

## To Hulse Or Not to Hulse

### Listening to (and Watching) *Sound for the Future*

By Gareth Evans

O wolves of memory! – Philip Larkin, from *Sad Steps*

That is the question. With time on my hands during this uncertain period, I found myself thinking on a semi-regular basis about filmmaker, photographer, musician and general artiste Matt Hulse. Why this happened, I do not know (there are, of course, a number of symptoms beyond current explanation). One morning, it occurred to me that his surname might hold some kind of answer to the fecund and variant nature of his hybrid creativity. I decided to google 'Hulse'. High up the list on page one of the results was the generous offer to 'get a Hulse mug for my buddy José', as Hulse was word of the day when I looked. Not having even consciously spoken to a person called José before, I was a little surprised, but hey, live a little, push the boat out... This was all new to me and, I hesitate to presume, to you too, and so I feel I should also share what Urban Dictionary revealed to me that morning:

Hulse: When you completely over-exaggerate your response to something harmless usually by swearing and being excessively loud; e.g. a group of three friends is walking downtown on the sidewalk when a stranger who obviously is in a hurry rushes by and accidentally brushes against them. Two of the friends react by saying "oh sorry" and "wow, he looks like he's in a hurry", while the other friend stops throws his hands up in the air and yells "GAHHHHHH, WHY THE F\*\*K DID YOU HIT ME?!" The two look at the one and say, "wow, you really hulsed all over that guy" or "ok hulse".

Interesting. This struck me as a line of enquiry worth pursuing. Elsewhere on the listing, I was offered the chance to track family members who had emigrated to Argentina, reminded of 1993 Nobel Physics laureate Russell Alan H (of course! Good work on finding that binary pulsar, Russ!) and clarified in my search by [definitions.net](http://definitions.net), who rhetorically asked themselves what Hulse means, replying to their own interrogation with the answer: Hulse is a surname. Ah, the internet, always giving...

The real gold, however, came right at the top. Given the Google algorithm searches and delivers by popularity, I felt both that I was not alone and that I was onto something: two wins and I hadn't even opened the first can of the day... Before going online, I'd imagined 'hulse' might be a word lost somewhere in the fourth act of one of Shakespeare's weaker History Plays: "Sire, I shall hulse to the castle afore the rook kisses the morning" or suchlike. Perhaps it was a noun: "My lady, by the hulse of your tone, I surmise the villain closer is than thine own fair shade." I even felt its origins could reach back further into dusty time, to the Middle English of Chaucer and his lusty comrades: "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote, the hulse of March hath perced to the roote..." You appreciate my investigative line, I trust.

So I was delighted to find that the name derived topographically, gifted to those who lived close to holly and, to underline the discovery, with the shrub often spreading its festive cheer out of a hollow or depression (from the Old English 'holh'). A prickly revelation indeed, but how much might it tell us about the man himself? Sure, I'd known him occasionally to wander under a concise cloud of localised ennui (who hasn't, if we're on the couch...), had glimpsed him leaving surreptitiously (as I too) from a weak exhibition opening, occasionally nudging - or hulsing - a drinks waiter, but no more than these minor lapses. Let he/she/they who are without sin...

Nevertheless, a deep lineage was now established, one which the said actually existing and present tense Matt Hulse has joined with vigour, panache and a certain wayward charm. He might be able to notch early middle age on his life-stick, but in visage and demeanour he retains a boyish naiveté, a creative optimism that has never been fully beaten into pummelled tin by the hammer of Late Capital. A maker of many things in multiple media, Hulse is naturally a collaborator (not as in "what did *you* do in the war, daddy?", but rather, "shall we sit down with a cup of tea, or a G&T, and see what ideas we could share?").

Loyal to his friends and fellow travellers, they - and family members - often feature in his features. A renowned guide on the North Korean tourist circuit, Hulse was all set to establish an international cultural think tank just outside Beijing, until he didn't. He's a consummate performer, one who live-streamed his own rooftop gigs during lockdown, with these musical musings differing from a similar locational performance by The Beatles in only three trivial ways: he didn't have almost a decade of globe-changing fame behind him, nor the attendant Midasian levels of wealth, and he was playing solo. Apart from that, and the fact that he was located east, and not in Savile Row, there is much fruitful comparison to be made between the two outpourings.

