

A CONCERT IN THE CINEMA: "STOP MAKING SENSE"

Insofar as music is purely auditive, records and CD's are a great medium to capture and distribute it. But when 'music' is meant to include dance and drama, purely auditive media can reproduce only a segment of the entire performance. During the 1980's, Byrne turned increasingly towards film and theatre, since are able to include this wider range of performance modes. The combination of film with popular music brought the Talking Heads, and especially Byrne, their greatest popularity, and it also allowed Byrne to experiment with the working methods of the performance theatre that he admired. On the other hand, since filmmaking in general is much more expensive than the process of recording music, the economic pressures of the film industry almost exclude artistic experimenting, as Byrne would learn by experience.

When the Talking Heads had expanded to a group of eight or nine musicians, they gradually elaborated their live concerts. The Tom Tom Club usually opened concerts, with a short set of infectiously rhythmical songs that were simple, playful and refreshing. The Talking Heads then played a selection of songs that spanned their development, from the tense rock of their early years to the rhythmic complexity of "Remain In Light" and the lavish funk of "Speaking In Tongues". On stage, the musicians were arranged in two lines, with drums, percussion, and synthesizers elevated on black risers in the back of the stage. This sober, formal presentation was designed to showcase the dramatic aspects of the concert and the songs that were performed. Byrne had developed a number of routines that acted out the personae of his songs; now by jogging in place, now by singing through a megaphone to give his voice a tinny and distant sound, or by skipping with an imaginary rope, and running around the stage, disappearing behind the black risers to come out again at the other side.

In 1983, Byrne worked with theatre director Robert Wilson: he contributed a musical score to Wilson's international performance theatre project "the CIVIL warS". He had been following Wilson's work for some time. In 1976, "Einstein on the Beach" had impressed him because of its deliberate slowing down of time, and because of its sense of theater as a plotless environment, an atmosphere you can leave and return to in the course of the performance.¹ In his productions, Wilson regularly separates the visual elements from text and music. He then uses extremely detailed and formalized lighting to single out and frame the movements of a single actor, or to present a single prop or a backdrop in exquisite, individual light. For the Talking Heads' 1983 U.S. tour, Byrne used some of Wilson's methods. He approached each song as a little play, with its own lighting design, and devised a little, intimate dance that he did together with an upright lamp.

The show was ready to be captured visually, and Byrne felt that cinema would be the right format. When the band was approached by director Jonathan Demme with a proposal to make a documentary concert film, Byrne jumped at the opportunity. The band was able to provide the necessary budget of \$ 1,200,000, and the film, named "Stop Making Sense", was shot in December 1983, during four concerts at the Pantages Theatre in Hollywood.

The idea of the film was to give a cinema audience the best possible experience of the concert as such. Abstractions were avoided. No dressing room interviews, no glances behind the scenes of a touring band, no comments from roadies, fans or tour manager. Demme also used restraint in shooting the film, using long takes of musicians instead of countless quick cuts, and avoiding artificial ways to create excitement and involvement, such as special effects and regular cutaways to an enthusiastic audience.² Instead, he presented the musicians as if each were a character that revealed itself in the course of the film, and the band as a group of people with its own patterns of interaction. To help establish their individual identities, he filmed most shots of the musicians from fixed positions, thus creating a series of stable perspectives for the film's audience.

Demme used the many perspectives on the stage that were provided by several cameras to highlight the interaction between the musicians, their intense concentration and pleasure in making music. By not always zooming in on a lead solo's, showing another musician's responses to that solo instead, the film presents the band as nine different characters enjoying themselves together. Byrne in particular clearly has a lot of fun on stage, dancing with the others, mimicking their movements and being mimicked in turn. Even while the cinema audience misses the direct crowd experience of the live concert, it is presented with a more direct, intimate and close-up experience of the band than it would be able to have during a regular concert. Because of this, "Stop Making Sense" was widely hailed as the best rock film ever made, and won the prize of America's National Society of Film Critics for best documentary of 1984.

There is a second aspect to the film. Byrne had thrown himself into finding gestures for his song personae, bringing to bear his growing experience with performance theatre, and even inviting director Joanne Akalaitis of New York's avant-garde theatre Mabou Mines to come see the band's rehearsals and to give him advice.³ Typical for the anti-illusionary approach that is often characteristic of performance theatre is that the film openly shows the stagehands, slide projectors, screens and light assistants that are used during the concert. The grossly oversized white suit that Byrne wears during the second half of the concert is also designed to make Byrne explicitly look dressed up.

