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Activating the Archive and the Postcolony in the work of Sven Augustijnen

Ann Curran

Abstract

The repression of colonial pasts reveal themselves in contemporary discourses and forms of representation – they are not nor can be ever fully deemed ‘past’ says T.J. Demos. Belgian filmmaker Sven Augustijnen excavates the troubling legacy of Belgian colonialism through his documentary films and installations. His investment in archival research and the presentation of media artifacts produces a multi-sensory experience for the viewer which in turn has implications for contemporary documentary practices, archive thinking and critical media literacy. In this article I will consider the relationship between the 2016 exhibition mounted by Augustijnen at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane in Dublin titled *The Metronome Bursts of Automatic Fire Seep Through the Dawn Mist Like Muffled Drums and We Know It for What It Is* and the documentary film *Spectres* (2011). In *Spectres* Augustijnen is literally conjuring the spectral by revisiting the disputed scene of the 1961 execution and murder of Patrice Lumumba, first prime minister of an independent Congo, with one of the historians of that pivotal event. Alternatively, in the exhibition *The Metronome...* the bodies of the victims and soldiers in the various military wars and conflicts are overwhelmingly on view in the photographs, while the spectre of postcolonialism hangs over the presentation. What are the effect(s) of viewing the films and experiencing the installations of Augustijnen, specifically in the examples of *Spectres* and *The Metronome...* where the installation format in

contrast to the film, appears to suggest very little intervention by the artist and materiality is uppermost? What is the contribution of Augustijnen to archive thinking and alternative documentary strategies using the moving image and photography?

Introduction

T.J. Demos in his 2011 catalogue essay for the Mannheim Fotofestival titled 'Photography's (Post) Humanist Interventions: Or, Can Photography Make the World More Liveable?' focuses on a number of art projects and exhibitions made since 2000 featuring photography and video. He characterizes the ethical and political ambitions of his selection of artists making these works as the drive to 'contribute to the formation of an experimental and inclusive democratic public sphere and counter the social omissions and political manipulations found in governmental propaganda and consumerist spectacle' (2011:191).

In the context of the theme of critical media literacy, this article will focus on Belgian artist and filmmaker Sven Augustijnen and his ongoing 20-year project to uncover the destructive and repressed history of Belgium's colonial past. I will argue that his work, in terms of his film and his installations of media artefacts, places certain demands on the viewer to consider how the media message impacts upon what becomes the historical record, while ultimately refusing to present a unified and stable statement about that history.

I will focus on two projects which use different forms of engagement with the document and the Archive in order to interrogate the theme of postcolonialism: his exhibition titled *The Metronome Bursts of Automatic Fire Seep Through the Dawn Mist Like Muffled Drums and We Know It for What It Is* in Dublin in 2016 and his 2011 film *Spectres*. I will discuss how the documentary film *Spectres* functions as a counter-strategy in terms of complicating how the document or artifact may be used in the representation of history: not to necessarily confirm knowledge but rather to acknowledge uncertainty. I will conclude by considering how, for all the restraint shown in terms of their presentation, the seemingly objective and minimalist installations of media artefacts made by Augustijnen demand a careful attention to the stuff and materiality of media. His gallery-based installation in this example produces an affective experience, a body-based response to the relentless cycle of military conflict rooted in the ongoing logic of post-colonialism and its relationship to globalisation.

Situating Augustijnen

The work of Augustijnen exemplifies what are now well-established contemporary art practices which have evolved from the tradition of the Humanist project and its relationship to Documentary film and photography. In attempting to acknowledge historical abuses, the artists employing this approach do what Demos describes as make 'reparations in the sphere of visual culture' (2011:191). Such approaches hark back to the traditions of social documentary photography, which of course has itself undergone re-evaluation and auto-critique and moved beyond the pages of magazines to the context of the gallery, among other sites. Similarly, for the politics of documentary practices more broadly, questions around aesthetics and visual regimes have shifted the emphasis from subject matter alone to how form is organised or what Hito Steyrl characterizes as 'the specific distributions of the sensible implemented by documentary articulations' (2011).

Sophie Berrebi contends there is an urgency around the investigation of the document in contemporary art, especially given the extensive circulation of digital images. The over-abundance of visual sources, she says, necessitates us to adopt a critical and analytical attentiveness. Similarly, the viewer or reader has to move beyond mere fascination for the unique source. Berrebi states: 'We need to investigate the way that artists produce artworks that take on the formats of documents and how these forms are used to interrogate the way that information is produced and circulated' (2014:6).