Just when you think you have the full span of Hulse's artistic endeavours, he will throw in a curveball, declaring his Gold Award levels of success in a major German photography prize I had never heard of (rather satisfyingly, the image of Hulse receiving the certificate finds him perfectly placed in ascending height order alongside the other presences onstage). He might remind you, since you asked, of his ongoing *Audible Picture Show*, in which 'no images' tour cinemas internationally, or - and perhaps more pertinent to our reasoning here - nudge recollection of an earlier sonic creation, *The Sound of Loozak*, installed in the public toilets of Glasgow's Arches (preparing this put him in an insurance risk category not too far below that of embedded war correspondents - hell hath no fury like a Glaswegian male when an aural installation interferes with his flow).

But most directly antecedent and relevant to our cause here was the creation and circulation of both the film and the book of the celebrated project *Dummy Jim*, a magnificently warm and witty work, moving and precious (in the best sense). Riffing on an actually existing cycling tour to the Arctic Cycle back in the heart of the lost last century, Hulse blurred fact and fiction, stitching together a cinematic quilt of concerns, held and carried by an appealing artisan ambition and a cast of dozens of valued, long-term participants, in front of and behind the lens. It took him an aeon and a day to complete, but it was worth it, and encapsulated what could be his credo of making: *less is more, except when it's less*.

If Hulse were very old, he would be the kind of figure 're-discovered' by Jeremy Deller's Folk Archive. As it is, he's an outsider artist of sorts, albeit one living in the Central London area, whose 'Come Dine with Me' aesthetic kin include Andrew Kotting, Derek Jarman, Harry Smith and Moondog, to name only those who can fit around a small studio flat dining table in the hyper-inflated property nightmare that is contemporary Capital City existence.

Which brings us to his latest project, one that keeps the viewer on their toes, time-wise. Drawn from Hulse's past, made and delivered into the strange present of our moment, it is his new feature-length *Sound for the Future*.

The first alert comes in the first word of the title. Is this a continuation of his picture-free listening films? Might it be better that way? (We are reminded here of Godard's full recording and release of all sounds from his 1990 feature *Nouvelle Vague*, care of German label ECM. He did of course also release the images with the sound and called it a film, but a number of critics wish he hadn't done either). In Hulse's case, images are a dream of being, made glorious by the addition of scoring.

The film opens with actual credits, logos, named people in certain roles, a major sound artist and composer - Simon Fisher Turner (henceforth SFT if he's mentioned again, and also because it makes him sound like he too hails from the 'yet to come') - yes, he of Derek Jarmania and much else - listed in soundtrack duties. The cards are accompanied by a wonderful radio tuning dialogue that could almost be by Beckett; that's if he'd written for late century Radio 4. For a Hulse project, this is unsettling. It suggests backing.

Image: Exterior: An open plain, a heath, a down, scrub; an edge-land, tower blocks at the horizon (where what we affectionately call 'the rest of the world' begins), dirt bikes, a bonfire, adolescent beer, cardboard signs, protest placards (but they say things like 'dentist', 'liquorice', 'unkind' and many words else); lots of noise and look, there's MH himself - and his T shirt has other words on it (well, one word - narcissist; could this be some kind of chin-stroking clue as to what is to follow...) and his voice is talking about his childhood post-punk band The Hippies...

It inspires... what exactly? It inspires... confidence. It's professional; officially so, it seems. He's always been serious in a light-touch fashion, and has constantly delivered (he would make a charismatic take-away courier, and still yet might be so, if this venture doesn't yield adequate returns),

but this feels like strange new, surprisingly *firm* ground. *Dummy Jim*, let's recall, took well over ten years to make. 'Tis then that we hear the familiar tones of MH declaring, "for over a decade I've been trying to make this film..."

Aha! It's all a front. Here we go again. And listen, now they're in a pub and MH's brother hasn't even turned up (or has he) for the 50th birthday reunion, It is and it isn't real. It's written on the body, in it and from it, outwards into the room. He's taken his shirt off.

Not everyone's made it through for the great, all-in-it-together, cross-generational reclamation. Friends have fallen. There's a table, as vulnerable as someone shielding, in full lockdown, quarantine, isolation (name it as you will, it's still the same thing, grim). It's an ur-table, up against the wall as if the rebels have found it, and said, "furniture first, without it, they're nothing..." It's the ground zero of creating. But it's lonely on the table-top. It's as if Beckett's Krapp has gone onstage without his tape-recording. How to bring it all back?

