a Strainnsear - [stranger], - becoming comfortable with his role as a reaper of time for a season - Foghar - harvest or gathering; taking, in sympathy with the language and the weathers, material traces of ‘truth’ from Skye.

2015 Sgoilearachd Jon Schueler / Jon Schueler Scholarship Artist Residency Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.
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PARALLELS

Introduction to the project “Parallels”
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Introduction to the project “Parallels”.

Before arriving at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig I proposed to spend my time reflecting on the experience of being in a Gaelic learning environment. I wanted to consider the roots of Scots Gaelic culture, through parallels I made with the ancient forms of poetry and piping. I wanted to use these traditions of the Gaels as a frame for working. On arrival, I immediately realised that it would be essential for me to have some understanding of the language, and here was the opportunity to participate in the summer Gaelic Short Courses. I spent the first 5 of my 12 weeks trying to absorb as much as I could of the broad cultural programme.¹

Memorably, I twice participated in the singing of the Gaelic Psalms at Church of Scotland services. One was near the start of my residency and the other close to its end. First of all, it gave me a tangible way to encounter a living tradition on Skye. This brought an immediate mental, physical and spiritual understanding of that place. Second, it revealed how much Gaelic I had learn over my residency, and left me to reflect on the forms that my interpretation of the experience might take. I am now reflecting back on the resonant forms that I encountered, seeking to make parallels of the experience in moving image works / film poetry.

¹ Both the culture and the language were intermingled throughout. It was affirmed that neither were mutually exclusive. What I learnt about the language would then enable me to meaningfully engage with the culture. The immersive environment of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig also enabled me to get to know many other forms of Gaelic expression that would feed into my broader understanding of the Gàidhealtachd.
‘Salms’ from a Gaelic Bible, St Kilda Church, by Allan Maciver

Transactions - Gaelic Society of Inverness
Gathering.

I wanted to open myself to the forces of the local environment, and reflect the deep ecology of the season of my residency - Foghar - Gaelic for harvest or gathering. With the natural forces of temporal change unfolding before me I found myself incongruously limited by the camera and other recording devices capacity to capture image and sound.

After my first three weeks on a very inclement Skye, I tried to summarize my thoughts via a blog post. It quoted an extended passage from 'The Mystic Crown', part of Alistair Maclean's book of Celtic praise - 'The Hebridean Altar' [1937], a popular anthology, drawing on and influenced by Alexander Carmichael's 'Carmina Gardelica' - [1900-28] the great compendium of prayers, hymns, charms, incantations, blessings, literary-folkloric poems and songs etc. The blog aimed to reflect on the attitudes that I had brought to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, but revealed my resigned acceptance of their inevitable need for adjustment.

“Maclean discloses the inherent value in time passing. I now interpret this as finding meaningful truth in watching and again waiting. … It was to observe the seasons change that I had prepared myself for back in Edinburgh. For Lughnasadh; that first day of August, on which [in traditional lore] there must be a propitiation, appeasing of God before thanksgiving. … But now, as a reaper of time, through my photographic and film images, I see myself trying to capture or still these fleeting sequences of the day in hopelessly irreverent acts, that sets myself up against the great forces of temporal change in weather that has most profoundly dominated my experience.

Therefore, in this light it seems right and truthful to offer an oblation - “to wait, to listen, to welcome light from any candle - such a one, that is to say, as has journeyed even a mile or two into its realm magnifical.” - [Maclean]. It’s a counter intuitive means of addressing the perceived vacuum of myself in this place, and then I’m actually able to acknowledge the fact that no vacuum was ever there.”

I note from another passage surmising my initial intentions:

“All the questions that I brought to Sleat - as a film-maker and performance artist - related to how I might encapsulate visually the closeness, but difference we feel in our digital age towards these older forms of expression.”

Perhaps my most recent insight can further illustrate how the intermingled discovery of a new language, profoundly effected my attempt at making an interpretation of this Gaelic culture. I discovered that there is a second meaning of Foghar - noise, sound, note, vowel or blow that causes a noise. This discovery of a double meaning resonated profoundly with my interest in the poetry, piping and experiences of psalmody. Therefore, every form of expression requires Foghar; and this new knowledge adjusted and expanded my initial expectations and understanding of what Foghar can mean to the Gael. My insight feeds and grows ‘a sense’; that I first experienced on Skye; a sense of legitimacy in attempting to make, mouth or voice an interpretation of this culture; even if ones understanding is limited and exposure weak.

In the possible meanings of Foghar I found two types of architecture which I captured with my camera. The first was found in the expression of natural shape in weather and flora and the second was in the forms of man-made architecture. These architectures became an analogy of language and expression across the island. Both architectures represented the nuanced place of myself in this landscape. The first between myself and the season and the second between myself and the location. I saw both my insights and expressions framed and paralleled by the modern architecture of Skye. Its sits visually exposed within the land / lang-scape.² It consumes the vistas, and imports a new voice; rather than being hidden beneath knolls, in an attempts to avoid the vicious onslaught of a bitter west wind. This new architecture sits proud.

