



EXPERIMENTAL CONVERSATIONS

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ISSUE 9: SUMMER 2012

Michael Higgins' *The Poorhouse Revisited* (2011) was presented in The Joinery, Dublin, this January as part of the exhibition 'Selected Stories Part 5: Four Is To Three' curated by Tadhg O'Sullivan. The show, and the screening events that stemmed from it, were presented as 'a series of screenings and talks based around works that utilise, challenge and subvert a shared cultural and historical memory that has increasingly become framed in the technical and narrative apparatus of the moving image'. *The Poorhouse Revisited* is an appropriately slippery point of entry to the unstable preconceptions found footage cinema often deals in.

Higgins' film is 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. However, the source material is actually much newer: Higgins discovered the rotting rushes of Frank Stapleton's 1996 period drama *Poorhouse*, which was broadcast on RTÉ television at the time. His authorised re-edit of this material could almost be seen as proposing a new, materialist spin on period filmmaking: not only should costumes and settings recreate times gone by, but the film itself should appear equally aged! And yet, there is a certainly a poignancy to the reality of time wreaking such elaborate erasure on images less than twenty years old which were created to evoke a more distant past. Time's passage present as both idea and reality.

Tadhg O'Sullivan's multiple presentations of this work teased out its fluid identity well. It was projected on loop as part of an exhibition of found footage films, which also included work by Rouzbeh Rashidi, Chris O'Neill and Sylvia Schedelbauer. Then it was performed as a live cinema event in the tightly packed back room of The Joinery. Projected double, on two walls at ninety degrees to each other, presumably to allow for a good view wherever you were standing or

sitting in the crowded space, the film was well accompanied by musicians Brian Conniffe, Diarmuid McDiarmada and Suzanne Walsh. The overall experience was joyously immersive; any remaining narrative elements in the film were washed away by this presentation, leaving only the bliss of pure texture which made it hard to keep track of time. There was also a screening, which I was unfortunately unable to attend, of the original *Poorhouse*, by many accounts a fine piece of work in its own right, in the presence of Stapleton and writer Michael Harding.

The Poorhouse Revisited (which has been selected for this year's Galway Film Fleadh) is one of several works Higgins has made so far using (often literally) found footage and/or working with the textures of 'damaged' film, although this is by no means the only style he works in. The brilliant and prolific Higgins is currently one of Ireland's most exciting filmmakers and one deserving of far greater attention than is currently being accorded him. As well as a large body of short films and videos, he is responsible for a handful of oblique and haunting features such as *Birds on a Wire* (2011) and *Concrete Walls* (2011) which manage to be simultaneously quirky and rigorous. And unmistakably the work of a director with a very particular vision.

- Maximilian Le Cain