Now the producer's on the phone calling it a day, and it's still, as The Carpenters regularly remind us, like we've only just begun (they weren't hippies or post punk but they were very popular, and look where it got them)...

Make it true outside your head, outside your confusion, your loss, like Christopher 'I'm so rich and powerful that I can determine global pandemic cinema openings' Nolan's *Memento*. Write it, be it, get others to be it, to remember it so you can forget it in your actual brain. This seems to be the strategy.

If so, how best to do all this but with kids (in a good way). Scottish Youth Theatre (SYT - so near and not so far) members come to audition. There's rabies and hairstyles and drumming but most of all there's the spirit, wit and fuel of the young; the perennial, stumbling, bold, adventurous, 'what is to become of me but right now I don't care, *too much*', present, awkward, anxious teens! (Damn them all, screech the older guard, no longer the van- or the avant-; I stand with you on our greying barricade). Won't anyone think of the children, those that aren't anymore, and those who still very much are? Yes, Hulse is. It's a plan, one we can get behind.

What follows: attempts, trying, rehearsals, "and again, once more with..."; in fact, almost anything but the actual thing. But what is the 'actual' when memory, competing and hazy, is so in the mix that at times it's the only ingredient, or the crucial addition (yeast in home-baking, a quarantine smash - without it you're lost, and we all knead the dough). It's so self-reflexive it's almost Iranian (cinema); or French, *Le Grand Meaulnes* with his Lost Domain, always trying to get back there, although he's not the same Meaulnes any longer, and it's certainly not the same chateau...

To be honest, however, does it matter if it does or doesn't resolve into something 'finished' at this point? There are many little stabs of happiness, shock jolts of emotional shift, and it's analogue (if not actually, then spiritually, and anything of that ilk should be grasped, if it could be, with both hands in this age of Nerosque decadence, chicanery and downright corruption). It's still make-do, makeshift, modest in resource but large in ambition - and this is what it should be, what the world needs, what the ecology cries out for. There are no international flights to 'recover the moment', no star trailers, no 'percentage, darling or I simply won't come out'. Somewhere between memoir, re-enactment, pantomime, masque, ventriloquism and, oh yes, school reports resides the 'truth'...

Really, it's 'about' the power of music (and heaps of other stuff): the time and place machine of it; its ability to seed, nurture and, pied piper style, lead us to another way of being inside our own hours on earth. While the song's playing, it could all be different; can be, *is*. So now, just imagine if you're actually playing it. "Music is the one thing I can rely on."

The film is really a witness statement, but there's been no crime committed, only the burden and joy of being born and having somehow to stay alive, to 'make the best' of it, to seek joy as the bee does pollen, and count it in teaspoons, having flown so far.

It's all in the trying; try this, try that, that's good, that doesn't really work but still, there's always this, that's great! Malcolm McLaren: there's a reason why he's here, why he's visited in his long slumber.

You feel MH is saying, “I was there - I think - in my own existence.” Yes, the past is ‘another country’ etc. but, if you’re very attentive, and hold it still, you can look down a cardboard drumstick and maybe, just maybe, if you’re lucky, you can glimpse it. And then what; would you do things differently, write better songs, not say that, do the other? No you wouldn’t, because you were 11 and you wouldn’t be you, then or now, if you had...

I’ve noticed that I am using a lot of these ... in this essay. It’s necessary. The whole story is full of gaps, alternatives, what-ifs and all sorts of things unspoken but hinted at.

It’s edited in a similar manner, according to this intention towards capture, or netting, or scales and depths of retrieval; structures of glimpse, prefiguring, reincorporation. It’s how the mind works, remembering the memories as much as the founding thing, act or gesture. Overlays, images smearing into images, jump cuts, non-sequiturs (or so they might appear): ‘infernal creation’ is everywhere, we and he and they have to keep up. Think collage and bricolage (which almost sound the same but are different, hence the alternate words). Think the two Johns, Heartfield and Stezaker; think Hannah Hoch. Think also motorway bridges. The sources of stimulant are many and various. When you’re making an auto-bio-pic, you need to keep the channels as open as the Thames Barrier is most of the time.

Who is it for? Anyone who’s ever lived, who was once or is a child, who’s had memories, and anyone who grew up in this sorry nation during the 1970s (these groupings are sometimes exclusive). It’s porous enough for you to fit into it your own version of the matters discussed. That’s the point. And who hasn’t made a drink out of all the liquor in the cupboard?