Reading Augustijnen's installations in relation to contributions to discourses in photography and Humanism made by Ariella Azoulay, and specifically her 'civil contract of photography', provides further evidence about what might be at stake. Through the medium of photography, Azoulay proposes the construction of an inclusive visual culture that offers a platform for rights claims against national exclusions: 'Against the political order of the nation-state, photography – together with other media that created the conditions for globalization – paved the way for a universal citizenship: not a state, but a citizenry, a virtual citizenry in potential, with the civil contract of photography as its organizing framework' (2008:134). Thus photography, which facilitates the spread of globalization can be also be redeemed in forging a counter network of political engagement, cooperation and affect. A vital and related aspect of how this network may be

forged is through the active reading of the photograph as a document in relation to other photographs and media artefacts in the Archive. Azoulay, in *The Civil Contract of Photography* and *The Civil Imagination*, asks us as citizens to both read and watch the photograph as it moves through time and context.

Alfredo Crammeroti (2009) argues that artists who adopt archive research, interviewing and documentary strategies are potentially able to counterbalance the effect of media manipulation by co-opting these very same mechanisms (2009:29). The time invested by the maker to take a longer look, increase the duration spent on the topic and develop a methodology that is attuned to the situation, is potentially ideally matched by the time the audience needs to spend critically analyzing and engaging with the work. In his discussion of the cross-fertilisation of journalism and art, he points to what can be productive differences: 'Art does not replace the journalistic perspective with a new one, but extends the possibility of understanding the first – where journalism attempts to give answers, art strives to ask questions' (2009:29). In the kind of self-reflexive practices and strategies utilised by Augustijnen then, the viewer is encouraged to question the relationships between media artefacts and how they are deployed in determining dominant narratives, instead of merely accepting the representations as they are constructed. As Hito Steyrl contends: 'the documentary form, which is supposed to transmit knowledge in a clear and transparent way, has to be investigated using conceptual tools, which are neither clear nor transparent themselves' (2011).

The exhibition

Sven Augustijnen's exhibition of printed matter and archival footage titled *The Metronome Bursts of Automatic Fire Seep Through the Dawn Mist Like Muffled Drums and We Know It for What It Is* ran from September 2016 to January 2017 at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane. The title refers to a 1971 quotation from a Mukti Bahini guerilla in the war over East Pakistan which became Bangladesh, a country forged out of the protracted postcolonial military conflict and border wars between Pakistan and India.

On the second floor of Dublin City Gallery, over 300 issues of *Time* and *Life* magazines were laid out, open and flat, in chronological order, arranged in two rows across a series of long tables which took up the length of four rooms. Each

issue was open on a specific, pre-selected page generally presenting articles about war or military conflict dating from 1959 to 2015. The length of the tables and simple presentation of the artefacts allowed the viewer to gaze down, across and along the surface of the pages, largely dominated by photographs. Each room had a large wall text indicating the dates of the magazine issues but aside from this there was no other supporting reference material.

In a viewing room adjoining the galleries, a selection of 17 clips of black and white news and television footage was projected on a loop. The footage dated from August 1969 to December 1973, perhaps the most active and violent period of The Troubles in Northern Ireland. These fragments were sourced from the RTE archives and the audio of the selected footage could be heard in the galleries while the viewer was browsing the magazines pages.

Midway between two of the four rooms there was a sealed glass cabinet featuring manuals and related printed matter about a particular model of a gun called the FN FAL, a light, semi-automatic rifle nicknamed 'the right arm of the free world'. This gun was consistently used in global conflict after global conflict from the 1950s to the 1980s. According to the website *Global Security.Org*: 'Each country in Europe has its own tradition of arms sales...the most persistent sellers of all are the Belgians, who have been renowned as weapons manufacturers and traders since the Middle Ages.'

Based on this brief description of the installation then, what emerges? On the face of it, Augustijnen was presenting a curated selection of media artefacts for the viewer to re-view or view for the first time. On a more profound level, he was producing a kind of history of global conflict from 1959 onwards, through the image and presence of the FAL gun. The gun is ever-present in the photographs on view in *Time* and *Life* magazine and is repeatedly seen in the hands of the British soldiers on the streets of Belfast and Derry in the moving image clips. Through the act of gathering, organizing and juxtaposing of media artefacts, Augustijnen is thus interrogating the construction and production of news about military conflict. In so doing, he demonstrates how Belgium's singular colonial past has significantly impacted on international political upheaval and related violence across decades via the global arms trade. As the articles and news stories move forward in time, the photographic depiction is increasingly spectacular: depicting the various countries and regimes

experiencing cycles of invasion and war, revolution and counter-revolution. These locations are all, as part of his thesis, experiencing the varying consequences of the legacy of postcolonialism. Northern Ireland, and Ireland by association, is just one of them. The suppression and repression of these colonial histories, however, continue to erupt and break through in endless Freudian loops. It is, as T.J. Demos argues, as though they are not nor can ever be fully deemed 'past' (2013:8).

