

Critical essay about Susi Arnott's film by Jenny Turner

1 INTRODUCTION

Stone Hole is a nine-minute time-lapse film that follows – or appears to follow – a single tidal cycle in a north Cornwall sea-cave, and is shot – or at least appears to be shot – from a single position at the back of that cave, though that position comes to be disturbed.

It's filmed from inside the cave looking out to light and sea, with another cave in the distance beyond it.

Sometimes, the light is so low, the film appears to be monochrome; sometimes you can see the blues and greens creeping in; at one point, there's so much colour it's shocking. Over the course of its cycle the film goes from calm to chaos and back to calm again; this is, of course, one of the great narrative patterns into which experience so often seems to resolve itself, and because of this, it's easy for the viewer to slip from Arnott's film to other stories that appear to follow a similar rhythm, and in an analogously earth-shattering way – tales that tell of sex, and assault, and seizure.

But although it's true that such stories would probably appear fairly close to one another in the structural myth-kitty, it obscures and diminishes the real story of Arnott's film to see it in such a way. The really important thing is simply to look at the film and attempt to find words for what we see; and beyond that, to think about the forces, natural and/or personal and/or social and cultural, that have made it its particular self.

It begins with rough, dark rock in darkness, a hole roughly at the middle of the screen, a soft, heaped triangle, a friendly huddle, somehow, of light. Beyond the hole there is daylight, and at the vanishing point of that, another dim heap, of darkness this time, lining up with the first one, but barely seen. The gentle piles, the parallel, the pleasingly off-centre framing, the sound, scarcely heard, of water lapping: it's a delightful image, calm and serenely held.

Except even as you have been thinking that, the light has been getting stronger: and stronger and stronger, and beginning to glimmer and reflect contour on the walls around the hole. Water drips from top to bottom, with expanding rings of echo; waves rustle then rumble then suddenly are roaring, the sea grows more and more.

The middle section of the film is particularly odd and interesting, especially if you know Crispin Hughes's panoramic cave photographs with which the film was first shown. Unlike the opening sequence of Arnott's film, Hughes's photographs are huge, still, harsh, shockingly coloured, right up there in front of you, perspectives distorted, in your face: in this part of Arnott's film, as the cave fills with heaving water and the camera is flung against its walls, sudden close-ups – it is as though the film were grabbing images from the photographs at random almost, flinging them together, regardless of colour, pattern, scale, texture, in a jarring

collage. It isn't of course, the camera is still in there, in Arnott's cave, rolling on oblivious, through sudden zoomlike movements and lashings and buffetings. It's a terrifying impression of the violence of the forces around it – as the geologist comments, it's the closest to getting inside a moving internal combustion engine that a human being can ever hope to get.

The film records a tidal cycle of terrifying violence, but that is not the only drama in it; it's also about the way the human eye, the perceiving mind, constantly tries to resolve indifferent nature into human shapes and stories.

“Instead of authenticity,” as Neal Ascherson has written, “stones have biographies. Some of this biography is incised or chipped or rubbed into them. Some of it – the different uses, mythical or practical, to which they were put by humans – can be read or inferred ... Much of it is unreadable. But a surprising amount of an object's biography is simply lying around waiting to be noticed ...” (*Stone Voices*, p9).

2 HOW THE FILM WAS MADE

Arnott, she tells me, has for many years been spending time in and about the sea-caves around her parents' house in north Cornwall, recreationally as a swimmer and diver, and helping Crispin Hughes, who is her partner, carry equipment for his shoots. She had already made **Estuary** (1996-7), a time-lapse film of tidal movement on a nearby beach over 2 very different days from dawn to night. After the success of that much simpler project, she wondered whether she could extend the same technique into the sea-caves, with their enormous technical and practical challenges – light, water, danger, where can you put the camera and its operator?

“Spending extended periods in sea-caves I realised that the seductive danger of the rising tide did not have to be a limiting factor – it was actually my subject. And that surrendering control was part of the point.”

It sounds so simple, elegant, value-free. And yet the film at every stage is an artefact, in both senses of the word. What you actually see is eight minutes 50 seconds long, but the raw material was shot over two overlapping periods of the tidal cycle, on two successive days. Arnott has reported that it took her a year to work out how to manage the many technical difficulties. Early tests resulted in capsizes, lost cameras and wild exposure and focus problems; battery limitations meant only 6-7 hours could be recorded in a single run – about the limit of Arnott's ability to stay in the water, coincidentally. Weather conditions being less predictable than tides and the position of the sun, there were very few days in the year when it was possible to film.

When you watch the film from beginning to end, it appears that the start of the tidal sequence coincides with dawn and early morning; this turns out to be a construct, a conventional fade-up; this cycle actually began in the late afternoon of the second day, the tide-fall having been recorded the day before. The

approaching tide we see in the final film was actually the nemesis of the camera, as it compressed and crushed and finally entered the waterproof housing, leaving digital images on the card accessible but the camera useless. The sound was recorded in that very cave, a few months later.