It’s also for anybody who loved the music of Andy Gill and Gang of Four. This essay and the film itself have been finished during the on-going pandemic and it now seems that the late, great Gill was a very early casualty of the virus. The feature’s dedicated to him of course, and rightly so. It is spot on that Hulse would love him. Gill’s fellow band members said, “we’ll remember him for his kindness and generosity, his fearsome intelligence, bad jokes, mad stories and endless cups of Darjeeling tea. He just so happened to be a bit of a genius too.”

Let’s note his brief, amped appearance here, solitary with feedback and dissonance, a dropped guitar in the memory palace of a bare warehouse, and contrast it with fellow musician Nick Cave’s lockdown ‘live’ gig in Alexander Palace, all polished piano and multiple cameras and, according to one review, “beautiful, but in the way of an object to admire from the outside because it’s too polished to crack open and crawl inside.” That’s not the case here, and who’d want it? Here’s a word new to me quite recently: kintsugi; so good. Such a good word, really it is; Japanese (you guessed that). They know what they’re doing. It’s when you repair broken pottery with gold seams, drawing attention to the fractures, because the vessel is now more valuable to you, having survived. That’s it, that’s the core of it all in two syllables.

It’s how you make new memories, from the pieces of the old ones, especially when your time on earth started and developed most formatively in the age *before the internet*. True, much of it will now be found in scraps and shards online, having washed up there like plastic does into the great Pacific gyre, but growing up without it means *your own memory* has had to store what happened to you. What the drink, dope or other excesses haven’t wiped is what you’ve got left to work from; that and what others tell you, which can be more or less relied on, depending on which one’s doing the telling.

In this way, memory becomes a synonym for dream. Reverie is the unconscious telling it like it thinks it is, so it’s almost another person, and they might well look like Classix Nouveaux’s Sal Solo, in his pre-Catholic youth movement days, singing this magnificent ditty from 1982, the lyrics of which strikingly match with what we’re talking about (I won’t quote them, due to outrageous reprint costs, but roll your eyeballs across them at <https://genius.com/Classix-nouveaux-is-it-a-dream-lyrics>).

Given this, everything inside the frame feels charged: fetish objects, votive, totemic; heightened versions everywhere you look (five of each sibling; there are copies and then there are inhabitants); trinities abound – not only the children – and so do attachment theories. We feel the presence of absence *and* the absence in presence. We are also wrestling, as MH is, with ‘questions of identity’ and ‘belonging’. Are we special enough? Are we *special* at all? If not, we could make it up, and *that* is a great excuse for make up, and some serious nail action. Even if we *are* blessed, we can *still* invent.

We'll try and catch the smallest gesture that made all the impact (realised years and years later). Our shooting ratio is life:life. Yes, we'll try again, fail again, fail better and all of that, but, in doing it, we are *in relation*, with relations and many others. We are not alone, we are not (sal) solo in all of this. The past operates at an intimate distance from the presently tensed but, covid-defiant (disclaimer – all scenes were shot before the onset), we're doing things together in actual space/time and we're also enjoying it.

“This is going to be a turning point. This is not going to be shit.”

And when it all comes to a head, ‘fire walk with me’ stylee, we can let it go, exorcise it all, on a Glasgow Wasty Land and walk off into, not quite a sunset, but at least to *somewhere else*.

Spotify is renowned for horribly annoying adverts which seem to be widely despised. But that's the point. That's the company's commercial strategy. Hate the adverts, so subscribe to ‘premium’ to avoid them. This is their ‘vision’ of reality, as they ‘believe’ it should be lived. This film does not share that distilled corporate cynicism in any way, shape or form and could indeed be put in the scales to counter it directly (+ I cannot see The Hippies\*, with their precocious pre-teen takes on Lee Harvey Oswald, their Terra Nova and their dysfunction, disjunction and diverging accounts signing up to the streaming platform). Thank f\*\*k.

H is for Honest.

U is for ‘universal’ in its reach (*they* use that word but they don't literally mean it, they actually mean trans-cultural and planetary, but since they use it, I will too).

L is for likeable.

S is for sincere.

E is for everyone else involved.

You can't go home again. But you can try.

\*Signed in this feature film are three song titles waiting to be recorded in a comeback Hippies E.P: Belly High, Arm Girth and Tripe.

Gareth Evans writes, curates, hosts, produces, reads, watches and walks, when he is able.

ENDS

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