This architecture tries to borrow from the vernacular tradition but is quite different. It is often constructed in the same way; using similar methods, but these are modern and machine made outcomes, rather than hand crafted expressions drawn materially from the landscape. My moving image production may be considered comparable to contemporary building on Skye. The distance from old architecture to new

² The parallel between landscape and language has been drawn in relation to the particular language / landscape of my residency by John Murray in ‘Reading the Gaelic Landscape - Leughadh Aghaidh na Tire’ [Whittles Publishing, 2014]. In ‘Land / Scape / Theatre’, Jane Palantini Bowers essay - The Composition That All the World Can See: Gertrude Stein’s Theatre Landscapes - uses the word ‘lang-scape’ to emphasise Stein’s ‘…insight that the landscape is itself a kind of language that the greatest artists can read and then use as the groud of compositions in their own languages of paint or, in Stein’s case, words.’ Further allusion has been made to ‘langscape’ in landscape studies, by John A. Jakle in ‘The Visual Element of Landscape’ [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987]; and Anne Whiston Spirn in ‘The Language of Landscape’ [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998].
architecture is comparable to that of ancient Gaelic poetry to contemporary moving image works / film poetry. I sought to highlight these restrictions and parallel the difference in my reference and interpretation of poetry.

I particularly read and referenced works by Alexander MacDonald - Alastair mas Mhaighstir Alastair - ‘bho Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill’ [1751]; and by John MacKay - Iain MacAoigh [Am Piobaire Dall] - ‘Cumha Choire an Easa’ [c. 1700]. This poetry takes the form of a panegyric, the praise verse of the ancient Gaels. The first takes the form of an epic boat journey of a Clan, subject to the forces of the sea and elements; the second locates the praise and memories of a Clan Chief in the landscape. I see the images, shapes and forms evoked in these poems finding resonance in the signification of the two types of architecture that I captured with my camera. Both works further extemporising the possible meanings of Foghar.
Temporal Endeavour.

I came to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig aware of how the panegyric - praise poems and other musical forms derived from the fili and bards sat at the heart of ancient Gaelic culture. Within the time of my residency I became immersed in research, and progressively became more aware of the nuances in this culture; noticing further parallels with my knowledge of experimental film and moving image.

I had first become interested in Ceol Mòr or Pibroch, the classical music of the highland bagpipes and its form of panegyric expression, through my work in response to the experimental filmmaker Margaret Tait and the legacy of piping contained within her films.¹ I became progressively more interested in this type of panegyric through reading the works of both Allan MacDonald - 'The Relationship between Pibroch and gaelic song: its implication in the performance style of the Pibroch Urlar' from his Mlitt Thesis [1995]; and Dr John MacInnes - ‘Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry’ from Transactions of Inverness [1976-78].

I have progressively sought to understand these cultural signifiers and want to further highlight the influence of their temporal forms, while finding new ways to use their seductive powers. I therefore took the opportunity to go to a day of piping competition at the Portree Highland Games, and the two days of world class piping competition at The Northern Meeting, Inverness. There I listened to some excellent practitioners of the art of piping and of Pibroch. I also paid great attention to their individual interpretations and sought to find inspiration for my project.

Second, there developed various questions as I faced in my work the prospect of revisiting and reinterpreting the records and recordings of panegyric forms and traditions. I became concerned with distortion, speed and context and thus the reliability of the intended gesture.

Has it been distorted?
Is it at the right speed?
Is the information translatable, or miss-understood from our present point in time?

Now as a Gaelic learner, I was interested to discover in my reading about when the Gaelic language was beginning to be revived through Gaelic medium schools, and its modes of cultural expression reassessed through the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s, that it had parallels with a trend in visual culture. As TV was being used to reach Gaelic learners through programmes like Can Seo, so also were questions being asked in artistic circles about how to use moving image. Received ideas around the reliability of the established media, were surrounded with questions about the ‘truth’ claims of these record. The innovative visual and acoustic imprints that were used to create a temporal experience of reality became the ground on which artists sort explore new forms of expression. A way to critique the individuals ability to perceive and recognise things, known in philosophy as phenomenology.

There was a particular Irish film and video artist, James Coleman,⁴ that “would radicalise the phenomenological as the reappearance of the theatrical.” - ‘Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry’ [Essays 1955-1975] - Benjamin Buchloch. In Coleman's work of the 1970's we could seriously interrogate “(speech and rhetoric, enunciation and performance)” - [Buchloch], in the domain of the visual arts. He is also notoriously secretive about his work and never seems, as far as I can tell, to let it be reproduced outside of the installations that he set up in the Art Museums and Galleries. This was precisely because his work is about the way in which image and sound combine to constitute our expressions and articulations.

