

Found Theology and Found-Footage Film:
Christian Marclay's *The Clock* and Theological Aesthetics

by Brett David Potter

One thing artists and theologians have in common is that they both stand in relation to a tradition. Just as one cannot be an artist without standing in some positive or negative relation to “an art history,” however broadly or narrowly such a term is conceived, so the task of the Christian theologian is essentially impossible without reckoning with what has been passed down (*tradere*) through the ages.¹ Theology and art alike must constantly mediate between the past and the present, between the pre-existing and the genuinely new.

Ben Quash's *Found Theology*, taking as a central metaphor the “art of the found” associated with twentieth-century artists like Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters, describes the central theological task as “relati[ng] the given to the found.”² This expresses well the creative vocation shared by theologians and artists. For tradition, in all its complexity and profundity, is both a “given” and in the best scenario a “gift.” It is inevitable and, for the most part, desirable that “whenever one meets some found thing, one meets in it in the light of a tradition of thought and practice.”³ But like artists, theologians must also be open to the new – as Quash describes it, to diverse and surprising “findings” as they appear in culture and history even if they reconfigure and recontextualize certain ways of understanding the “given.”

With Quash's work in mind, I want to explore this analogy between theologians and artists by looking at a particular mode of “found art” practice – found-footage or “collage” filmmaking, as typified in works of contemporary video art such as Christian Marclay's

ambitious video installation *The Clock* (2010). Marclay's project poses a series of interesting questions about our relation to tradition and time, which is to say questions about *appropriation* - the "art of the found" in both theology and the arts. Found-footage filmmaking, in both its analog and digital iterations, turns pre-existing material into new works of art. *The Clock* thus helps us understand the way we "find" ourselves in a tradition – as artists, as theologians – even as we strive to bring the given and the found into a fruitful dialogue. With these questions in mind, I will also subsequently explore theological aesthetics as a kind of theological "art of the found," drawing on Quash's precursor Hans Urs von Balthasar in the hope of better understanding the interplay between tradition and creativity.

Time and Appropriation: *The Clock*

If film is a "time-based medium," perhaps Christian Marclay's video installation *The Clock* is cinema in its purest form. *The Clock* is, simply put, a twenty-four hour long montage of "found" film clips in which a clock or timepiece can be found somewhere in the frame, or where the passage of time is referred to or implied in some significant way. Displayed in a gallery as an installation, it aims to be an immersive experience. The footage comes from hundreds of different classic films, from Gary Cooper famously waiting for the outlaw train in *High Noon* to Peter Fonda checking his watch in *Easy Rider* to the iconic shot of silent film star Harold Lloyd hanging off of a giant city clock in *Safety Last!*, assembled together into a sprawling "metafilm." (Only in this massive cinematic collage are Orson Welles, Bill Murray, Nicole Kidman, Laurence Olivier, Joan Crawford, and Jodie Foster in the same movie!) Perhaps most ingeniously, however, the film also functions as a real clock – for the diegetic clocks on screen are arranged so as to coincide with "real time," such that 3:30 on screen is 3:30 for the gallery

viewer, midnight is midnight, and so on. The work, which debuted at London's White Cube in 2010 and has since been widely exhibited, has been called one of the most important works of twenty-first century art as well as "the defining monument of the remix age."⁴ In 2011 it won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale. The piece has been described as hypnotic and mesmerizing – viewers go in ready to spend only a few minutes but are entranced for hours by the overwhelming torrent of visual data and the whirlwind tour through Western cinema.⁵

The Clock is a formidable achievement of "found footage film," a genre of experimental cinema pioneered by artists like Joseph Cornell and Bruce Conner.⁶ The term "found footage" belies its decidedly analog origin – "feet" of film physically "found" and repurposed by a generation of filmmakers – a short list would include Conner, Arthur Lipsett, Martin Arnold, and Craig Baldwin – who raided the "cinematic dustbins" to create subversive experimental films.⁷ Taking, finding, and stealing film wherever they could find it – outtakes, commercials, home movies, instructional films, obscure B-movies – visionary films such as Conner's seminal *A Movie* (1956) wove together completely disparate visual sources into new, often bizarre narratives. Like Douglas Gordon and Pierre Huyghe in the contemporary landscape of video art, however, Marclay's work belongs to a new tradition of digital appropriation or "postproduction,"⁸ which has moved away from the ephemeral, obscure source material favoured by the earlier generation to recycling and remixing the canonical visual texts of Hollywood itself.⁹ Postproduction art is embedded in what Nicolas Bourriaud calls a "culture of use," or what is more popularly known as "sampling" – a digital mode of appropriation characteristic of "hip-hop, mashups, supercuts, and memes, each oscillating fluidly between modes of production and consumption."¹⁰ Alfred Hitchcock seemed to be a favourite source for found-footage artists in the 1990s: Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) stretched the original film out to a 24-

