of technological progress, Frank Sinatra as one of the embodiments of American popular culture and Chrysler as an emblem of the Fordist, capitalist model) and its decline (the deserted post-industrial landscape of Long Island, desolate diners and empty playgrounds). However, this simple game of contrasts is neutralised by the video’s montage, with its frequent edits and changes of camera angle that complicate any type of binary opposition, be it between modern and postmodern, industrial and post-industrial or progress and decay.

If Byrne’s work is not a simple articulation of contradictions, neither is it a simple transposition of the principles of epic theatre onto another medium – video. He undermines this possibility by ironically applying the Brechtian alienation effect to an already alienated content, to something whose principle itself is alienation: in *Why it’s time for Imperial, again* the subject is popular culture and luxury cars, in other works science-fiction writers, discussions of sexual lifestyle or eccentric actors on the verge of fame. The goal in *ZAN-*Tr85 r.1 is not to critique the aspiring actors’ lifestyle, and in *Why it’s time for Imperial, again* Byrne is not looking to expose the relationships between the car and entertainment industry, or the spurious democratisation of luxury. Something else must be at stake: on the one hand, even though he applies the strategies of the Brechtian alienation effect, Byrne short-circuits its ultimate goal, that is, making people aware of the unfairness of their circumstances as well as of the contingency of these circumstances, and, therefore, of the possibility of change. The subjects Byrne chooses for his videos are too co-opted into a popular imaginary to allow for this. He constructs his critique on a more abstract, less directly revolutionary and notably more subtle level: the work does not intend to drive people to effect change, but to expose social, historical, artistic and political constructs within art by applying Brechtian notions and techniques to different times and materials. And an essential result of this application is the negation of difference between the industrial and the post-industrial age, or between modernity and postmodernity – something that, at first glance, the work seems to maintain.

✱

In a more recent video, *1984 and Beyond* (2005–07), Byrne brings all these different elements into articulation. This piece was presented in Venice as three self-standing monitors placed in two rooms, accompanied by twenty black-and-white photographs showing typical American scenes and 1950s and 60s utopian projects – commercial signs, a rocket, a football stadium, a view of Manhattan, the lobby of a modernist skyscraper, a large model of the globe.⁴ Their style was borrowed from classic American photography (Robert Frank or Lee Friedlander), but the pictures were taken roughly at the same time the video was made (between 2004 and 2006). This overlapping of times is also essential to the video, which shows the re-enactment, in twelve chapters, of conversations that took place during a roundtable discussion between several science-fiction writers – including Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury – by invitation of *Playboy* in 1963.⁵ Byrne staged the discussion inside the walls of two emblematic examples of modernist architecture, Gerrit Rietveld’s Sonsbeek Pavilion at the Kröller-Müller Museum and Hugh Maaskant’s Provinciehuis in Den Bosch, both in the Netherlands. The topic of the roundtable was ‘life in 1984’, a date inspired by George Orwell’s *1984*, written in 1946–47 and published in 1949. The relatively short interval of 21 years

‘It is comparatively easy to set up a basic model for epic theatre. For practical experiments I usually picked as my example of completely simple “natural” epic theatre an incident such as can be seen on any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place.’ Bertold Brecht, ‘The Street Scene’, Published in Willets, J. ‘Brecht on Theatre’, London, 1964. Various views from the corners of Meeker and McGuinness Blvds, 2000 — ongoing, Fuji Crystal Archive prints, 50.8 × 61cm

4 The Unisphere from the 1964 New York World’s Fair.

5 Pohl Anderson, Isaac Asimov, James Blish, Ray Bradbury, Algis Budrys, Arthur C. Clark, Robert Heinlein, Frederick Pohl, Rod Sterling, Theodore Sturgeon, William Tenn and A.E. Van Vogt. The conversation was printed in *Playboy* in the July and August 1963 issues.



