



This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document and is licensed under All Rights Reserved license:

Clancy, Tony ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0525-6710> (2020) From Neolithic to Neoliberal. In: Creative Practice Research in the Age of Neoliberal Hopelessness. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh. ISBN 9781474463560

Official URL: <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-creative-practice-research-in-the-age-of-neoliberal-hopelessness.html>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/7774>

Disclaimer

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.

From Neolithic to Neoliberal

Tony Clancy

1.

The *Creativity in the Age of Neo Liberal Despair* conference offered compelling articulations of what it is to be a creative practitioner in the current academic world. It was a timely reminder to reconsider what it means to practice and to teach an arts subject (as well as a very welcome opportunity to listen and join in an important and fascinating conversation). My background is in still photography. In this essay I will discuss my recent practice in making short videos and think about why time-based pieces have become the main focus of my practice, and how they relate to and incorporate the still image. I will talk about some of the particular characteristics of the photograph (especially as delineated by Christian Metz) and why I currently make time-based work but why the still image keeps its importance to me. I will look at the work of photographers whose images relate to the conference themes and my work. I will then reflect on two short films that I have made – one, *The Plate Spinner*, is a scripted comedic piece with non-naturalistic narrative that has some direct echoes of the conference themes. The other is a more loosely structured piece, *Stone Ghosts*, that uses an assemblage of visual and sound devices to contemplate themes of nature, myth and prehistory.

2.

Berthold Brecht had reservations about the value of the single photograph, he thought its naturalism was too simple to say anything useful about social relations (though he saw photomontage as a useful tool). Christian Metz took a psychoanalytic approach to distinguish between how film and the single still image signify. In his essay “Photography and Fetish” he says,

‘While the social reception of film is oriented mainly toward a show-business-like or imaginary referent, the real referent is felt to be dominant in photography...a film is only a series of photographs. But it is more precisely a series with supplementary components as well, so that the unfolding as such tends to become more important than the link of each image with its referent. This property is very often exploited by the narrative, the initially indexical power of the cinema turning frequently into a realist guarantee for the unreal. Photography, on the other hand, remains closer to the pure index, stubbornly pointing to what was, but no longer is.’

(1990: 156)

Metz goes on to further differentiate between photography and moving image by discussing how the photograph is silent, and how its frame permanently excludes what is outside of it

(in contrast to film which can pan and use off-frame sound), it is a frozen fragment of time giving the photograph a hallucinatory quality

“...film is able to call up our belief for long and complex dispositions of actions and characters (in narrative cinema) and images and sounds (in experimental cinema). [With photography] its poverty constitutes its force – I speak of a poverty of means, not of significance. The photographic effect is produced not from diversity, from itinerancy or inner migrations, from multiple juxtapositions or arrangements. It is the effect, rather, of a laser or lightning, a sudden and violent illumination.... Where film lets us believe in more things, photography lets us believe more in one thing”

(ibid: 162-3)

Metz's essay was published in 1985, just before digital photography became widely available and to some extent undermined its strong link with the indexical referent that he speaks of. The photograph's sense of truth is far more malleable in the age of photoshop and the ocean of social media images that threatens our sensibilities. (Erik Kessel's installation *24 Hours in Photos* (2011) give a powerful physical realisation of this – he printed out the 1 million images that had been uploaded to Flickr by its users in a day and piled these up in a gallery, giving a physical presence to the vast number of images - mainly from smartphones - that appear on social media platforms).

