

Electric Dreams: Performing The Shock Doctrine

Electric Dreams is a new play created by the theatre company Dumbshow, inspired by the ideas in Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, winner of the first Warwick Prize for Writing in 2010. It is a story about shock – physical, economic and political – and the ways in which shock has come to be routinely exploited as an opportunity for neoliberal structural adjustment. With *Electric Dreams* Dumbshow offers a sweeping theatrical journey spanning CIA-funded mind control experiments, the war in Iraq and the current destruction of the welfare state, and asks: In today's political climate, are stories told to wake us up, or send us to sleep?

The Shock Doctrine is a genuinely interdisciplinary and international text – spanning economics, politics, history, journalism, medicine and other subjects within a global context – hence well-suited to exploration across departments and faculties at Warwick. IATL's Pedagogic Intervention grant, combined with an IAS Public Engagement Award, enabled Dumbshow to hold a ten-day artistic residency on campus in January 2015.

Warwick Arts Centre generously provided free rehearsal space in the Helen Martin studio as support-in-kind, while Nick Lawrence and IATL's Amy Clarke also assisted Dumbshow in booking rehearsal spaces for the residency.

The purpose of the residency was to foster fruitful interdisciplinary collaborations at Warwick by working with students and staff to test the ideas underpinning *Electric Dreams*. The residency successfully achieved both of these aims and, participants agreed, the experience mutually benefited Dumbshow and the university community.

This report will describe each aspect of the residency and assess its success.

Preparation

Dumbshow's Artistic Director Mike Bryher attended the first seminar of the module Writing About Human Rights and Injustice on Tuesday 6th January. Mike outlined Dumbshow's artistic residency to the students, alongside academic Andrew Williams. The residency was directly relevant to the course, as the students grapple with different ways of representing social and political injustice on a case by case basis, and could

therefore learn from the process of a storytelling theatre company adapting a complex work of investigative journalism.

On Thursday 8th January, Mike Bryher returned to Warwick to attend a screening of Michael Winterbottom's documentary *The Shock Doctrine* for English students studying on the module States of Damage with Nick Lawrence, Mark Storey and Stephen Shapiro. Again Mike was able to explain the upcoming residency directly to the students, drum up interest in the events and sign up volunteers who wished to participate in the upcoming Political Economy Roundtable.

Prior to the residency, Dumbshow enlisted the support of academics in English, Law, Theatre Studies, Politics and International Studies (PAIS), Economics and Sociology, and created an e-flyer advertising their activities at Warwick.

Residency

Dumbshow started work on campus on Saturday 10th January and rehearsed each day until the evening performance on Monday 19th January.

The key artistic ambition for the residency was for Dumbshow to inspire innovative interdisciplinary collaborations between students at Warwick, whilst developing the script for *Electric Dreams* by interrogating the ideas underpinning the play.

Adaptation Workshop

Monday 12th January, 6pm in the Humanities Studio

Dumbshow held a workshop exploring the process of adaptation. All members of Dumbshow took part and the workshop was led by Mike Bryher. The full workshop plan is included as an appendix.

The workshop explored the process of adaptation – whether of a novel, a film, a work of nonfiction or autobiographical material – and how Dumbshow have approached this task from different angles in the past.

Unfortunately this was the least well-attended aspect of the residency. Only one student from English and Theatre Studies took part; however, Dumbshow still ran the full workshop and had a very stimulating session with that student. Dumbshow focused particularly on exploring the student's own ideas about adaptation and discussed in-depth a book that the student was considering adapting.

It remains the case that it is difficult to compel students to come to workshops that aren't embedded in their course. Mike had directly informed students from *Writing About Injustice* and *States of Damage*. Theatre Studies tutors Susan Haedicke, Richard Shannon, Milija Gluhovic and Silvija Jestrovic had all encouraged their students to attend too. Mike attended the Theatre Studies' Adaptation class on Monday afternoon to remind students in person about the workshop that night. Reminders had also been sent out by email. Perhaps the Monday night was bad timing as the session clashed with some drama society auditions.