Another performative addition: for the second half of “Stop Making Sense”, screens were lowered behind the band, on which three billboard-size slides could be projected next to each other. Most of these projections combine three isolated words or groups of words: DOLL FACE | PUBLIC LIBRARY | ONION, and: VIDEO GAME | SANDWICH | DIAMONDS; later followed by indications of time: BEFORE | YOU’RE | AWAKE, by photos of arms, buttocks and knees, cityscapes, bookshelves. These words and pictures are not introduced and remain unexplained. They draw attention, but withstand attempts at interpretation: they only serve as a reminder that here, as in life, a great deal of potential information necessarily remains undigested and not interpreted.



1 Byrne’s face illuminated to present a ghost-like mask. Photo Hugh Brown / Dave Friedman, from the booklet that accompanied the “Stop Making Sense” album.

But the central performative aspect of “Stop Making Sense” is the way in which Byrne represents the personae of the songs. In “Psycho Killer”, “Swamp” and “Once In A Lifetime”, Byrne stumbles and staggers across the stage like a buffeted rag doll, as if thrown about by some irresistible mythical force. During “What A Day That Was”, lighting from underneath transforms Byrne’s face into an archetypal mask, made up out of loose parts: chin, mouth, underside of the nose, and eyes form an impersonal, skull-like face that shudders and trembles. A similar effect is produced when the band is silhouetted against a backdrop, creating the illusion that there are two bands: one of shadowy giants and another of tiny humans. Towards the end of the movie, Byrne’s personae find more happiness, in songs like “This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)” and “Girlfriend Is Better”. All in all, this development suggests an abstracted story of a man who is overwhelmed by outside forces and suffers an identity crisis, but somehow finds a

way of dealing with it through the music, and achieves a kind of balance. As told by Byrne: “the implied story... was of this man who frees himself from his demons and finds release and salvation in his big suit... He can cut loose in this house made of a business suit.”⁴

The film begins with a close-up of Byrne’s shoes walking on stage. He sets down a boom box and switches it on; it produces a mechanical beat. Byrne then starts strumming his guitar, and launches into “Psycho Killer”—but later in that song, while he moves around the stage, he lets himself repeatedly be thrown off balance by the very rhythm he started. Starting with this opening scene, the film clearly deals with simulated and self-induced psychosis. Art critic Carter Ratcliff has singled out this aspect:

[Byrne insists that] in a world of institutions, ‘lifestyles’, and scenes designed to absorb the self, all selves with even a trace of authenticity must acknowledge that they are—but must also object to being—patched together. Selfhood is a state of resistance to the seemingly natural fate of absorption. Its first tactic is to admit that singularity lives by means of artifice: images, fictions, rhetoric. Next, the surviving self must acknowledge the shakiness of all that artifice constructs.

Near the end of “Stop Making Sense” a shadow appears against the back wall of the stage—it is Byrne’s body distorted by the light beam’s angle. Then the giant suit looms into view, at least doubling the volume of his body, and you realize that the shadow was a distortion of a distortion. During a big-suit song, “Once In A Lifetime,” Byrne arranges his left hand in the form of a duck’s head and quacks it at his own face. “How do I work this?” asks the lyric. The singer is asking about himself, the creature he has invented for use in the world. Enforced by suit, stage, and camera lens, the general flatness insists that Byrne’s self-images are definitely images, if not so definitely selves.⁵

“Stop Making Sense” succeeds in capturing such duplicitous combinations of musical enthusiasm with delusion and disillusion. The film demonstrates how enthusiasm and other forms of possession are not just artistic illusions, but form the ritual aspect of the interactions of the individual with his surroundings. Byrne had always approached songwriting as if he were making small mimetic arena’s, theatrical performances in which voices and rhythms confront each other, interact, and sometimes harmonize. From now on, he would repeatedly turn to film as a medium that allows to elaborate and clarify such performances.

When nine songs of the *Stop Making Sense* soundtrack were issued as a live record, Byrne added to the album a series of statements that he wrote with help of Michael Hodgson and Jeff Ayeroff. These statements circle around performance and music, questioning them from irregular perspectives. These are some examples that deal with music:

TIPS FOR PERFORMERS: Singing is a trick to get people to listen to music for longer than they would ordinarily. There is no music in space. People will pay to watch people make sounds.

LIFE ON EARTH: People look ridiculous when they’re in ecstasy. Sound is worth money.

THE SPACE PEOPLE: The Space People think factories are musical instruments. They sing along with them. Each song lasts from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. No music on weekends.

IN THE FUTURE: In the future, love will be taught on television and by listening to pop songs.

Such statements invite the reader to consider the meaning and the function of musical performance, and suggest that neither is quite as clear as it might have appeared. The back of the album cover bears a series of questions, recalling questions for an interview with Byrne, but one to which no answers are provided. The opening question reads: “Why “Stop Making Sense”?”

