

THE  
SKATEPARK  
AND THE  
LIBRARY

## THE SKATEPARK AND THE LIBRARY

Matt Turner

'The infinitesimal in the infinite reflection of a camera recording. We touch and we make the sun: We make time.'

– Isiah Medina

Within the first minute of Isiah Medina's *88:88* (2015) we are met with a formidable array of sounds and images, plus more cuts than are found in most feature-length films. We see fragments of road signs, street scenes, passing trains, algebraic equations, pages of a diary, a meter that displays the numbers of the film's title, and a great many bodies and faces. We hear snippets of conversation, half-monologues, a few seconds of classical music, several sirens, much quotation, and, more than once, the juddering sound of analogue film being rewound on an editing table. Images are double exposed, layered quadruple, or cut quickly, forming rhythmic flickers or ghostly traces. Sound jerks, jitters, or cuts out altogether. And through this frenetic tide of material we encounter a vast range of colours, shapes, textures, tonalities, noises, effects, and technologies, all coming at us in variable resolutions and bit rates, at hyperspeed. It is more matter than we know what to with, more stuff than any eye-brain connection can consciously process. It is a big wave that hits and knocks us down.

In 2015 – and, admittedly, still today – this felt like the forging of a new language, an attempt at taking all the known tools that one-hundred-plus years of cinema had offered and throwing them into a cauldron, out of which spoonfuls of some unfamiliar concoction could be served. And in its volume, density, and all-encompassing sense of sonic-visual overwhelm, this opening minute also felt like an invitation for the viewer to surrender to the film to follow, to let the continuing waves wash over, permitting us to draw meaning and feeling from aspects in isolation and in combination rather than attempting to decode the thing whole. An audio fragment from this opening minute enigmatically states that "words flood the continent," and over the film images come and go, flash in and fade out, and in their bricolage coalescence, form a picture – of a place and period, of a milieu, and above all, of a sensation: the working through, and working out, of ideas, struggles, and principles in real life, in real time. Part personal diary, part co-authored fiction, part music video, and part formal experiment, *88:88* works with abundance, offering not just one pathway but a plurality of them, constantly planting stray threads to grasp a hold of, then pulling them away, only to return to and develop each, and through this accumulation lending everything greater and greater weight.

Born in Winnipeg in 1991, the Filipino Canadian filmmaker, now living in Toronto, did not pull this new style out of nowhere, instead developing it through various Tumblr-distributed short films that test out the techniques and ideas *88:88* contains. With *Semi-auto colours* (2010), shot at night in winter on an effectively grubby 16mm stock, the filmmaker builds a rhythmic fiction out of the real-world elements of his West End hometown and the people he grew up around. Much like *88:88*, the film's narrative is shaped through on-screen text message intertitles, slivers of rap lyrics, and digressional, confessional asides. And its emotional core likewise comes from the filmmaker's affectionate gaze and a methodology that centres friends as subjects and collaborators. In *Time is the sun* (2012), these elements progress,

adding the adaptability of digital cameras to the assemblage to create the types of strikingly multilayered images that give *88:88* its elastic form, over which layers of exploratory thought are interwoven into a personal narrative of student debt, protest, and a self-didactic kind of growth. Then in *(Ǝu) [u ≤ f and u ≤ m]* (2013), Medina shows how much can fit into one cinematic minute, pressing images together like clay in an impressionistic sequence of footage that doesn't so much cut but blend, each layer folding into the next in a flurry of dilating colours, blurred faces, and palpable sentiment that packs a world into 47 seconds.

Where *88:88* feels a step beyond these films is not its theoretical rigour or aesthetic ingenuity, both of which are well evidenced from the get-go, but instead the intensity of its sentiment and the means by which the film makes that feeling felt to the viewer through its fragmentary form. Watched today, what registers most about *88:88* is the humanism at the middle of this centrifugal explosion of a diary film: the care and concern for the friends that the filmmaker puts on the screen, and the constant insistence that intellectual thought is not the preserve of a select few. *88:88* is anchored around two characters, Myles and Erik, who both encapsulate one of the film's central messages: pushing forward in spite of any perceived limitations, overcoming the barriers the world puts in your path. In one monologue, Erik talks to a confidant in a whispered stream of consciousness that seems to echo the film's vulnerability and its striving for something daringly formally new. You are "telling me to spend more time alone," he says, "saying you're sad, sharing your ideas for the theatre, agreeing to make friends with the city, sending me emails to get me through, demanding I think harder, share everything I've created, work constantly." In another monologue, Myles breathlessly outlines the extent of his emotional, financial, and legal struggles, talking on the verge of tears about his insecurities, his rage, and the sense of directionlessness he feels in the face of the relentless poverty that means always having your back to the wall.

Where then to go from here? With *Inventing the Future* (2020), an adaptation of sorts of the 2015 book of the same name by academics Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, Medina starts thinking through this question, channeling the ideas and aesthetics of the films he made up to that date into a visual formulation of the book's central argument that left wing politics have failed to cope seriously with the ramifications of late capitalism and that the only way forward is a new kind of political reality shaped around achieving the social, economic, and health-related benefits of the automation of work and the provision of a universal basic income. *Inventing the Future* combines the diaristic imagery of Medina's friends and social circles featured in the previously mentioned films (with them here enjoying the fruits of time that Srnicek and Williams' speculative system affords rather than suffering the scarcities, of leisure, money, and comfort, seen in the reality of *88:88*) with documentary style material showing the authors workshopping their arguments, a range of repurposed televisual and archival materials, several set pieces involving green screens and lego bricks, and extensive recitation from the book, all set to a slightly discombobulated jangly-piano soundtrack.

The result is an impressively comprehensible summation of a relatively dense book, wherein a convincing argument is made for something that few would say they would not want ("the flourishing of all humanity and the expansion of our collective horizons") and a practical means of achieving it

("the provision of the basic necessities of life, the expansion of social resources, and the development of technological capacities") is detailed. While Medina's films up to this point identified problems and rendered them emotively, *Inventing the Future* begins to gesture towards articulating their solutions explicitly. This said, the more you look the clearer it becomes that this was all there from the beginning, if present only obliquely in a flicker of an image or in a snippet of audio. The digits and dashes of 88:88 are, we learn, what an electronic display shows when bills are not paid and the power is cut, and in one scene in the film, Myles explains that he needs to be able to afford the internet as it provides the means of downloading a new essay to read everyday. This, to him, is like water or oxygen, theory being another tool for living that requires from its reader only the luxury of time. And, at the end of the previously mentioned monologue, Myles proclaims that "the only place" he feels "comfortable is the skatepark and the library," both of which are notably public spaces and services. It is a line that seems to embody the spirit of the whole film, wherein the personal and the public are intertwined and inextricable, wherein thinking and being are one and the same, and wherein ideas and theory are not just a distraction but instead a means of moving through problems and finding one's true place in the world.

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