

SPACE PILOT

The experimental spirit of the London Film-makers' Co-op is alive and well, and living in Stephen Connolly's explorations of place

By Vlastimir Sudar

Throughout the 60s and 70s, London was a thriving hub of experimental cinema – what is mostly remembered now is the wealth of work produced at the London Film-Makers' Co-op by artists such as Lis Rhodes, William Raban, Malcolm Le Grice, et al. One offshoot of this activity was the experimental filmmaking course that Le Grice set up at Saint Martin's School of Art in 1964, which soon recruited other filmmakers from the LFMC as teachers. Before this course was subsumed into a general fine art strand in the late 90s it yielded many famous alumni, including Jarvis Cocker, the hip-hop *enfant terrible* M.I.A., and the director Joe Wright (*Atonement*, 2007). But if you were on the look-out for contemporary manifestations of the LFMC's ethos among the course's former students, then Stephen Connolly's *oeuvre* might well be the place to start.

After a stint as a social worker with the homeless in London between 1987 and 1992, Connolly enrolled on Le Grice's course and was taught by, among others, John Smith – the filmmaker best known for *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) – the feminist multimedia artist Tina Keane and the animator Vera Neubauer (Le Grice himself had by now moved on). One of Connolly's first films after completing his masters was *The Reading Room* (2002), which situates itself firmly in LFMC territory, addressing similar preoccupations: a static time-lapse camera observes the Reading Room of the British Museum, producing images that blur any human presence into traces, non-representational smears. These are offset by the library's pin-sharp architectural forms, a contrast that emphasises the durability of the space as opposed to our human impermanence. The film is silent, Brechtian distance and humour introduced by a superimposed text which explains that Connolly was not allowed to record sound on location, and that archive sound from the BBC would have been exorbitantly expensive; the text also points out that Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital* in this very place.

Like many of the structuralist/materialist films made under the aegis of the LFMC, *The Reading Room* flares out at the end, reminding us that it is only as long as the reel of film loaded in the camera. As the last celluloid unspools, abstract shapes in flaming yellows and reds 'unseat' the image – a nod to the structuralist/materialist maxim that form and content are inseparable and that representation should be reflexively revealed, principally through an emphasis on film's material qualities. Connolly soon took off in his own direction, though, adhering only to the LFMC's modernist ideals of continual innovation and confrontation with the political and social contradictions of the times.

In Connolly's work, unlike that of his LFMC predecessors, there is no rivalry between film, video and digital: they are simply different



Death Valley days: *Zabriskie Point (Redacted)* (2013)

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media to be employed to suit his needs, just as a painter might use oil or water-colour. Connolly's choice is often a collage; and as well as static shots, he has been known to employ an elaborately moving camera, often from a travelling vehicle, fracturing reality into what is seen through the glass and what is reflected in it. The films often investigate public spaces by way of the French theorist Henri Lefebvre's idea that space reflects the social relations that produce it and is used to maintain hegemonies.

Such philosophical notions are particularly important in later works such as *Zabriskie Point (Redacted)*, which premiered at the Rotterdam festival in 2013. This film explores the areas of Death Valley where Michelangelo Antonioni's

1970 film was shot, but using a digital camera rather than 16mm; this enabled longer takes and allowed Connolly to blend in more easily, observing the spaces inconspicuously alongside other tourists. Connolly's film intercuts black-and-white archive footage of the social unrest that inspired Antonioni's film with shots of its locations, which have now become tourist spots partly because of the original film. Connolly has said that, like Antonioni, he wanted to produce a work as "an idea in landscape", setting story aside in order to reflect on the broader context.

That strategy of combining found, carefully choreographed and documentary footage guides Connolly's latest film *Machine Space* (2016), which focuses on the link between real-estate value and race. Connolly again takes the audience on a car journey, this time through Detroit, observing the spaces framed by the windscreen, interleaved with testimony from residents and images of a family playing a board game. This reflection on Detroit's ills, the post-industrial behemoth as a 'fluid, spatial-capital machine', while it could easily work in a gallery, is very much a single-screen piece, designed for the darkness of the cinema. Connolly is a filmmaker first, but also an artist and craftsman; he describes his contribution in the credits as "image/edit/sound" – in line with the hands-on ethos of the LFMC. But the broader range of both formats and subject-matter – from a ballet school in Cuba to Folkestone archives and tragic working-class heroes – means that his inquisitive, self-reflexive films take experimental cinema in new directions, revitalising the LFMC's ethos for the 21st century. 📍

i *Machine Space* will be shown as part of the Experimenta strand at the BFI London Film Festival on Monday 10 October at BFI Southbank



Machine Space