The development of the Talking Heads was summed up so definitely by the film that after the “Speaking In Tongues” tour, they would not play live again. When the other band members asked Byrne to tour with the songs of his film “True Stories” in 1987, he came up with a proposal for concerts at drive-in movie theatres, that would have actors come onstage between songs;⁶ suggestions that the others did not take to. After “Stop Making Sense”, Byrne would be as much engaged in the dramatic, ritual and visual aspects of performance as in the purely musical.

A CONCERT PUT IN CONTEXT: “TALKING HEADS VS. THE TELEVISION”

Because Byrne felt that the Talking Heads’ concerts were somewhat cinematic, and deserved the sound quality, the large screen, and the concentrated audience that the cinema provides, he did not want to put the show on television as it was.⁷ When British television director Geoff Dunlop proposed making a television documentary about a Talking Heads concert, Byrne accepted and collaborated as an artistic advisor, determined to address the specific qualities of television. He had always been interested in TV, had written a song about a couple that is dissatisfied with the offered programmes and responds by making their own life and relationship into a TV show (“Found A Job”, on “More Songs about Buildings and Food”), and made video clips. This documentary was a new opportunity to deal with the distracting flow of programmes and channels. A comparison of the one hour long documentary, titled “Talking Heads versus The Television”, with “Stop Making Sense”, shows how Byrne tries to bring out the special performative qualities of every form in which his songs are presented.

Dunlop filmed a Talking Heads concert in 1984 in London’s Wembley Arena. Contrasting with “Stop Making Sense”, his documentary does include shots of the band in the dressing room, during the sound check, as well as segments from an interview with Byrne: this time, the concert is interrupted, and placed within several distinct contexts. This of course detracts from the involving qualities of the concert, but it does fall in with the casual experience of watching TV, where the programme is as often as not seen within the context of other programmes, and,

more to the point, within the context of the viewer's own house and the lives going on there.

Instead of neglecting such distractions, which inevitable frame the viewer's experience, Dunlop's documentary addresses them openly and thoroughly, a choice that makes "Talking Heads vs. The Television" as remarkable as "Stop Making Sense". Dunlop wanted to deal openly with the diverging performative situations of a live concert and of television viewing. Byrne agreed with this emphasis on television and the media environment, but insisted on including religious, anthropological and ethnographic material as well. He helped Dunlop go through a great deal of existing footage that might be included, and suggested points where that footage would correspond to the Talking Heads' concert. Byrne also convinced Dunlop not to use anthropological or religious footage that made its subjects look foolish.⁸ It took a long time to secure releases of all the footage used in the montage, and that was partly responsible for the fact that "Talking Heads vs. The Television" was finally broadcast in 1989, five years after the concert was filmed.

The documentary opens with white noise and images to represent the whole chain of production and reception of television: TV assembly lines, commercials for satellite TV, a flood of diverse imagery and a TV host making a declamatory announcement: "...and receive all the television there is to see in North America!" The concert venue is introduced in a similar way, connecting the Talking Heads concert to a number of other spectacular performances: "The name of this place is Wembley Arena, venue for rock concerts, Horse of the Year show, Holiday on Ice, tennis, Harlem Globetrotters, 5-a-side football..."

The first song that the band plays, "Life During Wartime" is placed firmly within the context of TV viewing by illustrating it with found television footage. The lyric of this song presents the inner monologue of someone, a spy, terrorist, guerrilla or criminal, who is in hiding in a city and views his situation. He considers his resources: passports, visas, food rations, phone taps, a partner, and thinks longingly of the regular life from which he has cut himself off: the world of parties and disco, of education in night school or college, of carefree fooling around and kissing. Ideas for this lyric may well have come from television. During the thousands of hours of television viewing that are part of a regular upbringing, crime films and thrillers teach everyone what the world looks like from the position of the outlaw, the lone warrior or the spy. It is thus debatable whether the use of TV footage lifts the song out of its context, the Talking Heads concert, or returns it to its original context, the excitements and distractions of the home theatre.

"Life During Wartime" is contextualized and illustrated by found footage in at least five distinctively different ways. Footage lifted from police series and thrillers is used to create an atmosphere of tension and excitement. Later in the song, the television sound of wailing police sirens replaces a screeching guitar solo. Some of the footage is connected to the words of the song. A breathtaking example of

montage juxtaposes a spectacular camera movement, lifted from a car chase through a big city, when the camera swipes in a 180 degree tilt over tall building blocks, with a similar shot of Byrne singing ecstatically. And the soundtrack is interrupted completely by a brief documentary segment about inner city warfare, with footage of ruined building blocks.