The signification of a body of still images is fragmentary, and has to be pieced together in the mind of the viewer. Despite this, many photographers maintain their stance as uncompromised witnesses. The particular power of photography's link to the referent (where this is still seen to hold) may give it a degree of authority against the erosion of belief in the neo liberal era. This sense of authority may be illusory, but can stand against disinformation. Returning to Benjamin's vision of people as traumatised automatons, Michael Wolf's *Tokyo Compression* series shows images of commuters crammed into trains, an indelible vision of anonymous city dwellers, tired and exploited. Faces are framed and partially obscured through misted windows, some literally asleep on their feet, still conveying deep anxiety. A few awake eyes catch the camera's stare; one man is alive enough to give the photographer (and us) the finger, another puts his hand up to retain his privacy, others just glare blankly at the intrusive lens. These fleeting glimpses would be absorbed into the flow of existence if seen in everyday life. Grouped together and suspended in the silence of the photograph they become potent icons of the effects of the city on humanity. If the city was a place of exhilaration in early 20th century experimental film, it is a place of exhaustion in Wolf's images. Exhaustion is a theme in another work of Wolf's, the installation *“The Real Toy Story”* where walls covered in the plastic debris of discarded toys surrounds photographs of the factory workers who make them. One image shows two members of the production line in deep sleep on the floor on cardboard boxes under their workbench, surrounded by disembodied dolls limbs. Looking at these images it

is hard for us to disavow what happens on the sharp end of mechanical reproduction in a consumer driven world. This is the world of automated, where workers are as alienated from their lives as consumers are from the workers who make their goods.

Other examples where photography can stand as witness to the corrosive effects of neoliberalism on societies and the world include: Alec Soth's images of individuals on the edges of society in *Broken Manual*; Gideon Mendel's images and displays of items retrieved from refugee camps in *Dzhangel*; Susan Meseilas' images of Kurdish communities; Shahidul Alam's courageous images of violent repression in *Crossfire*.

These photographers show that the still image retains potency. Paradoxically, the photograph's accelerating hyper reproducibility in the internet age has been matched by a fetishization of the printed image in the art market, undermining the still image's role as a teller of truths. Documentary images are not always points of resistance, immutable in meaning and honest in intent, their truth can be reframed. I remember seeing large prints from Boris Mikhailov's *Case History*, exhibited in the Saatchi gallery in London. This work consists of people posing in degrading poses in post Glasnost Russia, a freak show photographed with voyeuristic flash, poverty commodified as art.

I have taken pictures of them and I have enjoyed it, and maybe the whole world has a better understanding of the post-communist dramas through these sequences taken directly after nature.

(Saatchi Gallery)

If the images themselves are problematic, Mikhailov comments make them even more dubious. His intentions in showing us shocking images of life in post Soviet Russia may have good intentions, but displaying these at the Saatchi Gallery is bleakly ironic. One of the Saatchi advertising company's main clients was the UK Conservative party, who it helped to power in 1979 where it initiated neo liberal reforms leading to a collapse of many industrial communities in the UK. Shock in these images is co-opted as exotic novelty by billionaires of the neo-liberal era.

3.

Roland Barthes' essay on the tableau *Diderot, Eisenstein, Brecht* (Barthes, 1977) began to open up for me ideas about how still images convey narrative and how they relate to moving images. Some time ago I produced a series of Eisenstein influenced narrative tableaux still photographs, aiming to make work that would, in Diderot's words, '*Touch me, astonish me, tear me to pieces...*' ([1765]1995:222). I succeeded, I think, mainly in perplexing my viewers. Still images are embedded in a fixed viewpoint (literally and figuratively). One aim of my recent work has been to decentre the viewer, to strive to find ways of experiencing the world from other perspectives. Moving image has been a more

effective medium for this; its dimensions of movement and sound making for a more immersive experience and bringing a broader palette of possibilities to experiment with

The Plate Spinner (2016)

'A mad race of shadows on the screen, not even a promise of something better to come, you're just sitting there, getting dumber by the minute; where are you going to get to by going faster?' ([1924] 2010: 21)

