

[Published in *Images or Shadows: Gerard Byrne*, edited by Pablo Lafuente, Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011: 71-90.]

Architecture, Television, Archaeology: Gerard Byrne's *Subject*, 2009

Maeve Connolly

Taking the form of a three-channel video installation with a wall text, *Subject* (2009) seems to invite comparison with earlier multi-channel works by Gerard Byrne, such as *New Sexual Lifestyles* (2003) and *1984 and beyond* (2005–07). All of these installations involve the use of TV monitors, with headphones attached, and the action is organised into a series of sequences ordered differently on each DVD so that it is not possible to fully experience these works without moving between monitors and viewing some sequences several times. In addition to this shared mode of display, there are similarities in production, as all three involve the use of 'scripts' derived from textual sources (including magazines and journals) dating from the 1960s or 70s, which form the basis for 'reconstructions' performed by professional actors and shot in modernist architectural structures. On closer examination, however, it is possible to identify important differences between *Subject* and the earlier multi-channel installations, particularly in the relationship between script and location.

In *New Sexual Lifestyles*, a conversation between predominantly North American critics, advocates and analysts of sexual hedonism, published as a roundtable discussion in *Playboy* magazine in 1973, is reconstructed by a group of Irish actors. They are seated in a simple but dramatically sited modernist summer house overlooking a river in Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow. This structure was designed in 1972 by the architects Scott Tallon Walker for Irish art patron Basil Goulding, and the installation also includes lush colour photographs of its interior, devoid of occupants. The script for *1984 and beyond* is similarly derived from a *Playboy* roundtable discussion, this time from 1963, in which an all-male group of science-fiction writers speculate about the future. In the reconstruction they are all played by Dutch actors, filmed in conversation at two different locations in the Netherlands; the Provinciehuis building (by Hugh Maaskant, from 1959 to 1971) in the city of Den Bosch, and the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, which incorporates a sculpture pavilion originally designed by Gerrit Rietveldt for the Sonsbeek International Sculpture Exhibition (1955). While both locations are clearly identified in press releases, and might be recognisable to some viewers, the editing and sequencing of scenes suggests the existence of a composite space.

Crucially, there is no direct connection between the source text and the shooting locations in either of these installations. Instead, these transpositions in time and space direct attention to cultural flows between Europe and North America, which encompass but also extend well beyond the circulation of the 'International Style' of architecture. In *Subject*, however, there is a direct connection between script and location. Originally commissioned for the 2009 exhibition 'The New Monumentality' at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, *Subject* was shot (in black and white) entirely on the Brutalist campus of Leeds University, designed in the 1960s by the firm of Chamberlin Powell and Bon, responsible for the Barbican Centre in London during the same period. While the Irish and Dutch performers are clearly out of place in the locations featured in the earlier works, the actors in *subject* generally have northern English accents and so might conceivably be from Leeds or the surrounding region. More, significantly, the script they perform is drawn not from a single publication but rather from multiple texts, many of which are linked to the university. These texts include Leeds University student publications such as *Union News* (1967–70), the student poetry journal *Poetry and Audience* (from the mid-1960s), the poetry journal *Strand* (1963), published by university staff, and the poetry collections *Wodwo* (1967) and *Crow* (1970) by Ted Hughes.

Also cited are 'academic reports on the vernacular use of language amongst the English working class', including *A Questionnaire for a Linguistic Atlas of England* (dated 1952, 1964, 1983) and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). A quotation from the preface to Thompson's book, largely written at Leeds, is also presented as a wall text:

The question of course is how the individual got to be in this 'social role', and how the particular social organisation (with its property-rights and structure of authority) got to be there. And these are historical questions. If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.

The quotation explicitly frames *Subject* as an exploration of class and social hierarchies, shaped partly by property-rights (and, by implication, architecture), and also provides an insight into Thompson's research methodology. It introduces two opposing strategies, loosely recalling the tension between 'structuralist' and 'culturalist' approaches in the development of the British

cultural studies tradition.¹ One involves stopping history to reveal the complexity and multiplicity of social experience at any given moment, while the other focuses on development over time. Although Thompson seems to recognise class as a construct that is itself historically determined, he nonetheless appears drawn to the position of observer, outside history.