Dumbshow members work on storyboarding in the Humanities Studio

Economy Roundtable: Neoliberalism in *The Shock Doctrine*
Wednesday 14th January, 4pm-6pm in So.10

Dumbshow worked with two academics in PAIS – Ben Richardson and Chris Clarke – to devise a format and develop an agenda for this roundtable discussion. The full agenda is included with this report as an appendix.

Four departments at the University were invited to attend. As well as the two colleagues in PAIS, we invited Mark Harrison and Dennis Leech from Economics, Nicholas Gane and Sam Burgum from Sociology, and Nick Lawrence from English. Each discipline also invited 4-5 of their students to partake.

Recommended reading was circulated in advance of the event, including extracts from *The Shock Doctrine*, a chapter from David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and a review of Philip Mirowski's book *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go To Waste*. Mark Harrison's critique of Klein, "Credibility Crunch: A Comment on *The Shock Doctrine*," was also added to the reading list.



Political Economy Roundtable in action as groups discuss responses to key questions

Chris Clarke from PAIS chaired the event, and the room split into groups to discuss the set questions. Students and staff were all treated as equal participants, although students were encouraged to lead discussion. Each group comprised at least one representative from each discipline and a member of Dumbshow. There were some rigorous and heated debates, and it was fascinating to see different disciplines strive for a common language with which to communicate, challenging each others' assumptions and foundational premises.

We are particularly pleased that the Economics Department partook in the debates, especially as this only happened after much persuasion. Mark Harrison was initially wary of taking part in the event, doubting the point of engaging with artists and social scientists who are “not even wrong.” However, Dumbshow made the argument that this was precisely the occasion to try and engage with others across departmental divides, in a safe academic environment; if such conversations couldn't happen at an institution of learning, where could they happen?



This shows the layout of the four group discussions, before feeding back to the whole

The interdisciplinary discussion, collaboration and debate were genuinely eye-opening, illuminating and useful. The students taking part seemed to find it exciting, unusual and stimulating.

Feedback after the event was universally positive and some of the conversations continued in the room, over drinks at the Dirty Duck, by email afterwards and on blogs.

Nick Lawrence reported that one of his English students studying on States of Damage wrote to him afterward:

“I loved every minute of it. The cross-discipline collaboration was almost utopian on my table ... Too bad it isn't weekly! Thanks for making it possible.”

Ben Richardson from PAIS wrote: “Speaking to the Politics students after, I think they were really chuffed that something like that had been organised and that they'd been invited, so I should say thanks to you on their behalf too.”

Mark Harrison continued to reflect on the content of the debate, posing the question ‘Who Are the Neoliberals?’ and published a blog on this theme, shared it with the participants via email and encouraging responses. The blog is available here: http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/markharrison/entry/who_are_the_1/

Open Rehearsal

Friday 16th January, 12-2pm in Helen Martin Studio

Dumbshow opened the doors of their rehearsal room to all who wished to attend. Visitors could see composer and pianist Rollo Clarke accompanying the rehearsal with music. Designer Florence De Mare displayed images that she was using as inspiration to help her conceptualise how the stage design might best be configured. The actors began to block through scenes from the script in rehearsal, interrogating the words in performance and exploring various possibilities of staging and delivery.

Chris Clarke from PAIS attended the full session and was a very engaged participant – commenting on scenes and helping Dumbshow to conceptualise and express key ideas. He also shared one of his recent papers, “Performing the Sub-Prime Crisis: Trauma and the Financial Event,” which shed light on how the financial crisis was characterised as ‘an event’ with traumatic consequences requiring a response.



Work-in-Progress Showing of Electric Dreams
Monday 19th January, 7pm Humanities Studio

Dumbshow performed a script-in-hand read-through/walk-through of *Electric Dreams*. The showing was well attended, with an audience of around 30 people, predominantly students from several different departments.

Dumbshow had fleshed out a full script, so were able to present the play in its totality – though the script will continue to go through further alterations, editing and refining.

The showing lasted an hour and was accompanied by a live piano score, with projections and effects operated by Dumbshow’s producer Heather Young.