hour period, while Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller's *The Phoenix Tapes* (1999) edited together visual motifs and recurring patterns from across the filmography of the great *auteur*, making Hitchcock's familiar stylistic tropes and obsessions even stranger. We can also think of Gus van Sant's shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho* (1998), maligned at the time but now thought of as a unique cinematic experiment – one which itself has subsequently been spliced together with Hitchcock's original film by none other than Steven Soderbergh ("Psychos," web video, 2014). Marclay belongs to the "illustrious tradition" of appropriation art in its new, digital format.

As in other video works such as *Video Quartet* (2002), an array of sculptural works, as well as his audio experiments with turntables and constructed instruments which similarly investigate sampling, remixing, and improvisation, Marclay's use of appropriated materials stems from an ongoing interest in collage and performance. Yet *The Clock* goes a step beyond these projects as well as Gordon and Müller's works in its sheer, Internet-like data overload. In the language of the Internet meme, *The Clock* is the more mature older cousin of the "supercut," where one aspect of a film or television series is "obsessively" collected and edited together.¹¹ [Think of viral videos like Brian Williams rapping the news, or the irreverent "Painters Panting" which bizarrely edits together every instance of Barnett Newman breathing or saying "umm" in the classic 1960s documentary *Painters Painting*.] It is Marclay's virtuosic skill as a collagist and editor, however, which allows him to transcend the banal and indexical – merely stitching together 24 hours of essentially unrelated footage, which often on the Internet leads to a tiresome "database" aesthetic rather than a narrative one – to create out of this shapeless mass of fragments a coherent and compelling whole, with moments of humour, suspense, and even various levels of (meta)narrative continuity.¹²

Video editing is about placing two images side by side so as to create meaning as they follow one another in temporal succession. As viewers, we construct narratives and patterns based on visual and aural continuity; the juxtaposition of two images causes us to reflect on their relationship. Borrowing from Fredric Jameson, we can call this a process of “re-narrativization.” We can see this in the films of Craig Baldwin, for example, who synthesizes hundreds of hours of news footage and sci-fi oddities into paranoid metahistories of alien possession and government conspiracy. Rather than a linear narrative, however, Marclay accomplishes his transmutation of found footage into new meanings by structuring each shot in relation to temporality itself. His use of montage thus serves to remind us of cinema's intrinsic relationship to time. In the darkened space of the movie theater, the passage of time seems to slow down and speed up based on the pace of the editing. In watching a “normal” Hollywood film, we are carried along with this without even thinking about it. The ellipsis of time, what is left out between cuts, disappears for us and as trained cinemagoers we instinctively ignore it.

In Marclay's collage, however, we as viewers are constantly being reminded of the relationship of cinematic time to “real time,” and the invisible mechanism of editing is constantly making itself apparent. Moreover, the “foundness” of the footage – its origin in a film other than the one we are currently watching – asserts an undeniable presence.¹³ Collage involves the viewer in an active process of meaning-making. To watch *The Clock* is to simultaneously experience the passage of time both onscreen and in our own bodies; to recall the original source of the material (what movie is that from?); and to understand the clip in its new semiotic context. As Quash writes, “there are ways in which an object's (or an event's) quality of ‘foundness’ can continue to cling instructively to it even when it is incorporated, canonized, and revisited.”¹⁴ Consider the complexity of seeing a clip from Orson Welles' *The Stranger* (the scene where he is

thrown off a clock tower!) in Marclay's collage. Our attention all at once directed to 1) the dramatic clip itself; 2) the film it was taken from; 3) our cultural associations with Welles, i.e. the “paratexts” which accompany our viewing of any film in which he appears; 4) the shots this shot is now playing alongside; and 5) the shot’s implicit relationship to time and clocks. Film viewing becomes an incredibly complex, intertextual, self-reflexive enterprise – yet accustomed to the polysemy of movie-watching and the digital polysemy of the Internet, we do it without thinking. The visible edits become once again “seamless” as we are immersed in the film.