Like Thompson, Byrne engages with 'historical questions' but although he is clearly interested in the patterns that might be discerned in social relationships, ideas and institutions over time, he explicitly rejects the position of observer. Instead, he uses a range of formal strategies and techniques (sometimes drawn from Bertolt Brecht) to disrupt and disavow any claim to neutrality or objectivity. In *New Sexual Lifestyles* and *1984 and beyond* these strategies include the use of 'non-naturalistic' acting styles, deliberate geographical and historical anachronisms in the staging, and repetition of elements in the editing of the DVDs. He approaches both of the *Playboy* documents as a theatre or television director might engage with the script for a play, taking liberties with the staging and the setting. That is the case particularly in *1984 and beyond*, which includes sequences bearing little relation to the content of the roundtable. *Subject*, however, involves a far greater degree of fabrication, as there is no link to an 'original' discursive situation. Instead, the same actors appear in disparate scenarios, while loosely recall dramatic and factual genres associated with radio and television, such as 'vox-pop' interviews, local news broadcasts, daytime chat shows and arts programmes. While this can produce an abrupt shift in tone, a sense of continuity is created through the recurrence of location shots of the campus, typically at night.

In contrast with the earlier works, the acting in *Subject* appears relatively naturalistic. But from the outset, *Subject* is marked by a highly self-conscious approach to both casting and performance. One of the most prominent sequences is an interview between a friendly young female presenter and a slightly pompous male guest identified as 'Mike Harnett', director of a student production of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939).² In the course of the dialogue, presumably taken from a published interview in a staff or student journal, Harnett complains that it would be much easier to work with a cast from 'secondary-modern' school. This is because, he claims, 'students suffer from being over-intellectual' and so cannot offer the kind of 'earthy, direct'

¹ For a discussion of this history see Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', *Media, Culture and Society*, no.2, 1980, pp.57–72.

² Written in 1939, Brecht's play is also referenced in Byrne's work *In repertory*, 2004-2006. First exhibited at Project Arts Centre in Dublin, this work involved the display of a collection of scenic elements, drawn from three specific theatre productions (the 1947 Broadway production of *Oklahoma!*, the 1961 Odeon Theatre (Paris) production of *Waiting for Godot* and the 1963 Martin Beck Theatre production of *Mother Courage*).

performance most suited to Brecht's objective – the creation of 'real-life characters within the social situation'. This dialogue reveals the extent to which the university was imagined as a place in which students (deliberately or inadvertently) became dislocated from 'real-life' and from their prior social and class identity. In addition to this direct citation, *Subject* is also characterised by the use of various techniques intended to draw attention to the construction of representation, which might be described as 'Brechtian'.³ The same actors reappear in different roles, often wearing costumes that are not entirely convincing and several shots are carefully framed to include camera operators and radio engineers, who are also (presumably) actors. There are potential parallels here with the ideology of Brutalist architecture, which sometimes emphasised the overt display of the means of construction, such as the marks left by wooden supports on the surface of poured concrete. Yet Byrne does not seem overly concerned with this aspect of Brutalism and does not linger on the material surfaces of the buildings. Instead, by using shots of the exterior to link the action sequences, he hints at the ways in which the architecture of the university, whether physical and institutional, might subtly shape the production of students as subjects.

Many sequences in *Subject* pointedly involve the use of 'direct address' in which reports, comments and questions are directed towards the viewer. Some of these sequences are shot in the campus TV studio, and are distinctly televisual in their assertion of a shared time and space. Often, however, the script retains aspects of its earlier textual form, which might be an academic article, poem or student newspaper feature. In one item, a young woman bearing a microphone stands near a campus walkway as though she is about to conduct an interview. She refers to a survey about sex, involving the participation of 'hundreds of people', and the action then cuts to individuals in entirely different locations speaking awkwardly about their own experiences. The reporter implies that the university may be complicit in the normalisation of sex outside marriage, but her authority is undercut by the slightly sensationalist tone of the report, amplified by the on-screen use of text. At one moment, for example, the word 'EXTREME' flashes up in a vaguely 1970s-style typeface, while a young man describes his encounters with women. This is just one of a number of sequences focusing on social behaviour. In general the participants are not named, but one interview is attributed to 'Jack Straw', the former UK Foreign Secretary who was president of Leeds University Union from 1967 to 68, and of the National Union of

³ For a discussion of the deployment of 'Brechtian' techniques in film during the 1960s and 70s, as well as a useful overview of debates around realism, see Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.

Students from 1969 to 1971.⁴ This reference to Straw is a forceful reminder of the fact that ‘extra-curricular’ activities at university are often integral to professional progression, particularly in the fields of media production and politics.