The Plate Spinner could be seen as a parable for an everyman figure living in neo-liberalism, a comic take on world that Michael Wolf shows us. When making this piece, I had in mind Buster Keaton, and his use of mobile camera work to portray a precarious modern world in films such as *Sherlock Jnr* (1924). Another influence was the plays of Eugene Ionesco where characters living banal lives become, for no apparent reason, overwhelmed by surrealist proliferations that engulf their reality. *The Plate Spinner* begins with a man setting up his act in an empty room. He begins his performance and once the plates are spinning, he runs out of the room. The camera follows him running up staircases and along corridors till he comes to a space where there is another set of plates waiting for him. Once these are in motion he runs back to the first room, noticing along the way that one corridor has another set up for him to attend to. Eventually there are three lots of plates in motion, and we see him dashing between them in a continuous loop edited at increasing speed. In between the frantic rushing we see the plates when the performer is out of the room, spinning calmly in their own universe, graceful and indifferent objects in motion.



The nameless character is tied to his compulsive need to keep the plates aloft; as demands multiply his equilibrium is threatened (as is that of the plates). He is depicted firstly as objectively observed, then we begin to see his performance from his own point of view and are drawn into his world as it accelerates in pace, building up to an unsustainable frenzy. The film emulates the exuberant energy of Eisenstein and Vertov. Narrative time and space is compressed to an absurd degree. The effect is almost believable as having been made in real time, though of course this would have been impossible; the viewer is pulled between believing the action and knowing it is film fiction. This is an old fashioned variety act that should be light entertainment, but there is the sense of a half awake nightmare, an obsessive repetition and a feeling that it will not stop, or if it does it will end catastrophically. The act of plate spinning (strange in itself if we stop to think about it) becomes stranger and taps into deep anxieties about control, a control over our lives that we might feel we have already lost, echoing Benjamin's darker view of the machine age.

"Benjamin and Brecht shared the intellectual project of disrupting frozen patterns of perception in order to forge a new, more critical attitude toward social reality. While Brecht embraced shock with absolute conviction, for Benjamin it entails great dangers: the likely emergence of a mass of "traumatized automatons; the vanishing of private space; the coming of an era where experience, devoid of tradition, is incapable of finding meaning."
(2012, section 5 para 3)

Plate spinning is a common enough metaphor for the pressures of work, here multiplied to absurdity. The performer seems trapped in an unending cycle of demands, perhaps a metonym for the neoliberal condition, the state of a stupefying chasing of nothing. The shots of the plates continuing their delicate balancing act are moments of calm unseen by the spinner – beautiful but highly precarious, liable to fall at any second. This instability again might be taken as a metaphor for a more general sense of a present overshadowed by the anxiety of impending collapse. It is this that spurred the making of this film – a feeling of being overwhelmed by the demands of work, and at the same time experiencing a strange compulsion to further add to it, a need to keep the plates spinning even if at times I cannot remember why (a compulsion seen amongst many friends and colleagues).

The character in the film is, then, akin to the commuters in Wolf's images. He witnesses people caught in the cycles of work in the real world, we see them voyeuristically objectified but markers of the harsh reality of working life. In *The Plate Spinner* the character is a fictionalised everyman figure, but through him we re-experience the mania of compulsion that ties us to our routines.

Stone Ghosts

“And we lost our feeling for matter, began to give cement the form of stone, iron the form of wood.”. ([1915] 2008: 83)

Stone Ghosts (2018), is a very different piece and comes from a more Romantic world view, exploring, among other things, the acoustics of rocks and myths of transmogrification. The film is not about Neolithic society, but takes as one starting point a people (not far distant from our own in geological time or evolution, but, in the popular mind, a primitive other) where metal and all its contingent technologies (from the wheel to the internet) were not possible without the knowledge and skills which came shortly after. Rock was important for its use in making tools and weapons, and also for its symbolism. As there was no writing, this world remains enigmatically hidden behind a veil with a few (very tangible) traces left to us. There appears to have been an organised society where spectacle played a prominent role, evidenced by the stone circles, avenues and burial chambers that they left behind. Visiting these monuments now, especially the better-known ones, is often a disappointing experience. We know that there is a deep history associated with the objects we see before us, but their material is commonplace and seems unremarkable. Looking for their ‘aura’ can lead to a feeling of literally stony blankness. This may be in part because of stone’s inscrutability; it may also be because, in the 19th and 20th century, many sites which had fallen prey to the vagaries of five thousand years of passing time and humans, were moved and reset (Stonehenge is a notorious example of this). These places which were once sacred we assume, became commodified tourist simulacra of themselves, stage sets disconnected from their own history and mystery.

