

Twice-lived fragments of time: 3 moments on Martin Healy

1. Five years that's all we've got

In 1971 David Bowie was still a young man of 24 when he invented Ziggy Stardust the messianic alien rock star who came to earth. By the end of the album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, Ziggy is dead in a "Rock and Roll Suicide" having been torn apart by, apparently, his appetites and fans. As we know, Bowie himself was perpetually in a moment being lived twice – Bowie being the alter-ego of the more prosaically named David Jones. A mere 45 years later Bowie was, like Ziggy, also gone; his death having been similarly, meticulously choreographed in the beautiful, unprecedented and almost unbearable work of art of the album *Blackstar* and its accompanying videos.

The Ziggy album opens with the song *Five Years* which is astonishing not only for its musicality but also as a statement on the power of art in the face of mortality. As is so often the case with the best pop music it is reflection on human finitude amidst the fleeting contingencies of the world. And the potential for love and art (and, surely in pop we can be allowed to think of them as being the same thing) to sweetly resist the disorder and collapse that we must all, inevitably, submit to. The story of the song, narrated by the singing protagonist, begins with him:

"Pushing through the market square, So many mothers sighing News had just come over, We had five years left to cry in."

It appears that humans and their world only have "five years left to cry in." In the list that follows you can hear our character collecting up the appearances of the furniture of a world that is about to no longer exist. As he walks around the dying environment he becomes a kind of pop phenomenologist grasping at the thick textures of phenomena. He's gathering up some of those things that will, all too soon, be gone for ever:

"I heard telephones, opera house, favourite melodies, I saw boys, toys, electric irons and T.V.'s"

The key moment of the song comes with the following lines:

"I think I saw you in an ice-cream parlour, drinking milk shakes cold and long. Smiling and waving and looking so fine, don't think you knew you were in this song."

At this moment there comes a beautiful merging of worlds. It's signalled by Bowie singing in a higher register. The worlds of our protagonist's memory and the song we listen to become indistinguishable. The address "don't think you knew you were in this song" seems to be directed within the song, to the milkshake drinker whilst also, simultaneously, pointing outwards to the listener. We're in the song too. At this moment, the moment of the planet's doom becomes a moment to be lived twice over. It is lived in the memory of the protagonist; and lived again in the song. The song becomes a stand-in for all works of art which are like little warehouses crammed full of those things that are about to be lost; those things that, in five years will be gone.

There's the rub. Five years. That all any of us have; more or less; give or take the odd year here and there. In a few mere years we will all be gone.

2. The Owl's Legacy

In 1818 the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork was presented with its extraordinary collection of replicas of classical sculpture. Along with other Greco-Roman examples it includes copies of: the Belvedere Torso reputedly a representation of another character from the Trojan Wars, Ajax, contemplating his suicide; and The Laocoön representing the eponymous Trojan priest and his two sons being torn apart by serpents in revenge for attempting to expose the trick of the Trojan Horse.

They are astonishing, not only for their beauty, but also for their remarkable history. At the beginning of the 19th Century, in Rome, the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova made over a hundred copies of masterpieces from the Vatican Collection. They were initially commissioned by Pope Pius VII as a gift for the Prince Regent of England in thanks for the return of art stolen by Napoleon, many of which ended up in the Louvre collection. They were shunted around for a few years until they were eventually shipped, under the auspices of Lord Listowel (Viscount Ennismore), to the Cork Society of Arts, hence finding their current home in the Crawford. There they now sit embodying an idea of classical culture.

In his television series, *The Owl's Legacy*, the film-maker Chris Marker interviews intellectuals and experts to explore the contemporary legacy of classical civilization through the "lost resonances of thirteen words" including, Olympics, Democracy and Symposium (an intellectual conversation over food and drink.) As the French politician Michel Jobert puts it, capturing something of the essence of the whole project, he has a profound, almost mystical love for Greek civilization as an idea and in a: "civilization of open spaces, a mass society... of modern communication ... I feel that we can find a refuge in memories - true or false as they may be. And a sense of belonging."

The classical continues to seduce as a model of art because it offers the possibility to time-travel. This is why it's been looked to as a refuge, for memories, for a sense of belonging be that in the so-called rebirths of Renaissances, or Neoclassical reconstructions. Its values and styles can be imagined to sit outside time; or at the very least arrest its passing.

In another section, Jean Pierre Vernant explains the formation of images in ancient Greece where they referred not only to statues and pictures but copies, duplicates and ghosts: that is, for things that live again in their doubles. Images were a way in which the Grecians could deal with their darkest fears by making them tangible and reducing them to a caricature. They are a way, he suggests that: "through images and through stories, of disarming the horror of death that the monstrous face expresses and which the image carries out so that what can't be seen can be depicted in many ways."

The Crawford sculptures are such images; images with a double valence that are balanced between ancient origin and contemporary setting. Like Bowie's protagonist we can also find in them a model for the complex imbrication of love, memory and art in the face of death. They can become screens on which to project our values, fears and dreams. This is the owl's legacy and its gift: a sense of roots and some collective

origin.

And, yet, the truth is that we can never, really, know what they would have meant to their intended audience. Its timelessness is as much a fictive construction as any other work of art. For all the projected universality of Greek culture it also must remain unthinkable to us for Greek attitudes to sexuality, slavery, religion, culture are as alien as Ziggy Stardust. These sculptures remain “cracked actors” in a drama we can only imagine.

3. A moment twice lived

It is for another of Chris Marker’s films, *La Jetée*, that Martin Healy’s show at the Crawford Art Gallery is named. A moment twice-lived is used to describe Marker’s time-travelling protagonist who sees and becomes haunted by an image of his own death and “the memory of a twice-lived fragment of time.” The two examples offered above both present instances of themes explored in the exhibition. Healy’s images also offer a doubling of the world. He also shows us recurrence; moments lived again and the opportunity for art to slow down or suspend time. He has talked about using the moving image in the sense that the director Tarkovsky described it; as a means of “sculpting in time.”

He describes the show as comprised of three elements all relating to three different temporalities and which are rhymed here in the three parts of this essay: cosmic time; historical time; and human time. Cosmic time is unimaginable and relates to the occult operations of the universe. It is alien time. Historical time is that time through which the world unfolds and which distances ourselves from our ancestors. And human time is the time of lived experience. It is the time of looking at paintings and sitting on park benches. It is our time, the time of now. It can only be lived once.

Francis Halsall

Course Director, MA Art in the Contemporary World, NCAD