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Declan Clarke's Fantasies

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FUGITIVE PAPERS



A Quarterly on Art in Ireland

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It is a poor idea of fantasy which takes it to be a world apart from reality, a world clearly showing its unreality. Fantasy is precisely what reality can be confused with. It is through fantasy that our conviction of the worth of reality is established: to forego our fantasies would be to forego our touch with the world.¹

The seagulls are difficult to place. Generic, as seagulls often appear, they fly with unhurried purpose over a neo-classical bronze, a lady, laureate, draped, suitably robust, her hand resting on a book, the contents of which are unseen. She gazes from right to left across an expanse of sky, attentive not to the seagulls but to something off screen. There is a small round hole just above her elbow. The camera does not move. Her companion gazes weightily in the other direction, also draped, but with a chignon and the suggestion of wings unfolding out of shot. She has a hole of equal size further above the elbow, at the base of the upper arm. Close-ups of the two holes show irregularities at their edges. They are accidental, then, without design. Thanks to the proximity and nuanced register allowed by 16mm film, the weather-burnished, lightly-pitted bronze resembles skin. The title of this short film, *We'll Be This Way Until the End of the World*, could be either a promise or a lament. Evidently, these details matter, but why this should be so is not clear.

In a sequence from a different film, all is precisely designed. Two fenders taper skyward, culminating in tail lights edged with chrome and launched, so to speak, diagonally. Inside the door, the trim of an armrest likewise tapers one way into fins and the other way, projectile-like, to a nose. Aeronautical. Sharp motifs. The licence plate nestles in symmetrical, glinting arms of chrome. Chrome beams arch over the interior of the roof. Two-tone seats divide snugly into two rectangles, the one supported by the other. Comfort and protection. A cruciform insignia recurs on bonnet, hub cap, steering wheel, door handle. *Tout communiqué*. Reflected in the chrome of a wing mirror a miniature figure enthuses in a warm Southern drawl of this, his 1960 DeSoto Fireflite: “They were trying to incorporate aesthetics into every little detail. It just doesn’t happen any more.” Again, every detail matters. This is the source of Bobby Buffalo’s pleasure. He is right to mention aesthetics: the car is indeed beautiful, and I am glad that I can share, momentarily, Bobby’s pleasure in it.

The brief for this issue of Fugitive Papers was to argue for art’s purpose, its political purpose in particular. I am reluctant to do this, for the following reasons. Firstly, such an ambition would require me to make hasty and grandiose inferences from the brief descriptions just given of two short films by Declan Clarke, of which more below. Secondly, the desire for art to exhibit political purpose often entails a realism with which I am uneasy; a realism that is, moreover, absent from these films. Artur Zmijewski, for example, artist and curator of this year’s Berlin Biennale, demanded that art must “substantively direct reality”; it must consist of “concrete activities leading to visible effects.”² Failing such “artistic pragmatism,” art has no purpose worthy of the name. Zmijewski rehearses a familiar opposition, noted by Hal Foster, between active resistance and negative commitment, between the position-taking of ‘activist art’, i.e. ‘directing reality’, on the one hand, and on the other, rather forlorn – or, according to Zmijewski, ‘fearful’ – claims for autonomy, which latter arguably result in there being “little left to do but to go through the formalist motions.”³ To practice exercises in form, it seems, is to give up on real and concrete historical action, to become a “practitioner of impotence.”⁴

I will stay with Zmijewski’s polemic a little longer because its failings help to clarify the problem (if it be so) of purpose with regard to some of Clarke’s video works. Firstly, Zmijewski demands that tendency should equate to quality. Only those qualities of a work of art that display the correct political tendency shall be qualities relevant to our judgement of it. A work of art that displays the correct tendency therefore need display no further qualities.⁵ But again, as Walter Benjamin recognised at a time when the purposes of art were similarly in dispute, this is a decree, not an argument. By contrast, the sequences from *We'll Be This Way Until the End of the World* and Bobby Buffalo’s *DeSoto* begin to show us what might be the significance of a commitment to other, non-tendentiousness or formal qualities. It is not only insofar as I can find evidence of a correct political tendency in these sequences that they have purposeful qualities that matter.