³ I spent a 2 year residency, close to Tait’s former home at Slowbend, Portgower, Sutherland; exploring the collection of films that she made during her time there. I made my own film and sound-track that responded in sync with her work Caora Mor - The Big Sheep [1966]. Tait represents a distinct flowering of creativity in mid 20th Century Scottish experimental film-making. She draws on the folk and classical idioms of the Highlands and Islands. Her ‘film poems’ use these emblems of Highland culture and made much of the fact. ‘Caora Mor - The Big Sheep’ had ‘a full pibroch’ in it. She created her own - ‘Hilltop Pibroch’ for the film - ‘Where I am is Here’ [1964]. Her films therefore capture for me the best aspects of a culture. She first highlighted the creative parallels between filmmakers and the ancient pipers, and I want to continue in this tradition.

⁴ Why am I making reference to Coleman? Well, he seems to me to be in a great line of fili and musicians, that were concerned with protecting the power of their work, protecting the unseen - a Celtic idea of sighting and blindness that aims to both evoke and protect the spell weaving / prayerful utterances of their work in performance. Fili took seven years to perfect their art, mastering the intricate syllabic rhythms of their poetry and song. For me, Coleman and the fili dovetail at this point enabling a different sort of understanding of visual culture today in light of this history of the Gàidhealtachd.
There is certainly a difference today to the culture of the 18th Century, the last great flowering of classical Scots Gaelic poetry and piping in the works of Alastair mac Mhaighstir Alastair and Iain MacAoidh [Am Pìobaire Dall]. But also a level of equivalence to be discovered through an exploration of their rhetorical modes and dramaturgy. To quote Buchloch again in light of Coleman, he points to “the register that [cultural critic] Roland Barthes would call the “grain of the voice”: the phonetic definition of subjectivity within the acts of enunciation.” This brings into focus for us the importance of bringing a work back to life through an informed performance style.⁵ I experienced the temporal unfolding of various Gaelic works at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and through this engagement with their subjectivity, I now feel placed to make an interpretation for myself.

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⁵With Colman, MacInnes, MacDonald and Tait’s legacy in mind, I’m now trying to reframe a serious and prophetic temporal works of the fili and bards of the Gàidhealtachd. I am aiming to do this by defining again a parochial cultural experience and history of expression in the temporal medias of my own age. Therefore reviving a heritage that I believe all those referenced above, may have revisited and interpreted themselves in the 20th Century, through the Ceilidh Houses, Homes, Churches, Village Halls and Movie Theaters. They all sort to preserve, reshape or highlight qualities of idioms from their Scots, Irish and Orcadian cultures.
Reverb.

I was given the opportunity on my residency to find, reflect and record examples of the unfolding change in Foghar. I wanted to understand it both in Gaelic poetic terms and rhythms, and then make parallels with my knowledge of the visual arts. I therefore reacquainted myself with ‘Blow Job’ [1964], by Andy Warhol. A really significant example of his ‘screen test’ films, that should be seriously reconsider in any attempt to make contemporary interpretation of the panegyric. He was an extremely significant counter-cultural figure and filmmaker. This work was made in his studio - The Factory, and I believe has clear qualities worth comparing to Bardic Poetry.⁶ Its simple premise develops out of an instance where conditions equivalent to the phenomenological questions posed in Colman’s and Tait’s films are vigorously interrogated. I therefore sort to make subtle parallels with it, echo it and make reverb for it.

Second, I sought historical examples of change in performance style of Psalm Singing, Bardic Poetry, and Ceol Mòr / pibroch. I wanted to see how these findings, set against my contemporary representations, might shift expectations of these traditions. How can traditional Gaelic modes of communication and their material record be interpreted up against the ‘ecstasy of communication’ in our contemporary digital society, today?

I set about doing intensive research following conversations I had with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig language tutors and academic staff. Notably, I met with:

Prof. Hugh Cheape is a leading Gaelic historian and expert bagpiper currently heads the MSc Material Culture and Gàidhealtachd History currently teaches a post-graduate programme on ‘Material Culture & Environment’. He took up this post in 2007 after a curatorial career in the National Museums Scotland where he assembled collections, exhibitions, research papers and books.

Prof. Meg Bateman teaches literature and philosophy through the medium of Gaelic. She taught at University of Aberdeen for many years. Her poetry is included in numerous anthologies such as the Penguin Book of Scottish Verse and the Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945. She has translated and co-edited anthologies of Gaelic medieval, 17th century and religious verse.

Dr. Decker Forrest is the Course Leader of the An Cùrsa BA Gàidhlig agus Ceòl Traidiseanta (BA Gaelic and Traditional Music course). He is particularly interested in research-based performance as it relates to Highland bagpipe music and has been active in recording 18th and 19th century music on period-bagpipes. His recordings have aired on BBC Radio Scotland’s, Pipeline’ programme.