Stone Ghosts is an experiment in progress that had its origins in some pieces I made for a project on biosemiotics (a discipline where researchers try understand the world not as ‘our world’ but as a world of which we are not central to). Talking about the relationship between humans and rocks, Jeremy Jerome Cohen says,

...something potentially propulsive unfolds within both frames at the moment of contact between mortal flesh and lithic substantiality: the advent of a disorienting realisation , no matter how dimly perceived, that stone’s time is not ours, that the world is not for us, even as material continuity becomes palpable. (2015: 83)

Stone Ghosts is an attempt to find ways to decentre the human view of the world, to try to find a way to see and to listen to rock that undoes our over-familiar relationship and evokes something of the sense of awe and enormity of what we see. Even a casual knowledge of geology should make us marvel, but to experience it as more than cerebral is difficult, it seldom enters our affective world. Myths such as Sisyphus, Medusa, Pygmalion help us to connect more fully to the lithic by dramatizing an imagined relationship between rocks and humans. There is an anxiety in these narratives where stone is seen as related to human suffering and death. (As with Metz’s description of the photograph, rocks and statues are

generally seen as frozen, silent and death like; Pygmalion, more benignly, is a stone statue that becomes human.)

I look then to make rock strange again, to renew our sense of it and to try to reconnect in some small way with the sheer weirdness of rock to which we become inured. In the opening sequence of *Stone Ghosts*, a cave is gradually revealed, lit up piece by piece, at the same time accompanied by musical sounds from an (at that point) unidentified instrument. Camera shots then move over rock formations lit up in the cave. The walls of the cave are in vibrant greens and reds, at times almost flesh like. In a later section a large obviously false prop megalith is carried across the landscape by a man dressed in modern clothing, intercut with shots of the odd but melodic soundtrack music being performed on rocks. There is a deliberate clash of narrative modes here, a reframing of the film's continuity. This is intentionally part comic; the megalith is ironically weightless, a nod to the achievements of our Neolithic ancestors in moving large stones over long distances with no modern machinery or wheels. A rapid sequence of still images then takes the viewer on an ecstatic joy ride around stone circles. Each rock is photographed with flash (evoking Christian Metz's description of the photograph as hallucinatory, and giving the sequence a look – I am told – similar to a drug experience). This section again links to sequences in Russian films from the 1920s that intoxicate the viewer with a deluge of images. Here, the use of rapid succession of stills that imply movement, sits between film and still photography, not quite part of either medium. Together with the insistent rhythm of the soundtrack the effect was to take the viewer out of a rational relationship with the flow of the film and to suggest something more primal where everyday logic no longer applies. When the sequence ends, the figure carrying the rock, now asleep in front of it, is turned to stone (by the power of low grade special effects) as the music continues. By the end of the piece, the viewer has experienced rocks represented in different ways – sonically, theatrically, and through moving image and an animated stills sequence.