Usually, a time-lapse film carries an expectation, as Arnott has admitted, that the filming is impersonal – you set the interval, a focus and an exposure, and you just leave the camera in one fixed position, for as long as it takes. Stone Hole may look as if the camera is on its own – and that appearance, of course, is part of the drama, it is what allows a viewer to imagine herself, alone and powerless, in that place – but in fact, it was always accompanied. “I set a focus and an exposure and lots of tests about what might be rational settings to choose, and then bound the camera down with elastic bands and put it in the waterproof housing, which was weighted so it was roughly neutrally buoyant – it would neither sink, nor just bob on the surface.” When the waters rose and grew rough, however, “early tests in a much smaller cave had shown that the camera would just go off into a little corner and bash itself against a rock in the dark for an hour, and I wouldn’t have a film.” The camera, then, was put in a waterproof bag and stabilised with lead weights and allowed to float; Arnott herself, then, attended the camera throughout the tidal cycle – “my presence there was absolutely necessary” – righting the camera when it threatened to get stuck in the dark or broken. The film-maker had to be there in order to save the camera from itself.

3 ART, SCIENCE, DOCUMENTARY

The more closely one investigates any art-making, any worthwhile scientific method, the more one pretty well always discovers even the most apparently elegant process to be an effect of painstaking adjustment and variation. In the field of science, the current scandal over the University of East Anglia climate-change emails is an example. What non-scientists like to think of as gold-standard objective experimental data is in fact routinely subject to statistical processing, necessary to separate significant from non-significant elements, but inasmuch as it is a human intervention, immediately open to possible mistake and manipulation. In science, they call this “artefact” and see it as a problem – the residue of technology, mode of perception, conscious or unconscious intention that gets in the way and blurs the data; a problem that needs to be handled with collective rigour and openness – that is what the peer-review system is for, to eliminate, as far as possible, traces of personal bias. For art, on the other hand, such artefact is generally a gift – the humour, mystery, the space between nature and the personal, in which all human culture happens.

With regard to this interest in artefact, the film’s deeper background, in Arnott’s intellectual and artistic biography, turns out to make sense as well. Arnott did a PhD in plant genetics by research at University College London, and began film-making during that time before studying documentary and camerawork at the

National Film and Television School in Beaconsfield. (The NFTVS has since become more directly vocational in its focus, but during Arnott's period, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, under the directorship of Colin Young, it was a place of great intellectual richness and ferment. As well as learning about film as technique and as a business, the documentary department engaged intellectually with the history of documentary in the 20th century, which is, in a sense, the history of aesthetic modernism itself - the kino-pravda of Vertov, the cinema verite of Rouch, or in literature, the No Ideas But in Things! of Ezra Pound.)

Examining the film closely as a narrative sequence (rather than considering how it participates in geology, art history, neurology or any of the other themes to which the exhibition's supporting materials drew attention) - examining it as an object, via close attention to how it exists and moves through time: what appears to be simple and unmediated is in fact full of human judgement and necessary compromise. What could be seen as a scientific recording - a simple, almost unmediated exercise in time-lapse nature photography is in fact packed with human, social and cultural content. What appears, at first sight, to be merely a record of a natural cycle can also be experienced as a profoundly satisfying story, almost traditionally structured, in terms of beginning, middle and end.

4 INTERPRETATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Viewers watch the film and talk about sex, childbirth, assault, death by drowning; From Here to Eternity is mentioned, and Anna Livia Plurabelle; the artist herself has spoken about how she suddenly realised, while in the middle of post-production, of her own experience of epileptic seizure, the way neurological disturbance builds to a crisis that is almost a release, and then subsides.

Such talk is interesting and has a place, but can also become an evasion. As Neil McLaughlin has said, with reference to Crispin Hughes's photographs, isn't it interesting, in our increasingly specular culture, how difficult we find it simply to look at something and hold our focus on that one thing without shying away to tell stories about something else; and isn't it odd how often these stories depend on sex or death or similarly sensational pet topic. Particularly interesting how hard it is with this work, which appears to be nature unmediated but of course is anything but. The really important thing is simply to look at the film and attempt to find words for what we see; and beyond that, to think about the forces, natural and/or personal and/or social and cultural, that make it its particular self.

And so, as the camera rights itself and finds a new equilibrium, and we come back to the lovely double-pyramid framing of the opening composition, the film moves towards what a thrillingly happy ending, a calm after the storm that is also proof and hope that life will go on. In Arnott's words:

I only managed to achieve well to film one complete cycle. But it was in

my heart that the truth of being in that cave is that the end of any particular cycle is not, and never will be, the End. It's going to happen again, in the dark, in the night; and then in the morning it's going to happen again; and then in the afternoon it'll happen again, inexorably; and that's one of the reasons there's a cave there in the first place ...

In response to Stone Hole, Neil McLaughlin, at the Photofusion exhibition, read an extract from the end of Elizabeth Bishop's great poem, At the Fishhouses (1955-6). Note the way the poem, like Arnott's film, is interested in how, when we look at the sea, we are seeing both sameness and difference, flux and cycle, movement and stillness, and how ultimately, such perceptions concern not a naïve confrontation with nature, but "what we imagine knowledge to be":

... The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then the world.
If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache immediately,
your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
as if the water were a transmutation of fire
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

"Knowledge", says Bishop, is on the one hand "utterly free ... derived from the rocky breasts/ forever", but also "since/ our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown". For Arnott, "the truth of being in that cave is that the end of any particular cycle is not, and never will be, the End ... and that's one of the reasons there's a cave there in the first place"; and so, as the water goes on rising, agitating, bashing the rock, blindly finding spots of weakness, it follows that this process, too, will eventually lead the cave to disappear.

Jenny Turner 2009