Dr. John Purser is a Scottish composer, musicologist, and music historian. He is also a playwright. Purs-er’s book Scotland’s Music, published in March 1992 (new edition October 2007). It was followed by a thirty-programme radio series of the same title, written and presented by him, which was broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland and totalled 45 hours. Purser’s work has contributed to a revival of interest in such composers as John Clerk of Penicuik and John Thomson.

Rev. John Urquhart is passionate about promoting his beloved first language. All his prose work is writ-ten in his mother-tongue. He also teaches idiomatic Gaelic and Gaelic vocabulary classes as well as advising on a new translation in Gaelic of the New Testament.

Third, I was able to take courses with members of the Media and Television Course thanks to Alasdair Mac-Kay: ‘Digital Camera Handling’ and ‘Lighting’ with Joe Breslin - Solas Alba.

Finally, I learnt a great deal from local people living and working at the college by attending Ceillidh’s and Charity Cafes. As well as from those of the local community, worshiping at Sleat and Strathey Church of Scotland and Free Church, by going to regular services and meetings.

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⁶ In its viewing it is radically two faced, both toward its subject and audience; displaying echos of the praise and satire in a traditional Gaelic panegyric. I therefore found parallels and seek to demonstrate this affinity with the marginal Gaelic communities of today. Douglas Crimp outlines in his book about Warhol’s cinema at The Factory - ‘Our Kind of Movie’ [2012], his theory or definition of ‘queer’. From its review in Art Forum - October 2012, Branden W. Joseph writes of Crimp:

“habitutés depicted in it represent an especially compelling microcosm of 1960s New York queer culture. His intellectual aim - and the book’s single theoretical contribution - is to understand, ... a “relationality” instantiated by these films and the community depicted in them “that depends on neither identification nor disidentification with - on neither merging with nor violence towards - others.” Such intersubjective relation, a “coming together to stay apart,” as one chapter title puts it, “maintains both the self and the other in their fundamental distinctiveness” and this exemplifies, for Crimp, “the radical meaning of queer.”
A comprehensive study, recommended by Meg Bateman.

A critical reading of Celtic Mysticism, recommended by Hugh Cheape.

A page from 'Carmina Gadelica' by Alexander Carmichael.

A Chapter on early Irish ‘gnomes’ or maxims on nature.
‘Caora Mor - The Big Sheep’ by Margaret Tait & ‘Air Sgath - For the Sake of Margaret Tait’ by OHV Mezger; at Portgower, Sutherland - Nov 2013.

Article from Circa 17, 1984.

Film still, from Bow Job [1963] by Andy Warhol.
CONCLUSION

Original Gesture?
Original Gesture?

As I aim to complete my visual and acoustic panegyric, I will enter into a parallel and self-reflexive discourse with all the ‘underground’ or counter-cultural languages that surround, inform and have taken root in me. As in my learning of Gaelic, I seek to make referential interpretations of audio recordings that I receive. This work is created with my memories of the elements and temporal change in the landscape, through the panegyric forms of the ancient Gaels, and by allusion to films of communities representative of the ‘other’ in society, creating associative reverb with the idea of the Gaelic ‘outsider’ today.

This work has again revealed to me how a parochial concern for psalm singing, the seasons, piping and poetry can be given a universal significance through film and other temporal medias, and likewise the other way around. A parochial concern for moving image in association with Gaelic culture can reveal aspects of the mediums universal significance.

My work aims to locate a fecundity, or resonant meaning, using the gathered material and experience from this very distinctive culture and community of Gaelic speakers and learners at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig to provoke debate and interest in its ongoing revival.

From the final line of my talk during the Short Courses:

“It’s through engaging with the challenges of adjusting to the Gaelic cultural environment; acknowledging my status as a Stràinnsear - [stranger], becoming comfortable with my role as a reaper of time for a season; taking, in sympathy with the language and the weathers, material traces of ‘truth’ from Skye.”

In conclusion, I discovered that I’d rather not make referential appropriations, which strive for some original gesture, something that I might claim as my own. But rather, confidently interpret those things that I actually encountered there. My intension is therefore to set this representation of the Gaels against, and apart from, the hugely powerful forces of bland; the monolith that is commercial media culture of our day.
Foghar (2015) by OHV Mezger
Oliver is an artist that addresses the instability in both our minds and our technologies to recall, remember and mediate reality today. He is interested in the limiting state of moving image and sound as a record. He repeatedly seeks to test received ideas about how one relates one’s own experience to an ‘other’. The work first aims to weave together the parochial paths of both people and objects in a place. Second, it looks to ask how their prosaic visual presence can co-exist with a mythopoetic imagination.