Sound is the element which underpins and structures the film. The music that forms the soundtrack is played on rocks from the Preselli Hills in west Wales, which was the source for the bluestones that made up the early stone circle of Stonehenge. How the rocks arrived in the middle of England remains a much pondered mystery and there is no final consensus on this, though most archaeologists believe that they were taken there by humans rather than glaciers – if true, a remarkable feat. A long standing question is, why were the fifty or so stones brought so far? Weighing an estimated two tons each this was a vast undertaking. Recent work by Jon Wozencroft and Paul Deverieux has conjectured that the rocks were valued for their sonic qualities. (Wozencroft, P and Deverieux, J (2014) On a trip to Wales to see one of the sites where some of the stones are known to come from, I found for myself that indeed the rocks from this area do have a musical ring, and a random set that I picked up played a scale. That they can make music was a wonderful surprise to me when I found them, a connection – almost magical – to the sound world of our distant ancestors. These were the rocks used to perform in the film by musician Mike Adcock and they integrate the materiality that the film contemplates into the soundtrack.

[Berthold Brecht's desire was]... for the Verfremdungseffekt to reveal the workings of the theatre in order to empower the spectator to question rather than to have a pleasant experience....Brecht wanted the artifice of the theatre to be stripped down so that the spectator, rather than suspending her disbelief, could instead become a co-author of the performance.

(2014: 67)

Similarly, in this film, the viewer cannot settle into an easy relationship with the material, but is made aware of the different and sometimes clashing registers of representation. The

somewhat menacing feeling of the footage of actual stones and caves is undercut by the musician's hands shown playing the soundtrack, the fake prop rock, the use of sequences of stills, the retro TV sci-fi style special effects.

Without overstating the case, rock is analogous to the '*pure, stubborn index*' that Metz speaks of in photography¹, the most stable of referents (though also polysemous and indeterminate) that brings the transience of human existence into relief. Metz talks about the photograph as a fetish, a disavowal of change, ageing, death. Rock also has an otherworldly permanence that defies time (at least in our ability to perceive it). They can be both spectacle and a metaphor for all that is inert; in *Stone Ghosts* they are animated through sequences of stills that suggest movement and luminosity, and by the music that rocks can make.

5. My two films are very different, each an experiment in using moving image to bring about an experience for the audience where the world is made strange. Looking over my work, I find myself poised, or lost, between opposing impulses; on the one hand the wish to see and depict the world afresh in all its excitement, lit up with the energy that distinguished the art of the Russian revolution, sweeping away ossified views and celebrating the freedoms that new technologies bring. On the other hand I want to connect the viewer to a yearned for permanence, a sense of calmness that is closer to an elusive 'real'. This is offered to some degree by traditional photography, and is also connoted by the obdurate permanence of stone; both mark time and lives that have been, and stand against the erasure of loss. They are a counterpoint to the precarious act of plate spinning. They also connote reality rendered immobile, trapped in a past tense.

Neolithic monuments are a meditation on time, they stand as a very tangible trace of peoples whose investment of labour may appear primitive but which have survived for thousands of years. In our age, our short term addiction to progress and the disposable new find itself condemned in Pieter Hugo's still images in *Permanent Error*, where workers in Ghana stand amidst the debris of the affluent world's discarded electronic technology where they pick over to sell the materials for recycling. Their lives are shortened and blighted by the toxic chemicals released, they pay the cost for our constant movement into the future through accelerated technological innovation. This is the end point for the smartphones, tablets and computers that are made in atrocious conditions in factories elsewhere in the world, a reality we constantly disavow. Our dependence on social media helps to drive the consumption of these goods and add to this cycle. We are all snared in this web - the computer I write this on, the cameras I make my videos on etc etc will

¹ Metz himself, writing when personal photography was still mainly consumed as prints, describes the surface of a photograph as '*petrified*'.

probably one day end up on the dumping grounds that Hugo shows us. Whilst I do not for one minute think we can or should return to stone age living, to meditate on rocks gives a counterpoint to the virtual absurdities of an age where reality is so eroded.