Jeremy Begbie has pointed out the way in which much of the meaningfulness of music comes from “the interplay between its temporal processes and a vast range of temporal processes which shape our lives in the world” – everyday phenomena like breathing, waiting, the cycle of day and night.¹⁵ *The Clock* also reminds us that film functions in a similar way, bridging between our bodily experience of time and the perfect, mediated time of the silver screen. Appropriation thus becomes not only the creative activity of the artist, but of the viewer. Not only does *The Clock* position itself so as to re-create a cinematic experience, it investigates cinematic experience itself in terms of time and temporality. In brief, the “real time” connection between what is happening on screen and the passage of time both disrupts and reconstitutes our experience of the world through the “time-based” medium of cinema.

Theology, Film, and Time

What *The Clock* does for theology is alert us to a way of being-in-the-world where the given and the found collide. This is, I think, a clue as to the meaning of the term appropriation in both art and theology, which simply means “making one’s own.” The postproduction artist takes or recycles footage in order to synthesize it into his own unique creative vision. Yet the viewer

also “appropriates” the experience in a constant, multidirectional act of interpretation – a self-reflexivity where one sees oneself both in relation to these films and their cultural meaning and to the present passage of time. In found-footage work, to digitize a phrase from Shakespeare, visual material is “untimely ripped.” It is taken out of one “sequence” and placed in another. Yet in the hands of an artist, a decontextualized, recycled shot can become extremely “timely” – the diachronic unfolding of shots in sequence situates us in relation to time and yields new histories and patterns of meaning.

Theology, I suggest, must similarly effect a kind of creative re-editing of tradition. Like a video editor, the theologian has at her disposal a vast array of materials, ready to be revisited and re-presented with an eye to both past and future time. Appropriation, in the theological sense, becomes a “making one's own” of tradition not in the mode of a dead traditionalism but of artistic and pneumatic inspiration. A “found theology” investigates both theology and culture – in the mode or medium of time – for signs of new life, and integrates these findings into the living tradition of the church. In this vein, Quash’s “found theology” sets a new direction for conversations between theology and art, eschewing a “shallow” approach in favour of one that is genuinely interdisciplinary and open to new possibilities.

There are important issues to be explored here in terms of temporality. Human experience of time is an important theme for Hans Urs von Balthasar, who approaches the question Christologically. For him, it is Christ's experience of time in terms of total receptivity and openness – as a “gift” from the Father – which is normative for human temporality. Quash similarly explores the importance of time for found theology. For Quash, Christian theology is not a matter of ahistorical propositions, but unfolds precisely in the contingency of historical process.¹⁶ Theology receives past, present and future simultaneously, standing in relation to

tradition even as it must find its footing in shifting cultural and linguistic paradigms. His theological method is primarily one of re-creative “abduction” – a mediation of given and found which “insists on the centrality of imagination,” making theology “an unfinalizable process oriented to making the best sense of old and new data together.”¹⁷ He characterizes this as a deeply Pneumatological process, the Spirit guiding the Church into all truth with history as its medium – the church’s tradition entering into dialogue with culture, history, and art in all ages. Yet the model here is Christological as well, for Christ’s mission – his *mandatum* and vocation – is to “stand in relation” to his mission “as one ready to be a creative finder.”¹⁸