Video of the showing on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/118634902>



A collection of images compiled by designer Florence de Mare

Post-Showing Discussion

Monday 19th January, 8pm Humanities Studio

All attendees stayed for a lively discussion after the show, engaging with the ideas driving the piece and offering constructive responses and feedback.

Some of the useful contributions included the following:

Student 1: “The idea of a shock – you’re given a shock and afterwards you can be told whatever, because you’re in a childlike state and you’ll believe it. Theatre is inherently like that – we go into a theatre and we believe whatever we’re told. If you say this is a thing, we believe it’s a thing. And I think that there’s something really interesting there that you could play with – maybe telling Rose’s story post-shock... and then going ‘now I don’t know if that’s real.’”

This student raised the idea that *Electric Dreams* could play with a meta-narrative about the power of stories and the reliability of narrators.



In the midst of the post-show discussion

Student 2: “When you brought up the [tribal Moken] people [reacting to] the 2004 tsunami, I thought it was going to go somewhere different. Because what I remember from [Klein’s] book is that all their stuff was washed off the beach and then they went back down to the beach and physically occupied it ... so they had their story and fled to higher ground, but then they went back to their beach and occupied it.”

This point about occupation was part of a discussion about the pros and cons of reframing the play as a political occupation, and offered a useful reminder of how the story of the Moken people could support this premise. This led on to another student comment:

Student 3: “I don’t think that you have to think ‘Oh, because the Royal Court does stuff it’s not real and it wasn’t really a sit-in’ ... If the second act does become a teach-in, then it is real because you said that [telling] stories is how we combat shock. And what you’ve done is tell us a story which is going to help us take ownership of the situation we’re in, and therefore combat our own anxieties, so it *is* real.”

All of this feedback has been collated by Dumbshow and will help the company as *Electric Dreams* continues to be developed and refined.

Video of the discussion: <https://vimeo.com/118629097>

Outcomes

The Political Economy Roundtable was a very successful interdisciplinary event that energised all the participants. The PAIS academics were particularly animated about the event. They stressed how unusual it was and how pleased they were to be able to discuss the subject of neoliberalism with their colleagues in Economics.

Nick Lawrence also plans to use the event as a prototype for conducting more such interdisciplinary sessions in the future, so one goal of the residency is that the relationships established at the roundtable will be sustained and further developed. The roundtable helped build a working relationship between staff and students in the social sciences (Economics, Sociology, and PAIS) and those in English, particularly concerning the topic of neoliberalism and critiques of orthodox economic thinking.

It is certainly desirable that students in Economics are given opportunities to engage with students from other disciplines, since Economics students primarily learn neoclassical economics, whilst students in English and Social Sciences are more likely to engage with critiques of neoclassical economic thinking and its policy manifestations. Everyone benefits from such cross-fertilisation and being exposed to different ideas, frames and arguments. In this sense, the event enriched and diversified the student learning experience.

Similarly, students and staff relished the opportunity to engage creatively and collaboratively with a theatre company and enjoyed exploring new ways to communicate the ideas that preoccupy them to a wider audience.

Dumbshow benefitted from accessing the range of knowledge and expertise at the University. The input, ideas, responses and feedback from students and staff was invaluable and has materially helped Dumbshow to interrogate the ideas underpinning *Electric Dreams*. Both students and academics shared useful and highly constructive feedback with the company. They also offered inspiration to Dumbshow for future work on the project, by recommending further reading and suggesting different directions in which the play could be developed.

Dumbshow wish to continue this relationship with the University, and hope to bring *Electric Dreams* back to Warwick in the near future as a fully realised touring production. Certainly this would be of interest to English students studying *The Shock*

Doctrine for States of Damage, as well as to students on Writing about Human Rights and Injustice. Since completing their residency, Dumbshow have been awarded funding from the Arts Council and the Wellcome Trust to further develop *Electric Dreams*. The production will be performed at Camden People's Theatre in May as part of a season of political theatre programmed around the general election.