Secondly, purpose is more banal and more complex than Zmijewski allows. In general, when judging works of art, whether coyly, boorishly, indignantly, as conciliation, without reason, or otherwise, we infer purpose. We claim legitimacy for our attributing intentions and purposes to what is both an artefact and an accomplishment. To judge a film such as *We'll Be This Way Until the End of the World* is to compare its accomplishments to whatever purposes it appears to have, not all of which will be either

Declan Clarke’s Fantasies

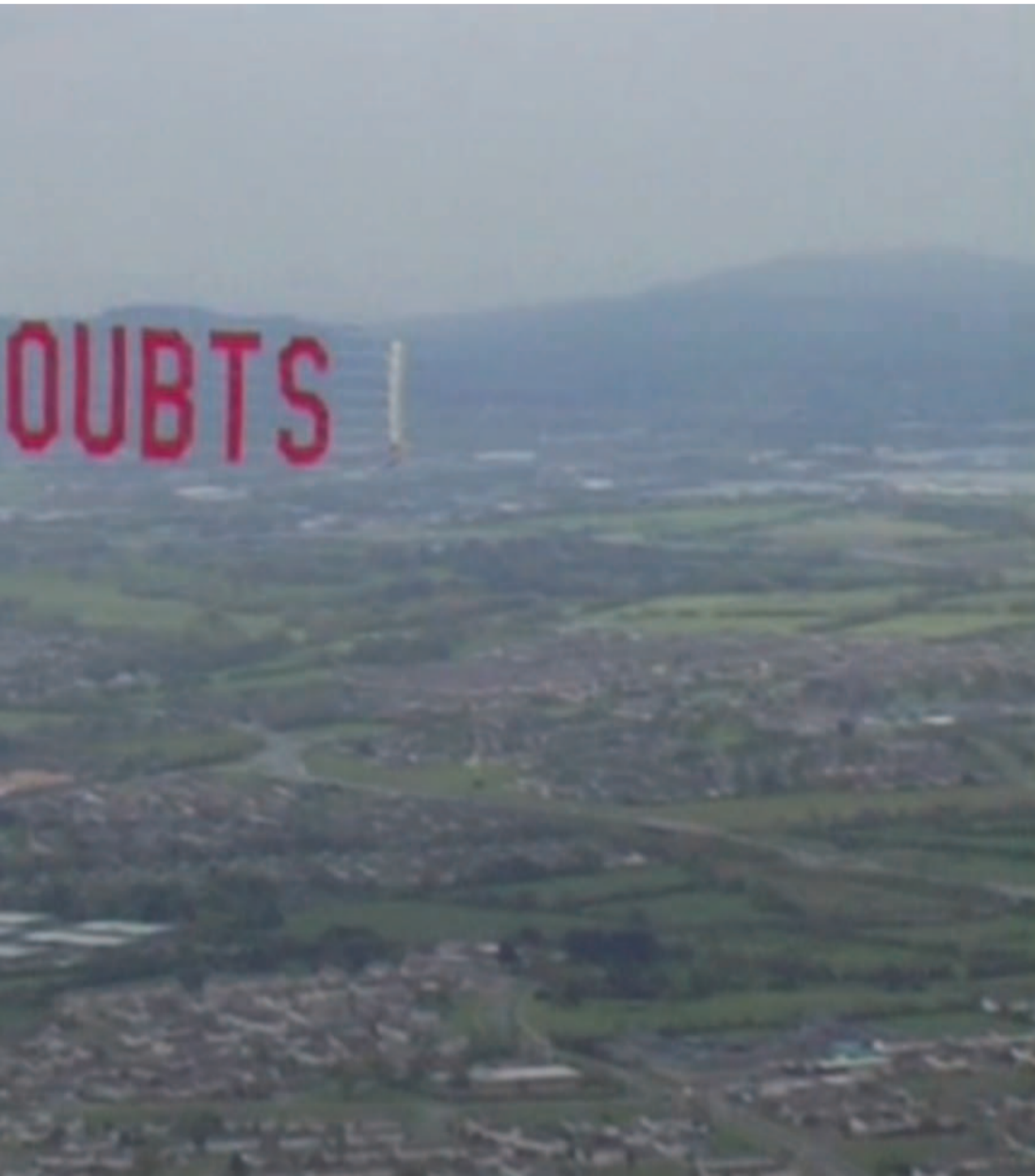


immediately evident or attributable to Clarke.

Thirdly, Zmijewski’s equation of tendency and quality repeats the intentional fallacy, judging to be legitimate only those intentions that can be related to the maker of a work of art, that ‘designing intellect’ famously criticised by Wimsatt and Beardsley.⁶ Whilst this ‘intellect’ might well be the cause of a work of art, it does not furnish a standard by which the work’s performance, or, one might add, its purposes, can be judged. Yet this fallacy, this ‘romantic error’, as Wimsatt and Beardsley describe it, provides the basis for Zmijewski’s realism of effects: the concrete activities of art are to be judged according to the intentions and tendencies of artists and, on occasion, their collaborators. This leaves little room for the discussion of works of art and the public dramatisation of intention affected by them. Yet a work of art’s *aboutness*, what makes it matter to us and what will continue to make it matter, follows from the inference of intentions that are, as Michael Baxandall wrote, not attributable to the psychological state or mental events of an author, but to the purposefulness implicit in the relation between an object and its circumstances; or what one might call the mode in which this object encounters a world. Intention is, therefore, “the forward-leaning look of things”⁷, which seems to indicate a work of art as a *subjunctive* artefact: that is to say, fictive (in the mode of as if...), doubting, and passionate. With regard to Clarke’s videos, which are contemporary to us (Baxandall’s examples are historical), the investigation of this aboutness, this mode of encounter with the world, is unresolved. At times, we and they lean forward together, purposefully.

