

“You Talkin’ To Me?” - Returning to Conversation
Neil Fox, Falmouth University, School of Film & Television
neil.fox@falmouth.ac.uk

The current situation has resulted in conditions conducive to conversation that have been, if not entirely lacking, ignored for too long. Conversation is a vital component of my research as a filmmaking and podcast practitioner, scholar, critic and teacher. In the words of Theodore Zeldin good conversations are “meetings on the borderline of what I understand and what I don’t” (1998: 88). They encourage what Les Back terms ‘sociological listening’, an act where the “importance of living with doubt in the service of understanding, of trying to grapple with moral complexity” (2007: 14-15) comes to the fore. It’s simplistic, if not a little cliché, to lean in to the notion that conversation is a (golden) art-form that has been lost and in need of recovering but there could be little disagreement that conversation as a method for investigation, one that both formulates and responds to ideas and theses, has been sidelined in favour of the soundbite and the unerring position statement.

Talking has been on my mind a lot in the lockdown. More so than normal, even for a podcaster. I’ve been thinking about it in terms of purpose and dissemination and how the current situation has resulted in me having time to (re)assess the value of conversation and how it may be configured and reconfigured in and as a vital research method moving forward. It’s not a new method but to quote Audre Lorde “There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt” (1977, in 2017: 11). One of the strange effects of this situation is how it has afforded me some more physical, and a lot more emotional, time than normal. Juggling work, childcare, walking the dog and contributing to the running of the house has felt differently pressured. Within this time, conversation has taken on different values as there have been challenging conversations with anxious students, difficult conversations about teaching with colleagues, profound conversations with my wife about our life and wondrous and enlightening conversations with our 3-year old about what is happening to her and our world. It feels important to capture how people are feeling and conceiving of what they do in these times. It also feels like this is research.

Hopes I have in these times (I’m an optimist) are that different voices and different ideas around what constitutes conversation as research may emerge. I’ve been talking with filmmakers, critics, programmers and scholars via the online tools that have become staples of the pandemic, with some being released as podcasts and some just forming a record of the time. All bear the audio (in)equalities of the formats of the conversations (glitchy connections, frozen screens, lost lines). All are full of the uncertain, the unknowing, the curious, the hopeful, the scared. It’s been revelatory to talk. My research is largely in the area of film, but increasingly into podcasting as well. What has fed into my research, as much as scholarship in those fields, are words and ideas from people who have considered talking and listening as research, some of which are always foremost in my mind with extra resonance now. Zeldin says “the more we meet different forms of gentleness and conviviality, even in misfortune, the less we can boast about our victories, the less we can be satisfied with the bitterness of so much of our conversation” (1998: 93). Then there’s Les Back saying “while the scale and complexity of global society may escape our total understanding [we] can still pay attention to the fragments, the voices and stories that are otherwise passed over or ignored” (2007: 01). I think of Sara Ahmed who says “each time you write or speak you are putting yourself into a world that is shared” (2017: v), knowing that Ahmed here is talking about Audre Lorde, who says “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised

or misunderstood” (1977, in 2017: 01). In the world that follows this situation may we take more time to listen and value speaking as information and knowledge differently, more. May conversation gain new prominence as a method and output of research. Some of my conversations can be found here - <http://www.cinematologists.com/>.

This piece was developed over a series of conversations with my colleague and wife Bethan Michael-Fox.

References:

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Dr Neil Fox is a senior lecturer in Film at Falmouth University where he leads the Research & Innovation programme *Pedagogy Futures* and convenes the Sound/Image Cinema Lab. He is an award-winning screenwriter whose short films, and feature debut *'Wilderness'* (2017), have played to festival audiences around the globe. He is the co-founder and host of the leading film podcast *The Cinematologists*, the official podcast partner of the BFI national film seasons. He is the co-editor of *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media* (Palgrave, 2018) and writes for *Little White Lies*, *The Quietus*, *Beneficial Shock* and *Directors Notes*.

<http://drneilfox.com/>