Electric Dreams is a real departure for Dumbshow and IATI's support has helped Dumbshow to meet this new artistic challenge. Dumbshow formed at Warwick in 2007. Since graduating, company members have previously worked on literary adaptations and self-authored stories. With this project, Dumbshow is blending its traditional emphasis on storytelling with complex subject matter, historical and contemporary, that crosses numerous disciplinary boundaries. The input of staff and students into the rehearsal and creation process proved integral to developing the piece. Dumbshow explored, with Warwick students, what is at stake in making a piece of contemporary political storytelling theatre – including what role stories have in contemporary political culture.

Dumbshow are particularly excited about their new relationship with Warwick's PAIS department. Dumbshow members attended a special PAIS seminar on money at Chris Clarke's invitation, met individually with Matthew Watson, and chatted at some length with Ben Richardson. Since the residency, correspondence has continued, enabling an exchange of knowledge and ideas, and the Politics Department remain keen to support Dumbshow and are interested to see how *Electric Dreams* develops. Matthew Watson has said that he is planning a departmental trip to come and see *Electric Dreams* at Camden People's Theatre in May with a number of his colleagues.

These relationships may also prove useful for developing an Education Pack for *Electric Dreams* at a later date. As a company of Warwick graduates making intellectually and politically engaging work, Dumbshow's partnership with the University could continue to strengthen and develop to mutual advantage.

Students from the Writing Programme who saw the showing also contacted Dumbshow after the residency to ask if they would return to speak to students about writing for the theatre. Dumbshow hope to be able to fulfil this student-led request in the third term.

APPENDIX

ELECTRIC DREAMS

Electric Dreams is a project by Dumbshow Theatre Company. The work is inspired by the ideas in Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, winner of the first Warwick Prize for Writing in 2010 (theme: 'complexity'). It is a story about shock – physical, economic and political – and the ways in which shock has come to be routinely exploited as an opportunity for neoliberal structural adjustment. With *Electric Dreams* Dumbshow offers a sweeping theatrical journey, spanning CIA-funded mind-control experiments, the war in Iraq and the current destruction of the welfare state, and asks: In today's political climate, are stories told to wake us up, or to send us to sleep?

Adapting The Shock Doctrine

Mon 12th Jan, 6pm - 8pm, Humanities Studio

Theatre workshop: Dumbshow will lead a workshop on reworking *The Shock Doctrine* for the stage, with a particular focus on adapting nonfiction sources. Staff and students from Theatre Studies, English and the Writing Programme will be enlisted to comment on the process of theatrical realisation.

Neoliberalism in The Shock Doctrine - Political Economy Roundtable

Wed 14th Jan, 4pm - 6pm, Social Studies S0.10

Political economy roundtable: A collaboration between students in Sociology, Economics, PAIS and English. How do different disciplines understand the meanings and scope of neoliberalism?

Open Rehearsals

Fri 16th Jan, 12pm - 2pm, Helen Martin Studio and 6pm - 8pm, Humanities Studio

Open rehearsal: A rehearsal of the work in progress, to which staff and students from across the faculties will be invited.

A work-in-progress showing of *Electric Dreams*, plus post-show Q&A.

Mon 19th Jan, 7pm - 9pm, Humanities Studio

Performance: Having engaged with university input to create *Electric Dreams*, the company will stage a public performance of the finished work.

Post-show 'town meeting': Dumbshow will host a discussion after the performance during which company members will solicit feedback from the audience. Wine reception.



Neoliberalism in the Shock Doctrine – Political Economy Roundtable

Wednesday 14th January, 4pm-6pm, Social Studies S.010

“The very design of neoliberal principles is a direct attack on democracy” (Chomsky). The critics of neoliberalism, like Noam Chomsky, are legion. But what exactly are these neoliberal principles he and others so readily refer to, and if they are antithetical to democracy, why have they been accepted into so many areas of life the world over?

