

A Whirling Dervish is shown in a white and red costume, performing a ritual on a red floor. The image is a close-up, slightly blurred shot, capturing the dancer's hands and feet. The dancer's hands are positioned in front of him, and his feet are visible on the red floor. The background is a bright, hazy white, suggesting a large, open space. The overall mood is serene and focused.

**STEPHEN GUNNING**  
JOURNEYMAN

JANUARY – FEBRUARY



## SPECTACULAR TRIPS

Do we, when we are busily playing the role of the tourist, see anything? Certainly, by moving our bodies from Crouch End to Uluru, and on from there to Easter Island and Dingle, Istanbul and Machu Picchu, we present ourselves, and our eyes, with a succession of vistas, a parade of images. But do the compromises we make in order to see all this, and, of course, the compromises that “all this” (that is, nothing less than habitat, history and culture of the human race) makes in order to be seen by a parade of tourists, does that mean there is, in some ways, nothing to see here? And if that procedure is infinitely compromised, what then of the filmmaker who makes a film of others consuming the compromised? Why does that not become a sort of semiotic black hole from which not even light escapes? How can we possibly see anything on the screen at all?

Stephen Gunning is an artist whose approach seems to play out some of these apparent contradictions by adding one or two more. This is work which often appears to give up its meanings early in our encounter, only to remain persistently fugitive. Even when what we are looking at is ostensibly familiar, a dancer or a marcher of a type we imagine we have seen many times before, our apparent comfort with the image initiates our difficulties, as Gunning’s easy mode of presentation lures us into what must be, in reality, a trap. We think we have seen the artist’s film, engaged with it for a loop or two, only to find that we have spent our time not seeing something. What we have missed is not a revelation, but rather, the absence of such an unequivocal communication, something which confuses us in a piece of work that we imagined to be somehow first degree, glaringly and pointedly transparent. The process might be likened to a public festival whose meanings have become lost in pomp and pomps, but which continues very publicly to command the streets, even as its significance disappears for ever larger numbers of those who see it. Repetition is not always the route to revelation; just as following the crowd is not always the best method of fostering an identity.

Gunning’s disposition is one which tends to treat the camera and its associated wiles, image and sound editing, with suspicion, deploying them adroitly while steadily cautioning the audience of their dangers. If this holds true for the two related large screen video projections of the artist’s show at mother’s tankstation this year, Gunning’s strategies have also taken this form on previous occasions. In 2008’s *Parade*, a video work of what could be a march, the identity of those involved is not asserted, and something tells us to doubt what we are watching, or at least to doubt ourselves when we are watching. As with more recent work, the soundtrack for *Parade* is one that was recorded on a different occasion (and featuring a different kind of group interaction) from the video images. The sounds of the original parade have here been replaced sound with those of a Frisbee contest, setting up a disconnect between what is seen and what is heard, serving to break Chion’s audio-visual contract, but also unavoidably stressing the link between the disparate occasions.

This is an approach and a strategy that Gunning employs throughout his practice, and is one that relates to an interest in how people behave in groups, and more precisely, in the often hidden relationships between social experiences that at first seem entirely disconnected. Sometimes, the works seem to suggest, the differences we recognise at first become less certain when we begin to play close attention.

If, as the artist has said, “the longer you look the more you see”, it is not always more difference that is available, but deeper levels of connection.

What often happens in the global tourist sector, however, is movement in an opposite direction, towards a flattening of experience; the result not simply of a dissociation from language required to approach meaningfully an event – which, of course, is also a site, a church, a mosque, a street, a statue – but also of the simple effects of accretion. We know that dust, either real or metaphorical, is falling over what we are here to see, but we take that dust as part of the meaning, continuing our slightly automatised pilgrimage, somehow allowing its status, semi-evacuated of meaning, to persist. But a layer of dust does not, in reality, constitute an erasure.

There is in Gunning’s work, exemplified by his installation featuring Istanbul’s Blue Mosque, a strong echo of the filmmaker Michael Haneke, the Austrian master of the cinema of hiding in plain sight. Haneke’s is a cinema in which the incidental becomes the instrumental, in which actions and scenes that adopt the guise of randomness lure unwary viewers into a surprising, unsettling congress. The frequently celebrated scene, for example, at the end of Haneke’s *Caché*, shows a group of children exiting their school. Do we recognise some? Given that we are looking, what are we looking for? Why are we looking here? Surely this must connect to that, otherwise our attention is wasted. But does the meaning, like the significance of the Blue Mosque, necessarily remain hidden to most whose gaze falls on it? Even to the tourist in possession of everything a guide book has to offer, it will remain an obscure destination. It is both present and absent to the casual visitor.