Theological Aesthetics as *Bricolage*

We have sketched out some of the implications for a “found art” model of artistic creation and reception for Christian theology. But what does this look like? What can theology learn about tradition, creativity, and “foundness” from found-footage filmmaking and remix culture, and from Marclay’s *The Clock* in particular? As we have seen, one of Quash’s key theological precursors is the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, the figure most closely allied with the term “theological aesthetics.” Balthasar’s seven-volume aesthetics are most often cited in terms of their retrieval of Beauty both within and outside of the Christian tradition. Yet another way to look at Balthasar’s voluminous theology is precisely as a complex work of art itself. This then begs the question of what kind of art it is. We may discover that Balthasar is in a certain sense a theological *bricoleur*, creatively putting together disparate elements – ancient and modern, sacred and secular, mystical and practical, theological, philosophical, artistic – into a new, organic whole.¹⁹ Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and dramatics are daringly original, yet they gain their strength precisely from their non-systematic,

integrative method – a theological project well-suited to its “artistic” subject matter. One striking example is the way Balthasar appropriates a range of thinkers as representatives of “lay” and “clerical” styles in volumes II and III of *The Glory of the Lord*: from the tradition of Christian theology he draws on Irenaeus, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Anselm and Bonaventure, but on the other hand he “finds” ample theological insight in the poetic and mystical works of Dante, John of the Cross, Pascal, Hamann, Soloviev, Hopkins, and Peguy. Throughout his work, he draws equally on German philosophers, French novelists, playwrights like Shakespeare and Calderon, painters (Georges Rouault seems to be a favourite), composers, poets from Sappho to Rilke, and mystics ranging from Eckhart to his own close friend Adrienne von Speyr. The heterogeneity of his theological sources is thus much like the eclecticism of the found-footage artist – he casts his net widely, but in the end he is able to weave his “findings” into a coherent and compelling whole.

I am thus inclined to see his project in terms of creative and transformative appropriation and synthesis. Balthasar’s synthetic theological aesthetics is less like a Duchampian readymade and more like Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, integrating classical, Christian, and philosophical motifs into a new creative shape coalescing around the revealed supreme “form” of Christ. Thus Balthasar yields, in Ben Quash’s aesthetic terminology, theology “that is found and not simply made” – much like a certain (non-Duchampian) type of found art, which responds to both the found and the given with creativity and resourcefulness.²⁰ Moreover, Balthasar’s constant theme is openness and receptivity, a theological orientation readily available to the world and to God in order to experience both anew.²¹ Appropriation, in a Balthasarian model, is a matter of experiencing the form of Christ as mediated by the tradition – particularly our experience of the “archetypal experience” of the apostles, Mary, and even Christ himself, which is “expropriated”

(perhaps a filmmaker might say “ripped”) from its historical context and appropriated by the individual believer in the present. Such archetypal experiences are thus not just “bound to historical concreteness” but are extended and re-experienced in their appropriation by the Church and its members in time. Balthasar’s approach to tradition is consistent with the kind of “found” theological method espoused by Quash and modeled artistically by Marclay. Theology as dead traditionalism or propositionalism is precluded – rather, tradition, creativity, and appropriation exist in a dynamic interpretive relationship.

The French Dominican theologian Yves Congar, drawing a similar parallel between artists and theologians to the one we have made here, argues for an understanding of tradition not as a force which stifles creativity, but as something which ought to renew it from the inside out:

Tradition conceived as the handing down of set formulas and the enforced and servile imitation of models learned in the classroom would lead to sterility; even if there were an abundant output of works of art, they would be stillborn. [...] The aim of this lesson is [rather] to receive the vitality of their inspiration and to continue their creative work in its original spirit, which thus, in a new generation, is born again with the freedom, the youthfulness and the promise that it originally possessed.

As Congar, Danielou, Balthasar and others realized, tradition ought to nourish rather than stifle Christian theology, and so its appropriation should take the form of creative use of its resources in order to engage the present anew. Tradition can only be “born again” when we are willing to embrace both the given and the found – to appropriate tradition with both reverence and a certain artistic irreverence, splicing together the old and the new in order to “find” our place in the unfolding story.

Quash sets out “found theology” as a self-consciously Anglican, British strand of “reformational practice” distinct from American postliberal theology as well as a further development of Balthasar’s theology of the Holy Spirit as *Ausleger* or exegete of history. We can

also see it as a creative approach to the question of the appropriation of tradition and what it means to be “found” and “given” as theologians, artists, and subjects in the present. In a found theology, tradition and creativity go hand in hand, and appropriative art of the kind evident in Marclay’s *The Clock* as well as Balthasar’s theo-aesthetics can help us explore this dynamic. In found-footage filmmaking, film clips are “untimely ripped” from their narrative contexts and given new life, edited together in surprising, unusual, and often subversive ways.²² But as the narrative context of this quote from the Scottish play reminds us, and as is evident from Congar’s metaphor, this is the way new artworks – and new theologies – are born.

