

The Great Ecstasy of Filmmaker Higgins

"I feel very close to Deleuze's view, because I think that in life, being is nothing but an illusion. If we acknowledge that and accept the fact that we are in between states, that we are moving, and this movement is the nature of our lives, and we stop having aspirations for being in a definite state, we know life better and are able to enjoy it better."

- Abbas Kiarostami (posted by Michael Higgins on his blog in May 2014).

One of the newly emerged group of Irish experimental filmmakers associated with the Experimental Film Society, Michael Higgins has so far completed eight no-budget or very low-budget feature films (with a ninth currently in post-production) and a large and restless body of shorts. In a recent article, Donal Foreman described Higgins as the 'nomad' amongst his peers, his outgoing vision contrasting with the brooding introversion characterizing films by Rouzbeh Rashidi, Dean Kavanagh and this writer. The road movie is Higgins' genre and the 'found' his theme, be that 'found' places, people or footage. A current of low-flame ecstasy and dry wit flows through his work, often leaving the viewer with an agreeable sense of joy by the films' conclusions. Yet there is nothing remotely sentimental in them. Higgins' poetic vision is extremely personal and mysterious, and there is something slightly unsettling in its combination of wry modesty and non-anthropocentric vastness. His gentleness seems to promise a humanism that never quite manifests. His cinema is ultimately about experiencing vision and subjective consciousness, looking beyond his characters into the depths of terrestrial space or falling short of them to focus on small details of place or on objects, right up to the surface material of film or video itself. He builds his films through an accumulation of details that are knitted together by the force of his fascination with them, a viewpoint that proves at once warm, detached and evasive. The lyrical drift of his work organically escapes any narrative expectations a viewer might try to project onto it, generally leading the audience into a dreamlike, internalized contemplation of a world that nevertheless remains not only material but presented through a palpably material medium.

His first features form a 'Road Movie Trilogy': *Roadside Picnic* (2010), *You Have Been Killed* (2011) and *Birds on a Wire* (2011). There is a marked symmetry between the three films. All are shot in black and white on HDV, all run for approximately one hour, all favour long takes with carefully composed static shots, and all centre on sets of two friends travelling abroad. *Roadside Picnic* and *Birds on a Wire* are mirrors of each other. The first follows two young Irish men backpacking around the roads of Iceland, the latter two young Polish women travelling in the rain sodden west of Ireland. Both capture a relaxed but slightly travel-frazzled mood with muted good humour. We never come to know the characters; their presence is a pretext for the audience to immerse itself in a vivid and intimate experience of a series of moments of laid back contemplation on the road.

This lack of traditional narrative or character identification is tantamount to staking the whole film on Higgins' instincts as a filmmaker: his visual sense, pacing, attention to atmosphere, general apprehension of the world. It's a gamble he is more than equipped to take. His framing is exquisite throughout, belying the guerilla conditions of the shoot and creating images that engage the viewer in the pleasure of the present moment, however uneventful it may be from a narrative point of view. What is mysterious is how subjectively specific the moments Higgins presents us with seem, while not allowing us to identify that subjectivity with any of the characters. The voyagers remain friendly strangers on the screen with whom we share some passing moments but it is for us to make our own connections with the world the films conjure up without the aid of character identification. The independent position Higgins assigns his audience is made clear in a shot that occurs quite late in *Roadside Picnic*. His camera frames a comically bleak and barren patch of foggy Icelandic countryside. The two Irishmen play a game of 'I Spy', absurd given the dearth of things around to 'spy' ("R!" "Road?" "No!" "Rain?" "Yes!"). The characters remain off screen on either side of the frame, passing before the lens only briefly when they swap positions as part of the game. The audience, therefore, is invited to participate in the game with only the landscape before its eyes whilst never being sure exactly where the characters are or what they are seeing.

What is disconcerting and perhaps unique here is the deft way Higgins fronts his pitch with easygoing charm and, instead of delivering on it with the comedy we might expect, puts us in a contemplative relationship with the world that we might more readily associate with far more self-consciously weighty cinematic subject matter in the Bela Tarr vein. This is not a cheap trick calculated to befuddle the audience. For a start, there is no marked shift in the direction or tenor of these films, they just serenely reveal themselves as they unfold. Our expectations are not Higgins' concern. Secondly, his sense of lightness remains consistent. The characters and situations might appear trivial or frivolous but the films never do because they do not stem from the characters and are not guided by them. Higgins' viewpoint might be compared to that of a pet dog, observing and enjoying without being any more tied to human experience than to the innocent appreciation of any other aspect of the world that presents itself. This results in a floating universe, one that is prone to be muddy, windy and fraught with at least moderate frustrations along the lines of waiting endlessly by an isolated road for a lift in wretched weather. But such inconveniences are viewed with the same equanimity as the more obviously pleasant circumstances. This lightness notwithstanding, Higgins sets us viewers well and truly adrift in his world and this is not without a degree of unease. It is up to us: we can either let go and enjoy or cling to expectations of empathy and perhaps become alienated from the film in consequence.