Through a gateway we see (via a camera left fixed on a tripod, apparently at a low level) tourists and pilgrims enter the mosque. The crowd are largely tourists, we presume, as they are unprepared for the entry into the sacred space and must be reminded to take off their footwear, or cover heads or bare shoulders with scarves. Plastic bags are offered to aid with this preparation, a first oddly chiming note, suggesting the way in which customs are moulded around contemporary convenience every bit as strikingly as the recordings of muezzins that replace the live chanters in the city’s minarets. The traditions that the tourists are here to consume, in their fashion, have adapted in order to facilitate their own consumption. But Gunning’s film, despite involving a stationary camera and without editing (outside of its loop) is not at all ‘neutral’ in its means. The motion of the image is slowed slightly, adding to a dream-like, perhaps religious reverie, while the soundtrack is also radically reinterpreted, the diegetic sounds replaced by those of a different event, in a different location, a gathering which might stand in ironic position to the visual content. If Istanbul has repeatedly provided a site for various ‘clashes’ of civilisations, Gunning’s film instigates yet another, playing the soundtrack of a spectacular American Independence Day fireworks celebration over the visual of a mosque, rockets bursting in air over minarets. The contradictions might have appeared brusque, but the artist’s manipulation of the scene maintains the tranquility of the religious building, co-opting the psychic space of the fireworks into the religious space, rather than invading it with explosions, so that what might have offered a violent contrast seems unexpectedly harmonious. The dynamic of the piece is, it seems, elsewhere.

Despite appearances, there is a great deal of verbal play in Gunning’s work – play which is initiated by the show’s title, *Journeyman*, which the artist suggests, is a reference to the German tradition of



craftsmen who, having completed their initial training, are obliged to move about the world seeking further instruction and contact with master craftsmen. They are, indeed, banned from spending more than a few weeks in one location.

In this, they are occupied in a similar manner to Sufi dervishes, whose role as travelling mendicants is no less real for now being somewhat outmoded, and who feature in *Journeyman's* other component, a video shot by the artist and featuring the feet of a member of a touring company of dervishes who fetched up at the National Concert Hall, Dublin in 2004. The etymology of the word dervish relates to the word for "door", serving to represent the dervishes as men of a lowly social position, as journeying monks begging door to door, but also as having access to a door to another realm which the practice of ecstatic whirling is designed to open.

The ceremony in the context of which the dervishes whirl, the Sema, is indeed described as a "journey of the heart", a four movement ritual in which the speed of rotation gradually increases, in the process producing a trance state in the whirlers. The original German term for "Journeyman" craftspeople is "Zimmerman" – literally room man. But where does a conjunction of a door man and a room man leave us?<sup>1</sup>

But it is always possible that such brisk linguistic activity, such a frantic barrage of liens, might simply serve to obscure other layers of meaning. One notion that unites all these groups is the journey itself, whether an etymological, geographic, spiritual or metaphorical journey; whether it brings about a change simply in location, or in status, in spiritual state, in apprehension. But are all journeys, perhaps, compromised in the manner Debord sees as being precipitated by tourism:

Tourism – human circulation packaged for consumption, a by-product of the circulation of commodities – is the opportunity to go and see what has been banalized. The economic organization of travel to different places already guarantees their equivalence. The modernization that has reduced the time involved in traveling has simultaneously reduced the real space through which and to which one can travel.<sup>2</sup>

To pursue just one of *Journeyman's* examples, the status of the various groups of Dervishes active in Turkey prior to the advent of Ataturk in the 1920s was radically altered with the new leader's emphasis on secularisation. Once prominent orders were driven underground, and even today, when a government more predisposed to Islam holds power, the orders have not regained their former exalted status. Indeed, around Istanbul, tourist entertainment often features dervish whirling, so that the mystical elevation sought by the order's founder, Rumi, is often filtered through dinner-cabaret displays.

Difference and the spaces it generates, it might seem, are hollowed out leaving only a skin to be venerated and ascribed value as though complete, resonant. But even that dimming vision is infected with nostalgia, with an anguished desire for some impossibly anterior space, a space to which no journey was ever possible.

Luke Clancy

<sup>1</sup> Other than at the feet of the most celebrated of the latter, Robert Zimmerman, himself a religious traveller, moving flexibly from faith to faith in pursuit of his muse.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*