This approach is addressed in a voice-over by Byrne, which accompanies the introductory scenes that precede the first song:

I try to take ordinary things and make them be seen in a new light, by breaking them up into bits and trying to reorganize them ... I wanted to make boring things seem dramatic, instead of dramatic things seem boring. An ordinary thing put into an extraordinary place isn't ordinary anymore. Like scratching your head in front of a few thousand people isn't the same as scratching it in front of your family... When the performance is successful, something transcendent happens, that has to do with the audience and the musicians losing their ego's, immersing themselves into sort of one identity. It need only happen in a performance for thirty seconds or so, and that justifies the whole thing.

The contextualizing strategy of "Talking Heads versus The Television" is emphasized further by the use of ethnographical and religious footage: women and men from different cultures, dancing in ecstatic trance; people dancing to music in sub-Saharan Africa, Japan, Italy, an Arab country and China; footage of Americans describing their personal experiences of a divine presence; and shots of television preachers who use the TV to broadcast healing rituals, shouting: "Put your hand against mine." "Heal, in the name of Jesus!" "It'll pour through that tube right into you."

The ethnographic footage of people in ecstasy is accompanied by Byrne's comments on the soundtrack:

I guess I might be considered religious in some sense. If most religions originated in a combination of a sense of awe and excitement, and a little bit of fear. People look ridiculous when they're in ecstasy, whether it's religious ecstasy or sexual ecstasy. They really look sort of distorted. People look ridiculous when they kiss... But, you know, people know that... they don't feel ridiculous.

This is continued a little later, following footage of several Americans who testify to their personal experience of God:

They combine excitement with spirituality, they take ordinary language and transform it into something exciting. It seemed like something that was very close to what I was doing. Maybe not what they were saying, maybe, but... the way they were saying it, and a little bit what they were saying as well.

And after the song "Slippery People", which has been illustrated with footage of breakdancers, acrobatic dancing in Africa, whirling derwishes, a highly disciplined dance in a mosque, and Chinese children waving flags while executing a dance, Byrne comments:

Some of my ideas about music in other cultures might be wrong, but I don't think that matters. In some way probably the misinterpreting other kinds of music and using it to my own ends, I think, is justified, and I think it's a good thing.

This is a statement with far-reaching implications. The whole documentary suggests, by means of its editing, that popular music should be considered simultaneously in the frame of mediation by the media industry, and in the frame of transcultural comparisons of musical rituals. It openly states that it can offer no secure point of view from where this interpretative quicksand could be overseen, and admits freely that mistakes and misinterpretations are inevitable.

Byrne shows his analytical predilection when he voices the opinion that “people look ridiculous when they're in ecstasy”, and when he recapitulates the development of the Talking Heads in pejorative terms of ‘artifice’ and ‘pantomime’:

When the band began, I think the band and myself wanted to strip away all... the artifice of performing. We wanted to, as little as possible, make it seem like we were putting on a show. We wanted to go on stage wearing our street clothes and not move around much. Gradually we ended up bringing things back in that were at one point unacceptable. I think it just became a matter of realizing that you are up on stage, that it is a pantomime.

Yet at the same time he presents himself while singing and dancing ecstatically, and expressly states as his belief that a form of ritual “transcendence” justifies the Talking Heads' concerts. Byrne oscillates between an ironic, analytical approach and the enthusiasm that takes him over during the performance—and he uses his conceptual and theoretical interest to balance the two.

CHAPTER 3 | FILM AND PERFORMANCE THEATRE

- 1 Byrne, quoted in Bowman: “Fa fa fa fa fa fa”, p. 91.
- 2 Demme did film such shots, but later decided not to use them. Bowman: “Fa fa fa fa fa fa”, p. 264.
- 3 When I asked what her advice had been, Byrne did not remember: “At one point I got to know JoAnne Akalaitis, and I think I invited her to a rehearsal, to say, will you look at this and tell me what you think—if you think this is working. I don't remember what she said, it might have been just only a little bit, but it was obviously helpful.” Byrne, interviewed by the author, 22 February 1999.
- 4 Byrne, interviewed by R.F. Thompson, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 21 April 1988, p. 52.
- 5 Carter Ratcliff, *Artforum*, May 1985, p. 97.
- 6 Bowman: “Fa fa fa fa fa fa”, p. 311, and *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 15 January 1987, p. 58.
- 7 Byrne, interviewed by Melinda Camber Porter, *The Manipulator*, spring issue 1984, pages unnumbered.
- 8 Byrne, e-mail to the author, 14 May 1999.