In either case, he convincingly demonstrates that lightness and seriousness are not necessarily contradictory when fused in a modernist cinematic idiom.

The brilliant and very strange *You Have Been Killed* provides a sort of key to the formal demands of the films flanking it in the trilogy, to their investment in cultivating the viewer's own capacity for perceptual involvement and immersion. More overtly experimental than the other two, it accompanies two young men, presumably filmmakers, to a film festival featuring a cinematography masterclass in snow choked Poland. The director of photography lecturing at the masterclass dogmatically equates good cinema with an invisible camera: if a viewer notices the camera work, the movie has failed. Only 'story' has value. Higgins' film is an understatedly ironic counter-argument that seems to do everything it can to highlight the presence of the camera as a device for raising the perceptual awareness of the viewer, whilst dispensing with anything traditionally understood as 'story'. Where 'story' is introduced, it is in the hyperbolic caricature form of animated scenes taken from a video game the guys play showing gangsters planning a hit and engaging in a car chase. This emphasizes both the artificiality and knockabout fun of mainstream narrative in its crudest manifestation. But even this visual form, with its player-controlled angles, has little use for the 'invisible camera'. The announcement that ends these games gives the film its title: *You Have Been Killed*.

The rest of the film is divided into four different scene types. The opening minutes are dominated by gently humorous, dialogue-free shots, stolen at the festival, of participants moving around or attending the workshop, images apparently taken on the sly and yet framed and choreographed with such comic precision that it's hard to believe they weren't planned. This counters the 'invisible camera' argument with a Tati-esque joy in simply observing people. Then there are scenes hanging out in domestic interiors, the same relaxed savouring of time's passing that characterizes the other films in the trilogy, where the sensory awareness of being in a space as achieved through conscious visual contemplation proves that 'story' is not always a necessity. These are contrasted with rawer scenes of the two men on the road in extremely poor weather conditions. The camera here is literally battered by the weather, its lens struck by snow and its microphone distorted by wind. Its now fragile presence as a sensitized recording object within the scene vividly conveys the conditions of actually being within that scene. Finally, there are scenes of pure abstraction: snow turning to animated grain on a white screen, protracted images of rural landscapes rendered spectral by being presented in negative and made even more uncanny by the use of natural sound.

If a rebuttal of the notion of the 'invisible camera' is *You Have Been Killed*'s starting point, it would be inaccurate to portray the film as a dry polemic. The poetic lengths Higgins goes to in demonstrating the experiential potential of a cinema where audiences are not 'taken out of themselves' but, on the contrary, sensitized as consciously perceiving entities actually results in a testament to the medium's visionary potential. The hints of unease in the other two films in the trilogy are not only confirmed here, they are brought to the fore. On the one hand, there is the amiable and inconsequential interplay between the two friends; on the other, a radical plunge beyond the limits of the image suggesting a liminal zone that is not only beyond the representational but perhaps even between life and death. The one does not lead to the other: the two co-exist, to the point that Higgins unsettlingly juxtaposes protracted landscape shots in negative with ordinary, everyday sound to ghostly effect. The 'invisible camera' ultimately finds its most compelling rejection in the 'invisible image'.

The more abstract passages in this film, especially when viewed alongside the other two films in

the trilogy, indicate the primacy of perception in the form of an encounter for the audience in Higgins' work. If the other films draw our attention beyond the characters into landscape, here the materiality of the image functions in the same way. We are invited to an encounter with vision, to see what Higgins has 'found', whether that be a place, an object, a person, or film and video formats, textures and technologies in and of themselves. His next two features, *Concrete Walls* (2011) and *The Poorhouse Revisited* (2011), provide neatly contrasting examples of the various categories of 'found' in Higgins.

What is 'found' in *Concrete Walls* is a place: an abandoned industrial building fallen into disrepair. This almost event-free film is basically a contemplation of this atmospherically resonant space. The trilogy's carefully composed long takes have reemerged in a consciously hieratic form, abandoning any residue of the anecdotally observational in favour of a rapt, immersive pictorialism. A man wanders through the building, examining it as he goes. At a certain point, he is replaced by a dog. The spaces inevitably recall Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979, which was, of course, originally based on a story called *Roadside Picnic*). The otherworldly ambience is compounded by the constant, hypnotic presence of a drone soundtrack by Síol Na Gréine, music for 'reverence and reflection' as the musician's website puts it. With these few simple elements, Higgins is able to create an exceptionally intense, enclosed world that feels oddly contemporary with the work Philippe Garrel or Werner Schroeter were creating in the early and mid '70s.

If the building is both the 'found object' and the 'encounter' Higgins arranges for his audience in *Concrete Walls*, these descriptions apply to the film material itself that makes up *The Poorhouse Revisited*. Higgins literally found the discarded, decomposing 16mm rushes of Frank Stapleton's 1996 TV film *Poorhouse* at the location where *Concrete Walls* was shot and edited them into a new work, one which I described in an earlier review as "a celebration of the textural richness of decaying, discoloured 16mm film, decomposed to the point of abstraction. The ghostly images that survive within it are appropriately ancient looking and famished- images from a drama about the Irish Famine that might initially suggest one of Bill Morrison's epic reframings of footage from early cinema". There have been several versions of this film, some prepared for live musical accompaniment.