¹ Jerrold Levinson, for example, argues that the “intentional orientation” of the artist to position a work of art in relation to “an art history” – from the great works of the Western canon to the more local scenario of “any prior art activity” – is what makes it art. For Levinson, a work that has been “seriously intended for regarding-as-a-work-of-art” is art because it is positioned to be regarded in the same specific ways that “preexisting or prior artworks are or were correctly regarded.” Jerrold Levinson, *Music, Art and Metaphysics: essays in philosophical aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 44.

² Ben Quash, *Found Theology: History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2014), xiv.

³ Quash, *Found Theology*, 17.

⁴ See Daniel Zalewski, “The Hours: How Christian Marclay created the ultimate digital mosaic,” *The New Yorker* (March 12, 2012). Available from <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/03/12/the-hours-daniel-zalewski>

⁵ See Meghan O’Rourke, “Is *The Clock* Worth the Time?” *The New Yorker* (July 18, 2012). As Hal Foster remarks in an appendix to the most recent edition of the classic textbook *Art Since 1900*, “An immersive, even mesmeric experience seems to be the desired effect of much art today... and it’s very popular, in part because it aestheticizes, or “artifies,” an already-familiar experience - the mind-blowing intensities produced by media culture at large. In this art we get the rush of special effects along with the surplus-value of the aesthetic.” *Art Since 1900: modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism*, 2nd edition (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 778.

⁶ A sign of the times in terms of the analog-to-digital trajectory of found footage work is Jen Proctor’s recent digital, shot-by-shot “remake” of Bruce Conner’s famous film *A Movie*. See Scott MacDonald, “Remaking a found-footage film in a digital age: an interview with Jennifer Proctor,” *Millennium Film Journal* 57 (April 2013): 84-91.

⁷ Scott MacKenzie, “Flowers in the dustbin: termite cinema and detritus cinema,” *CineAction* 47:1 (1998): 24-29.

⁸ The canonical text here is Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

⁹ Margot Bouman, “On Sampled Time and Intermedial Space: Postproduction, Video Installation and Christian Marclay’s *The Clock*,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 3:1 (2014): 5-6. For more on the changing nature of appropriative video in the digital age see the documentary film *RiP: A Remix Manifesto* (2009, dir. Brett Gaylor).

¹⁰ Bouman, 4.

¹¹ More technically, a supercut can be described as a video “where film fragments are serialized though an archival discourse according to iconography and narrative motifs.” Eli Horwatt, “*The Clock* and Christian Marclay’s Instrumental Logic of Appropriation,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 54:2 (Fall 2013): 209.

¹² “The longer one watches, the more *The Clock* reveals itself as a metafilm in which our attention is concurrently and reflexively pulled into the action on the screen and thrust back out onto our own experience of viewing.” Julie

Levinson, "Time and Time Again: Temporality, Narrativity, and Spectatorship in Christian Marclay's *The Clock*," *Cinema Journal* 54:3 (Spring 2015).

¹³ "I suggest we regard "foundness" as a constituent element of all archival documents, whether they were "found" in an archive or "found" on the street. This "foundness" of the archival document exists in contradistinction to documents that we perceive as produced by the filmmaker specifically for a given film. Indeed, this sense of "foundness" is integral to the experience of the archival document." Jaimie Baron, "The Archive Effect: Archival Footage as an Experience of Reception," *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 6:2 (2012): 102–120.

¹⁴ Quash, *Found Theology*, 6.

¹⁵ Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13

¹⁶ Quash, *Found Theology*, 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, *Found Theology*, 14.

¹⁹ I realize that the terms *bricoleur* and *bricolage* may sound hopelessly postmodern, connoting mere pastiche instead of a deeper level of appropriation. In the original sense the word simply means making something out of what is available.

²⁰ Quash, *Found Theology*, 4-7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5. Moreover, for Quash, "a theological practice or disposition that is constantly ready to find will have good reasons to regard the theology that emerges (and is bequeathed to the Church) as itself found, rather than as cleverly concocted."

²² *Macbeth* Act 5, Scene 8. The context here is, of course, childbirth – an apt metaphor for the artistic process.