While much of the scripted material in *Subject* seems to have been drawn from student publications, there are number of scenarios in which the interviewee is required to answer a series of ambiguous questions, sometimes responding to gestures hidden from the viewer. In one such sequence the interview asks; ‘If you didn’t shave here, you’d soon have...?’ , repeatedly receiving the same tentative response – ‘Whiskers?’. The interviewees are also invited to complete statements about traditional village trades and occupations, rituals associated with death and patterns of school attendance, but the focus seems to be on vocabulary (or perhaps accent) rather than social custom. These interactions draw attention to the university not only as institution for the production of research but also as a site of potential social mobility, and heightened self-consciousness in relation to markers of class.

The content and form of these interactions, involving an interplay between on-screen and off-screen space, underscore the importance of phenomenological, linguistic and semiotic frames of analysis in shaping concepts of subjectivity and socialisation, which were often directly relevant to the study of film and television. It was during the 1960s that media studies first became widely established within British universities, partly through the journal *Screen Education*, which was founded in 1959. Even after it was re-launched (as *Screen*) ten years later with a more explicitly theoretical focus, many of the contributors were practitioners whose work in cinema or broadcasting was motivated by an interest in radical social and political change.

Subject is not the first work by Byrne to communicate an interest in the history of television. Both of the *Playboy* roundtable discussions respond to shifts in domestic consumption and leisure that were partly shaped by the rise of television. The explicit content and meandering flow of the discussion in *New Sexual Lifestyles*, with participants shot at close quarters, is also deliberately reminiscent of the Channel 4 show *After Dark*, a late-night live discussion programme intermittently broadcast between 1987 and 1997, which was often characterised by rambling conversation and ‘adult’ content. More recently, in *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not*

⁴ In 2000, Leeds students voted to withdraw his lifetime union membership because of his role in ‘curtailing civil liberties’. BBC News website, updated 7 December 2007 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7133364.stm [last accessed in June 2011].

(2010), Byrne has used material from radio – specifically a discussion between Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Frank Stella and presenter Brian Glaser, broadcast in 1964.

Subject is, however, more explicitly concerned with the exploration of the forms and conventions specific to broadcasting at a given moment. The early and mid-1960s were marked by radical change and experimentation in British television, as BBC television was facing significant commercial competition for the first time. In his critical history of television drama from this period, John Caughie notes that many theatre practitioners migrated towards TV in the late 1950s in search of a larger (and broader) audiences, but struggled to develop a distinctly televisual language. Caughie argues that the arrival in London of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble in 1959 generated interest in non-naturalistic approaches to staging and performance amongst British TV producers and writers.⁵ He also specifically highlights the drama documentary as site for the exploration of these ideas. This form had been employed in cinema since its inception, and in left-wing theatre in Britain and the US since the 1930s, when the Living Newspaper offered a means of 'performing the news'. But the drama documentary could also take a more instructional form, particularly in television, and Caughie notes that this double identity was exploited in TV productions such as Peter Watkins's *Culloden* (1964), and in three of the most influential works in the 'Wednesday Play' series: *Up the Junction* (Loach/James McTaggart, 1965) Watkins' *The War Game*, suppressed by the BBC in 1966, and Ken Loach and Tony Garnett's *Cathy Come Home* (1966). These productions went on to form part of the canon of television studies, and continued to be cited in debates around realism, popular culture and memory well into the 1970s and 80s. While *Subject* does not directly address this history, it clearly acknowledges the significance of theatre (and the newspaper) in the development of television's characteristic modes of address.

By focusing attention on a modernist university campus and evoking an array of televisual genres that belong to an earlier moment, Byrne might be accused of nostalgia for broadcasting, for the welfare state or even for the lost dream of universal education. In *Subject*, moments from past, present and future are brought into proximity with each other, and the fact that the actors are depicted in spaces once occupied by the writers and original readers of Byrne's source texts only highlights the distance that exists between the imagined future of the 1960s and the present situation confronted by students and lecturers, a gulf that has widened even further since the work was made in 2009. Ultimately, even though it draws heavily upon the formal language of a

⁵ John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p.68

very familiar medium, *Subject* does not offer a straightforward or reassuring image of the past. Instead, through its sustained emphasis on the campus as a site in which social conventions are learned and practiced – as well as occasionally contested – it offers an archaeology of the university that is both unfamiliar and quietly unsettling.