In certain short films, Higgins has used similarly damaged vintage footage that he stumbled across under sometimes remarkable circumstances. He has also made films from scratch that deliberately resemble these eloquent castoffs. More recently, these 'encounters' with the found have extended to 'found technology' with the use of a distinctively fuzzy Pixelvision camera in the shorts *04:49* (2013) and a device for remotely monitoring sleeping babies in the excellent, very dark *Funnel Web Family* (2013). Both of these techniques cast the films adrift from the present moment without locating them in another specific time. This lends them a sometimes creepily alien viewpoint, a vision that is at once contemporary and slightly out of synch with the times: the perspective of the recently forgotten. As in the *Road Movie Trilogy*, the images can often seem strangely personal and subjective while the source of this subjectivity remains impossible to pinpoint exactly. Unlike in the first features, there are no characters on screen to mark the displacement of audience identification: instead, it is located in the function and origin of the images themselves. In the decayed film works, there is the sense of the material having already had another life, another context that still haunts it to the point of making the viewer feel both slightly voyeuristic and uncomfortable. Strangers at a family funeral. A sense of voyeurism is overtly central to *Funnel Web Family* where the greasy black and white video images of a family seem taken by the prowling phantom of retired surveillance equipment.

Still another approach to the 'found' that Higgins has been developing lately is in documentaries that engage with the idea of the 'readymade'. The starkest example is the harrowing one-take documentary monologue Saorise (2011). While that video was simply 'rescued' by Higgins, more recently he has started a mysterious series entitled Bobb (2014). Although this project is in its early stages, it so far seems to be dealing with the concept of readymade footage in more ambiguous and playful terms. And his soon to be completed, feature length Acting the Clown (2014) is a more straightforward attempt to shape a documentary that is still based on material that was initially 'found' and that keeps the textures and ruptures of raw documentation. All of these documentaries are fundamentally portraits of outsider individuals.

Higgins' often anarchistic identification with outsider figures, as well as his fascination with the 'found', informs his warmly empathic and arrestingly off-the-wall feature Smolt (2013). This visionary plunge through the overheated escapades and fantasies of a couple of free-ranging young teens living on the brink of crime in one of Dublin's rougher corners was rightly praised by Donal Foreman as being "a refreshingly personal and unpatronising take on a milieu that has, post-Dardenne brothers, become grist to a festival mill idolising handheld, aestheticised grit." Where it differs markedly from most of Higgins' other work is that there is no ambiguity about the subjectivity of the film's perspective: we experience Smolt through Darren, Higgins' charismatic (very) young leading man Adam Carolan's character. Smolt developed from a short that was shot on a professional Red camera. In expanding to feature length, it came to encompass footage recorded on all sorts of lo-fi devices and formats, including video shot by the kids themselves and material uploaded to Youtube. The finished film has a VHS texture and was described by Foreman as "a strange bootleg tape of artefacts from another time and place". A fiction that draws on documentary and a sensitivity to the aura of the found object. Yet here, more blatantly and thus more visibly than in Higgins' other work, this materialist concept is more a strategy for personalising the world it depicts than for laying any claims to verisimilitude. And this world is, defiantly, an inner world: a trippy, wildly ecstatic emotional rollercoaster replete with protracted, darkly blissed-out slo-mo set pieces of buildings being demolished set to Brian Conniffe's soaringly in-your-face drone soundtrack. Yet the romance of the found object informed even Higgins' distribution strategy: in a beautiful gesture, the filmmaker left free DVD copies of the film at various locations around Dublin for anybody curious enough to pick one up.

The film in which Higgins' strengths and concerns find their purest and most compelling form is the magnificent Some Must Watch While Some Must Sleep (2012). Shot on Super-8 stock that was subsequently hand-processed, Some Must Watch was filmed on a journey Higgins made through rural Canada. Another road movie, yet one which doesn't follow the anticipated trajectory of a physical journey, drifting instead into an oneiric state of suspension between sleep and wakefulness. As in the trilogy, except now more explicitly, the journey through landscape turns out to be the pretext for a journey through an inner landscape that gradually reveals itself to be in a state of stasis, the spiritually charged stasis of Concrete Walls. The presence of character is further stripped away, with the perceptual and material qualities of the DIY film techniques now recognized as sufficiently personalized to cast a spell on the audience, something still just suggested by the trilogy. The grainy, scratchy beauty of the bucolic images seem slightly otherworldly and certainly somewhat out of time from the outset. And by the end, after a long interlude with an endlessly sleeping woman and a couple of flirtations with documentary, we find ourselves adrift on another planet wondering just how or when we were transported there, entranced by a work of cinematic poetry of the highest order.