A touchstone for me has been Viktor Shklovsky's ideas and legacy. In thinking about how culture and creativity can be acts of resistance to the sweep of neoliberalism that we are all subject to, the ideas that he wrote about and the work that these helped to foster in the early part of the 20th century still stand as inspiring examples of political art. Despite later criticisms of their effectiveness and legacy, their energy and verve are still compelling and they still hold a deep sway on our culture. His writings do not leave a manifesto. Rather I see them as a reminder to aspire to make work that challenges and does not fall into predictability, to keep finding ways to connect to the real and not fall into automated responses to it. I find in them an appealing spirit that gives me a place to see beyond the weight of conformity that chains us to our habits, steers us to our pension plans and blinds us to the world we live in. I did not set out to consciously explore or to illustrate the idea of *ostranenie*, but Shklovsky's words are very apposite to what I set out to achieve in my work.

... this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things... ([1917])

Thomas Elsaesser in his keynote speech at the conference spoke about Foucault's idea that the mechanisms of society absorb the challenges of the avant-gardes and indeed use them to compound a sense of discontinuity and disbelief in stable values, making us less able to act collectively and so more vulnerable to the machinations of the neo liberal elite. He also spoke about how making art could be an act of resistance in itself. My films, I hope, are small acts of resistance against the institutional steamroller of bureaucracy that threatens to overwhelm and to automate us.

References

Barthes, R. (1977) *Diderot, Eisenstein, Brecht in Image, Music Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London. Jonathan Cape. Pp 69-78

Cohen, J. J. (2015) *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press.

Diderot, D. (1995) *Diderot on Art*. Trans. John Goodman. New Haven. Yale University Press

Metz, C. (1990) *Photography and Fetish in The Critical Image* Squiers, C, ed. 1st edition. London. Lawrence and Wishart pp 165- 174

Mikhailov, B https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/boris_mikhailov.htm (accessed 31/ 3/ 19)

Piotrowska, A. (2014) *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film* London. Routledge.

Polgovsky Ezcurra, M. (2012) *On 'Shock:' The Artistic Imagination of Benjamin and Brecht* Contemporary Aesthetics, Volume 10

Robinson, D. (2008). *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature* Baltimore. The John Hopkins University Press

Shklovsky, V. (1917) *Art, as Device* Trans. Berlina, A. Available at: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/first/en122/lecturelist-2015-16-2/shklovsky.pdf> (accessed 23rd September 2019)

Tsivian, Y (2010) “*The Gesture of Revolution, or Misquoting as Device*”. In Annie van den Oever (ed) : *Ostranenie: “Strangeness” and the Moving Image. The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept*. Amsterdam. Amsterdam University Press (pp21-32)

Wozencroft, J and Deverieux, P (2014) *Stone Age Eyes and Ears: A Visual and Acoustic Pilot Study of Carn Menyn and Environs, Preseli, Wales*. **Time and Mind** :The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture Volume 7, 2014 - Issue 1

Artist web sites

Alam, S. *Crossfire*. Available at: <http://shahidulnews.com/CROSSFIRE/> (accessed 23rd September 2019)

Hugo, P. *Permanent Error*. Available at: <http://www.photographermagazine.net/pieter-hugo/> (accessed 23rd September 2019)

Kessel, E. *24 Hours in Photos*. Available at: <http://www.kesselskramer.com/project/24-hrs-in-photos/> (accessed 23rd September 2019)

Meiselas, S. *Kurdistan*. Available at: <http://www.susanmeiselas.com/archive-projects/kurdistan/#id=mass%20graves> (accessed 23rd September 2019)

Mendel, G. *Dzhangal*. Available at: <http://gideonmendel.com/dzhangal/> (accessed 23rd September 2019)

Soth, A. *Broken Manual*. Available at: <https://alecsoth.com/photography/projects/broken-manual> (accessed 23rd September 2019)

Wolf, M. *Tokyo Compression*. Available at: <http://photomichaelwolf.com/#tokyo-compression/> (accessed 23rd September 2019)

Videos.

The Plate Spinner. (2016). Clancy, T. Available at : <https://vimeo.com/281529326>

Stone Ghosts (2018). Clancy, T. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/245643565>