Roundtable Aims

This is a collaborative event between staff and students in Sociology, Economics, PAIS and English, and members from the theatre company Dumbshow. Together, we will discuss the different ways in which the meanings and scope of neoliberalism can be understood and evaluated. In particular, these six questions will be addressed:

1. What different ideas – from Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom* to Friedman’s monetarism – does neoliberalism bring together?
2. Does neoliberalism mean less or more state intervention?
3. If neoliberalism is so pervasive, why do so few people self-identify as neoliberal?
4. What is the relationship between austerity and neoliberalism?
5. Is the shock doctrine being applied to the UK now, post-financial crisis?
6. Are UK universities being neoliberalised?

The discussion will feed into the production of Dumbshow’s play *Electric Dreams*, which is inspired by the ideas of Naomi Klein’s book on neoliberalism, *The Shock Doctrine*. It will also allow participants to deepen their understanding of neoliberalism within an inter-disciplinary context.

Format

There will be around 25 participants in all, split up into small groups. These will comprise one student from each discipline and at least one member of staff and one member from Dumbshow.

After a brief introduction from the Chair – Dr Chris Clarke (PAIS) – the groups will spend 30 minutes discussing the first three questions which are more theoretical in nature, before feeding back to the room about the positions they have reached. At 5pm we will break for refreshments (tea and coffee will be provided) before returning to our groups and tackling the last three empirical questions. The group discussion will be audio recorded.

Preparation

To aid discussion, we ask that everyone familiarise themselves with the attached documents:

- Excerpts from Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* (Attached)
- ‘Bulletproof Neoliberalism’ by Paul Heideman – a review of Philip Mirowski’s recent book - <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/06/bulletproof-neoliberalism/>
- ‘Freedom’s Just Another Word’ by David Harvey – chapter 1 in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Attached)

Other texts you might find useful to consult are Duménil, G. and Lévy, D. (2011) *The Crisis of Neoliberalism* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press) and Crouch, C. (2011) *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (London: Polity). Both of these are available in the library.

Dumbshow's Adaptation Workshop Plan

Intro

It isn't a science; there are no correct ways of doing it

You have to respond to the material

Trying to recreate the original is probably the most dangerous thing to do, you have to bring something to the table yourself.

This workshop isn't about giving answers, more about asking the right questions.

Background

We come from a background of making popular, accessible theatre; we try not to alienate, but we do try to challenge. We like to play with form, but not so that it becomes about the form. At every point we are trying to tell the truth in the most vivid way possible.

Opening Questions

Have you ever seen or read an adaptation?

Did you like it?

Did you know the original?

How did it differ?

Did it live up to your expectations?

Is there anything that you have ever wanted to adapt yourselves?

Why adapt something?

because you love it

because you think that it needs to be heard

because you think you can improve it

Because it's pertinent

What can you adapt?

Film, play, piece of journalism, art, prose, game, dance, biography

What are the differences from writing something from scratch?

paying homage

responsibility to the original

an audience that loves the original

rights(!) and therefore the extent to which you can change something

story is already set up, characters are already there, some dialogue may exist

What are the pitfalls?

that you'll make a lesser version

that it won't be true to the original

that you'll fall out of love with the original

Dumbshow Process

One of the things we do is ask 3 questions:

Why Me? I think there has to be a reason. Something that draws you to this project. Why are you best? Why not someone else? What is going to drive me when this gets hard.

Why Now? This isn't necessarily about relevance - not everything has to be relevant, but so much easier if it is.

Why in the Theatre? Questions about form. Is this the best form that this story can be told in? Any examples?

Encapsulate it in a phrase - This forces you to think about what is at its heart.

We do this because:

We really interrogate the text

We discuss collaboratively

We have something to come back to.

Where do you start?

Timelines

Inspiration - feed yourself

Exercises

Working with a writer - flexibility, speed, urgency

Working in collaboration - the need for people to be on the same page. That can often mean being in the same room.

Thinking in terms not just of text - music, images, art. Primary sources, secondary sources, thinking out side the box.

Storyboarding

Research - how much is helpful, how do you deal with it when you have amassed it.

Dialogue - type it out, try on its feet.

Application Exercise

Discuss, as an example, how one would approach adapting this 'letter from the grave', which appeared as a newspaper editorial in Sri Lanka:

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jan/13/wickrematunga-final-editorial-final-editorial>

Apply all of the thinking above to this exercise.