With this understanding of intention in mind, the inadequacy of tendency with quality is of particular significance, given that some of Clarke’s more recent works often appear to engage an unequivocal political tendency, following what Fite-Wassilak describes as a “geeky enthusiasm for revolutionaries.”⁸ This is arguably true of the film that pays homage to Rosa Luxemburg (*Mine Are Not of Trouble*), or of that which recounts

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the history of the June 2nd Movement (*Loneliness in West Germany*), or of that which investigates, mainly through an interview with a witness, the final days of Che Guevara in the Bolivian highlands (*This Far and Further Still*). The qualities of these films that most readily court judgement in terms of their tendency (even a tendency that is lost and lamented, as Fite-Wassilak claims) are those that *matter* the least; or rather, they matter, but for different reasons.

My contention is that many of Clarke's videos show a commitment to form – sometimes sporadic or incidental, sometimes more developed – in the midst of a more straightforward informative use of documentary techniques – intertitles, subtitles, voice-overs, interviews, shots of evidence (newspaper articles, photographs). This is a commitment to the elaboration of complex means rather than to the more or less worthy ends of tendentiousness, and therefore also to qualities that do not simply follow from or equate to any tendency these films might either disclose or desire.⁹ The counterpart to such commitment is an attraction to enthusiasm, his own and that of others; an attraction that correlates Clarke's interest in Bobby Buffalo and Rosa Luxembourg, whatever their many differences. This contention is supported by Clarke's occasionally oblique treatment of, for example, the ghosts of Ceaușescu in present day Bucharest in *On Our Own We are Free to do Many Things* (2012). Here, the documentary techniques of voice-over, subtitles or intertitles, which might otherwise clearly indicate a tendency, a position on what is shown, no longer anchor the succession of images. Instead, silently, shots of Ceaușescu's notorious 'palace of parliament,' a brief montage of the famous photograph of Ceaușescu and others escaping by helicopter from the roof of this palace in December 1989, followed by a view of the same shot in the present, complete with a new, empty office block in the background, and shots of a public exhibition documenting the events and displaying artefacts of December 1989. With all of these shots, as before, Clarke takes on the role of an amateur historian, which has its