In *The Metronome Bursts of Automatic Fire Seep Through the Dawn Mist Like Muffled Drums and We Know It for What It Is* exhibition there was a particular emphasis on the Northern Irish material. This manifested more specifically in the selection of clips in the viewing room which dealt solely with the Troubles, but also in the extent of the number of magazines displaying stories about the Troubles. The largest number of issues of *Life* magazine from any one year on display (9 out of 52) was from 1972, the year of Bloody Sunday. This was a reminder of the mediatised spectacle of this particular event and the ecology of violent images of the Troubles in circulation internationally during the 1970s, something that now seems extraordinary to a post-Troubles generation. It also suggested how that particular image of Ireland was embedded in American cultural memory given that *Life* magazine was published weekly until December 1972 and thereafter continued as a monthly publication. The magazine reached a circulation high in 1969 of 8.5 million but could never attract sufficient advertising revenues to offset the cheap subscription rates it had to offer in order to sustain so many readers. It closed definitively in 2000.

The experience for the viewer of encountering such an array of materials, of walking around, looking down and across the pages and pages of image and text was simultaneously alienating and affective. It suggested cycles of consumption for media images of violent conflict rubbing up against the manufacturing of consent for military action; pointing to the fault-lines between propaganda and reporting. The overwhelming sensation produced by scanning the visual content was of perpetual conflict and violence in the world, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. Iconic images by noted photographers brushed up against the majority of lesser-known photographs and photographers in montaged relationships across magazine spreads. This produced a kind of history of photojournalism in conflict zones as the size and scale of the photograph on the

page expanded exponentially from the early 1960s to the 1980s. A weary history of graphic design manifested in the page layouts which were populated with a set of ghostly advertisements selling whiskey, cigarettes and watches in the midst of reports of violence and carnage. As Lucaites and Harriman state:

Visual media hollow out the public sphere from within, replacing the systematic thinking and rational deliberation of print cultures with a miasma of fragmentary information and sensory appeals leaving little distinction between news and advertising, public affairs and private consumption. (2007:3)

As is well known, the editors of *Fortune*, *Time* and *Life* magazines issued a joint statement in 1942 with the end of World War II in sight, which called for a 'new American Imperialism' in the face of a dying European or British version. The goal here was to 'promote and foster private enterprise, by removing the barriers of natural expansion,' through the creation of 'an expansionist context in which tariffs, subsidies, monopolies, restrictive labour rule... and all other barriers to further expansion can be removed' (2012:67). Reading a history of global conflict depicted in the magazines against the specifically political and economic vision of 'universal free trade,' the tenets of which we now identify as neoliberalism, is made possible by virtue of the commodity (the gun) and the breadth of time and territory covered by the number of the magazines put on display by Augustijnen. The explicit institutional and ideological history of *Time* and *Life* magazine, from the pre-eminent era of American imperial domination and influence, was thus there to be read: the language of the Cold War continuing throughout the 1960s and 1970s and tactically deployed in tropes such as that of the weaponised caption. The cumulative effect of looking around the rooms at Dublin City Gallery and realizing that it was, in fact, only a small portion of all the magazines that were published from the bigger Archive, produced a kind of weariness at the realization of how inevitable the spectre of postcolonial conflict and rupture appeared to be but yet was not necessarily recognised for what it was.

Augustijnen thus uses the gallery space to re-present documents and media artefacts by deploying archival, museological and journalistic methods. He draws on existing official and sometimes unofficial archives. Then, by way of selection and tactical presentation, the artefacts are offered back to us as the stuff of predominantly analogue media history, to be re-read as evidence of dominant

and partial narratives, placed side by side suggesting alternative versions of historical truth.

The film

The film *Spectres* has been extensively analysed, theorised and reviewed since its release in 2011, most notably by T.J. Demos. *Spectres* is a documentary about a pivotal event in the history of the Republic of Congo (formerly the Belgian Congo and now the Democratic Republic of Congo), made without using archive footage. The event in question is the execution of the first prime minister of the independent Republic of Congo, Patrice Lumumba, in January 1961. Lumumba is the spectre haunting the film and the lives of the Belgian and Congolese interviewees, as well as the contemporary political reality of the D.R.C. The title of the film additionally references Marx and his opening remarks in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), which was completed while he lived in Brussels, about the spectre of communism haunting Europe. Lumumba was repeatedly vilified as a dangerous communist who would overturn the Belgian colonial legacy and economic status quo, especially in relation to the valuable Congolese mining industry, by the Belgians and the Americans. This perspective was evident in the tone adopted by *Time* and *Life* magazine towards Lumumba as witnessed in *The Metronome...* installation at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, culminating in a photograph of his grieving widow Pauline accompanied by the caustic caption 'No More Paris Frocks'.