between the date when the conversation took place and the date when the predictions were to take place accentuates the ironic character of this venture, both in the initial conception by the editors of *Playboy* and in Byrne's re-enactment in 2005, 21 years after 1984. There are several layers of reality here: there is the 'reality' of 1963, presented by the actors and the text they read; the futuristic vision of 1984 that they depict in their dialogues; and the 2005 'reality' of staging the event 42 years later. The black-and-white photographs add to this confusion: they show details of American life in 2005 that seem to belong to 1963. At the centre of the work there is a future reality that is already past but has not been realised, an impossible time which can't ever happen, a time that refers the spectator to a moment when the future was still supposed to come, a time before post-history and post-utopia. The conversation between the small group of well-dressed men (following early 1960s fashion) moves from classical science-fiction motifs, such as flying cars and expeditions to Mars and the moon, to other topics such as futuristic sexual relationships, the transcendental orgasm, the discovery of a remedy for depression and the end of the Cold War – utopian dreams whose inevitability has now been tested (at least some of them).

The irony of re-presenting the utopian dreams of modernity once their failure has been all but certified is echoed by the alienation mechanisms Byrne employs, such as the actors' Dutch accents (the conversation is in English), their mannerisms and the imposing spaces that function as their stage. (The camera, always focusing on a group of actors or zooming in on a single person, treats the architecture as mere background, a background that, again, seems inappropriate for the kind of gathering that is taking place.) By means of this disrupted theatricality, there emerges in Byrne's work what George Baker has called 'a constructivism of the artificial' or a process of 'realisation', which I would like to reframe as the possible starting point for the 'new realism' that I introduced above.⁶ In his essay on Byrne's work, Baker sets up a familiar difference between the aesthetisation of reality by art, 'as if art could only perform as a kind of second-degree mythification', and the 'belief in the *productivity* of representation as such' (art conceived not as a copy of reality but as a 'set of directives for a mode of practice', or as a reality – or better realisation – itself).⁷ He concludes that Byrne relates the acting, photographic and filmic techniques to '*enactment and realisation*, less a (mimetic) realism than a form of making things real'.⁸

If this understanding of a realism as *a form of making things real*, as realisation, seems right to the point, Baker's subsequent discussion of this type of realism in relation to a notion of the unrepresentable is less convincing. According to Baker, the constructive capacity of Byrne's images is an effect of the impossibility of representing reality, of producing an image of which there is no possible experience – a conception indebted to Benjamin's writings. The artificial character of Byrne's images would then be a response to this unrepresentability. But, as Jacques Rancière has shown in 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?' (2003), unrepresentability only exists in a representative régime of the arts, in which hierarchies between what is represented and the way it is represented are essential to artistic production. Within the aesthetic régime, which is pre-eminent today and defined by the disappearance of any hierarchy, there is no such thing as the unrepresentable.⁹ The notion of a 'new realism' must be then constructed without an appeal to the unrepresentable: the artificial character of Byrne's images refers to an alternative representation, another form of realism which is defined by the fact that it inaugurates the possibility of a potential reality. What is at issue is not an attempt at representing the unrepresentable, but an interrogation about the means of representation itself, a construction of a realism that is no longer opposed to formalism or abstraction, but which is understood as a strategy for producing fictions and narratives. This notion of realism, which Baker considers at the beginning of his text, can be considered in terms proposed by Jacques Rancière as an investigation of the possibility of presenting or re-presenting someone or something 'as' someone or

6 George Baker, 'The Storyteller: Notes on the work of Gerard Byrne', in Vanessa Joan Müller (ed.), *Gerard Byrne: Books, Magazines, and Newspapers*, New York and Berlin: Lukas & Sternberg, 2003, pp.53 and 24.

7 *Ibid.*, p.24

8 *Ibid.*

9 Jacques Rancière, 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', *The Future of the Image*, London: Verso, 2007, pp.109–42. For an explanation of the three régimes (the ethical régime of images, the representative (or poetic) régime of art and the aesthetic régime of the arts) see Jacques Rancière, 'The Distribution of the Sensible', *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London and New York: Continuum, 2004, pp.20–23.

something else, by relying on the equality of everything with everything and the radical indistinction between men and things.¹⁰