own virtues and significance; but these are interspersed with a curious light show performed by chandeliers in the palace, a brief night-time shot of an unidentified luminescence passing above the palace. Then, for the last three minutes or so (of what is only a thirteen minute film), there are static shots of housing blocks, during the daytime, first in summer and then in winter. At the very end, a hazy winter sun metamorphoses into five mobile luminescences of the kind seen earlier, which exit in looping paths past the viewer. The rectilinear persistence, which mundane housing blocks share with pompous palaces and corporate offices, sprouts a sudden curvature, an arabesque. Here again is the subjunctive in the heart of the indicative, the fantastic confused with the demonstrative and persuasive ambitions of documentary techniques.

Even when these techniques appear to be most straightforwardly indicative, such as in *We Missed Out on a Lot*, a short, silent demonstration of how to make a Molotov cocktail in four steps, there is also redundancy and a move toward fiction. There is no need to seek out a top floor room of the Goethe Institute in Dublin in order to learn how to make such a thing. So this demonstration must matter otherwise. Their redundancy as instruction nudges the concise and casual gestures of the demonstrator toward the subjunctive. The 'just so' character of a gesture, in a redundant demonstration, acquires new formal qualities from the fact that it need not be.¹⁰

Or further, consider the film *Everything Must Finally Fall*. This shows the take off and flight of a small plane from Weston Executive Airport near Dublin. The plane pulls a banner, on which is written in large capitals "I HAVE DOUBTS." Again, we infer purpose, even problem-solving: the flying of such a banner as a response to a problem or set of problems. But what problems? To address, with the least discrimination, the largest public within the city? To declare one's doubt? But then, with regard to what? The 'situation', as the statement flies above the housing estates and business parks of West Dublin? The validity of such a statement? Is the purpose to sustain our interest with a *subjunctive declaration* – a declaration of doubt and passion, which must be doubted, enthused? And is this the basis of a conviction toward the world, as Cavell claims?

Rather than the development of a tendency, Clarke has found a way to enthuse without certainty, to persuade us not of a state of affairs but of the legitimacy of certain enthusiasms; again, his own and those of others. What is most compelling about this is his growing commitment to the formal requirements of presentations made in the subjunctive. It is from these qualities that we infer purposes less grand and more significant than the purposes demanded by those who would replace fantasy with realism.

(Endnotes)

1. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 85.
2. Foreword to *Forget Fear*, reader for the 7th Berlin Biennale, [Eds.] Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warza, Berlin: Biennale Foundation, 2012.
3. Hal Foster, 'Post-Critical,' *October* 139, Winter (2012), p. 8.
4. Żmijewski, op. cit.
5. See Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer,' *New Left Review* I/62, July-August (1970), p. 84.
6. William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).
7. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 42.
8. Chris Fite-Wassilak, review of Declan Clarke at Goethe Institute, Dublin, *Frieze* 123, May (2009), p. 133.
9. See W. J. T. Mitchell, 'The Commitment to Form; or, Still Crazy after All These Years,' *PMLA*, vol. 118, no. 2, (2003): pp. 321-325.
10. As Adorno writes: "Even an ordinary 'was', in a report of something that was not, acquires a new formal quality from the fact that it was not so." op. cit. p 302.

IMAGE: Declan Clarke, *Everything Must Finally Fall* (2007) | DVD 04' 36", courtesy of the artist.