Except for an image of Lumumba on a tape cover in the personal archive of Sir Jacques de Brassinne de la Buissiere, diplomat, amateur historian and main protagonist in the film, the only other document-based presence of Lumumba in the film is the archived recording of his inaugural speech as prime minister. This runs for four minutes over the shot with the least movement in the film. The usually loquacious Brassinne is rendered silent and he sits pensively on his sofa listening. The speech is an eloquent account of the struggle for independence and a damning indictment of Belgian colonial rule. The spectral quality of the voice with no body, the activated presence of Lumumba who hangs over the histories of the subjects in the film interviewed by Brassinne, and Brassinne himself, suggests the archive that is unknowable in its totality but which still continues to shape individual and collective memory.

Demos notes how the role of commemoration has been instrumental in drawing artists towards interrogating themes of postcolonialism, given that in many of the postcolonies in Africa, independence was achieved roughly fifty years ago (2013:10). Additionally, there is an attempt to interrogate the realities of neocolonialisms in these countries and the conditions of so-called 'development', which have ultimately had particular repercussions in terms of mass migration. This, according to Demos, is prompting a 'return' to the postcolony in an attempt to answer these questions and address the perpetual haunting for the injustices of the past (2013:11).

In a telling scene in the film, where Brassinne leads the camera upstairs to his personal archive, or 'Ali Baba's cave', to reveal his array of files and research on the death of Lumumba, one of the dominant themes in Augustijnen's work is made plain: the inadequacy of documents or the Archive to confirm knowledge or 'truth.' Brassinne proudly displays the drafts of his thesis alongside the official government report into the death of Lumumba as inter titles on screen detail a third inquiry about to take place at the request of Lumumba's family in 2012. Despite the limitless supply of documents, the findings in these official reports refuses to convince; despite all the efforts of Brassinne and the Belgian government to deny collusion and reject responsibility for facilitating or even ordering the execution of Lumumba, the spectre of his murder and the legacy of postcolonialism returns.

Augustijnen shot the film himself and reveals his own presence through his agitated camerawork and his mute interactions with the main subject Brassinne. This then is unlike, and other to, the sombre, seemingly objective presentation of media artefacts in his installations. He has also made an installation version of *Spectres* which privileges the documents cited and used in the research for the film, as well as a publication called *Spectres* (2011) composed of documents, photographs and a range of texts. It includes a terse written transcript of an interview with Brassinne interrogating his involvement and knowledge of the sanctioned murder of Lumumba given that he was a Belgian diplomat in Congo at the time.

Sophie Berrebi argues that Augustijnen's film work more broadly tests out different genres where he exploits the indeterminacy between fiction and documentary modes (2012:88). The film is thus a kind of condensed re-

enactment of the research that Brassinne did about Lumumba, demonstrating how he has internalised its defensive arguments and conclusions exonerating the colonial regime of Belgium. Despite all the document she fails to convince, even himself. Brassinne is the archivist of his own collusion and this film, in its various self-reflexive strategies, foregrounds the inherent capacity for the archive to still be deliberately misread.

Conclusion

The postcolonial condition emerges in a complex 'temporal entanglement', according to Demos, in Augustijnen's work (2013:11). By taking on the role of the historian and the archivist, he has built his practice on a range of strategies and methods whereby he isolates media forms, documents and sites in order to re-present them in proximity to others and re-orient how they signify in the present moment. His installations and films acknowledge the artefacts that survive but also the archive that we can never know in its totality. He reminds the viewer of the extent of the social, cultural and political repercussions of postcolonialism in the twenty first century through foregrounding the challenges for representing that topic.

In *The Metronome Bursts of Automatic Fire Seep Through the Dawn Mist Like Muffled Drums and We Know It for What It Is* exhibition, despite its austere and seemingly objective modes of display, the act of surveying the magazine pages from above and moving the body through a mass of often violent images and accompanying texts, produced an affective experience. The footage shown in the screening room, which was not embedded in its final destination or TV programme, ran simply as a detached set of moving image clips hinting at a kind of unmoored dissonance. The experience of the installation was, for the viewer, affective insofar as the attempt to contemplate that span of military conflict and legacy of postcolonialism by moving around and across objects is reminiscent of Gregg and Seigworth's characterization of affect in terms of producing 'resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in their very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves'. The film *Spectres*, in contrast, obviously instantiates the bodily presence of the subjective cameraperson: Augustijnen, as the artist/maker, in the filmic text. Through the explicit performance of camera

vision and camera movement, a rough not smooth rendition of the intersubjective interaction between the documentary subject and the artist is foregrounded and a different kind of affective relationship is posited. Underlying Augustijnen's practice then is the impulse not to construct narratives in order to unify histories, but rather a drive to reveal the systems of disorder and dispersion that are the underlying reality of any discursive statements about history.

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