In *The Distribution of the Sensible*, an attempt at defining a historical genealogy of art in opposition to modern or postmodern narratives (without linear disruptions between representation and abstraction), Jacques Rancière writes: ‘The leap outside of *mimesis* is by no means the refusal of figurative representation. Furthermore its inaugural moment has often been called realism, which does not in any way mean the valorisation of resemblance but rather the destruction of the structures within which it functioned.’¹¹ What Rancière, like Brecht, identifies as realism is a process of aesthetic realisation which relies on the rearrangement of the elements at play according to a principle of equality or, rather, of indifference. Stories about everything told by everyone; stories of cars, fame or women; stories that refer to the past and restage it, stories that in the era of post-history refer to the utopian dreams of the modern age. The disruptive force that results from this approach is not aimed at these failed dreams, but at the dominant discourse that claims the end of history, utopia and modernity.

A similar notion of realism could be found at documenta 12 in *9 Scripts from a Nation at War* (2007), a series of video works by David Thorne, Katya Sander, Ashley Hunt, Sharon Hayes and Andrea Geyer. Here the artists engaged professional and non-professional actors in restaging scripts that evolved around the question ‘How does war construct specific positions for individuals to fill, enact, speak from or resist?’¹² The work considers the processes by which ‘individuals’ – a veteran, a student, a citizen, an actor, a blogger, a lawyer, a journalist, an interviewer – are positioned in relation to the war. By switching their roles from one to another, the actors explore the differences of expression between subjective language, official diction and emphatic partisanship. The critical potential of *9 Scripts* thus lies on the questions that are posed by the disidentification of the actors – i.e. their shifts between different, even opposed positions – and the investigation of a form of realism that doesn’t intend to represent a scene but instead to propose an alternative through the awareness of the fact that reality is (inter-)changeable: it is the realisation of contingency that suggests a form of political resistance. Like *9 Scripts*, Gerard Byrne’s work doesn’t so much depend on the contents it communicates (especially as they are appropriated), nor on the fact that it actually communicates them, but on the creation of fictions that offer another approach to the real – another understanding of the relations between elements of the real, articulated on a formal level around a movement of disidentification between content, context and characters.

If there is a critical quality to Byrne’s work that goes beyond a reflection on the destiny of modernity or a nostalgia for an industrial, modern world, it lies on a double fictionality, one that goes back and forth between the fictionalisation of the real and the realisation of a fiction. Or, as Rancière puts it: ‘Fiction is not the act of telling imaginary stories. It is the construction of a new relationship between appearance and reality, the visible and its meaning, the singular and the common. If the affairs of cauliflower recounted in verse form have something to do with the political, it is not because they reveal a secret which hitherto had been ignored. It is because, in their own way, they do the same thing that politics does, because they blur the established separation between poetry and prose, between the language of public and private affairs, between places, functions and competencies.’¹³ The same could be said for Byrne’s videos: they don’t reveal anything about utopia, progress or the future (never mind about cars or Jean-Paul Sartre), but they do blur the established separation between fiction and reality itself, between history as progress and post-history, between the way one is supposed to deal with certain matters and the way they are actually dealt with, between irony and realism. In this blurring, the work reveals its critical nature.

overleaf
Homme à Femmes
(Michel Debrane), 2004,
video installation
with Dolby 5.1 Sound,
38min, dimensions
variable, production
still

10 One of the best ways to understand Jacques Rancière’s conception of the relation between documentary and fiction within art practice is through the films of Pedro Costa. These aren’t just the simple depiction of the daily goings of heroin addicts and jobless immigrants from Cap Verde in Lisbon; they show these characters in a different position. For example, a former worker in the building trade by the name of Ventura is shown in *Juventude em Marcha* (2006) ‘as a sort of lord coming from a distant country and a remote time’, that is, as someone capable of questioning the order of things by adopting a role that is not his. Jacques Rancière, ‘Image, Relation, Action: Questions about the Politics of Art’, unpublished manuscript, n.p.

11 Jacques Rancière, ‘The Distribution of the Sensible’, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004, p.24.

12 See <http://9scripts.info> (last accessed on 12 October 2007).

13 Jacques Rancière, ‘Politics of Art’, unpublished manuscript, 2007, n.p. The cauliflowers are a reference to Bertolt Brecht’s *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941).

