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By Peter Carty

The omission of local, working class voices from Liverpool's City of Culture programme is no less conspicuous in film-maker Terence Davies' plummy elegy, *Of Time and the City* - writes Peter Carty

Terence Davies is Liverpool's own auteur film director, best known for his films about growing up in the city during the 1940s and 1950s: *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* (1988) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992). They are brilliant works, capturing the grim beauty of Liverpool and of the lives led there during the austerity years. With skill and grace Davies fixed the city onto celluloid: its chronic deprivation, casual violence and dedicated alcoholism - as well as the song and sentiment, reckless generosity and goodwill, and elastic attitude to law and order.

Davies' approach to film-making, his painstakingly composed images and stylised narration, see him often grouped with Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman. What has set him apart from his postmodernist contemporaries, however, is his use of popular culture - particularly popular musicals and song - and his raw, emotional treatment of his city.

Â [IMAGE]

Image: still from Terence Davies' *Of Time and the City*, 2008

His latest work came at the fag end of Liverpool's year as City of Culture. Although as a film it achieves more than the overblown festival that spawned it, in many ways it exemplifies the problems of the year as a whole. These are problems of culture and class, of social and financial capital, and the ways in which all of them have marginalised, and continue to marginalise, the people of Merseyside.

Liverpool's Cultural Rise and Fall

Popular culture, which was sidelined both in Davies' film and throughout the festival, is a fundamental issue for both. We must start with the culture of Liverpool, and look at it in some depth, before examining the place of Davies' film within it. Liverpool's culture is a popular one, and the rise and fall of that culture has its own popular mythology. Some of this relates to the city's claims to international status. It is a source of pride for Liverpudlians that they can - or could - boast that Liverpool is a global city first of all, with little connection to the rest of Britain (let alone to Brussels and the nascent European state). Historically, it has had closer links to New York, Hamburg, Dublin and other major ports around the world than to the nation state it sits within.

Sailors visiting and returning to the city from other parts of the Atlantic seaboard, it is said, brought with them new ideas, new fashions, new music. The resident populace, steeped in a Celtic heritage of story and song, took hold of all of these and made of them something new, with a massive appeal, that exploded out of the city and which is still resonating around the globe. The 1960s were a decade of cultural revolution in the developed countries of the northern hemisphere; a revolution that fully recognised and embraced the popular culture of the working class for the first time and, for a while, Liverpool was at the centre of all of it.

Perhaps this kind of myth-making can only go so far; without the Beatles, it can be argued, we are left with a selection of lacklustre Merseybeat bands and a handful of second division poets. Yet it's not an argument that is much pursued; few deny that a broader cultural flowering did take place, which used the mass media and consumer industries to reach into everyone's homes and lives. It was a whole new nexus with strong and diverse political effects; the green movement and modern feminism have strong roots within it, and the events of 1968 continue to have a heavy influence upon writers and philosophers of the left. Culturally we are still living through the after-effects and fall out from the 1960s; no decade since has featured the same rate of monumental social change. And much of it was propelled along and popularised by Liverpool.

By the mid-1960s the city was widely perceived as a global centre of popular culture, creating a wave that swept all before it, so that for a period popular culture started to become continuous with high culture. For a brief moment the city provided the levelling of high and low culture so celebrated by postmodern theorists a couple of decades later on.

The comedown started in the '60s themselves, when the focus of popular creativity shifted towards London, and the city's social decline started to accelerate through the 1970s. Margaret Thatcher hit the city very hard. She failed to crush the spirit of its people completely, but the economic violence she wielded left terrible scars. As large parts of the city went up in flames, many of us were forced to recognise there was no place for us here any more. During Thatcherism and its aftermath, between 1980 and 1995, a third of the population had to leave, never to return, mostly working class people in search of a livelihood elsewhere. This exodus terminally sapped the city's vitality and spark; the city's characterless middle class rump which came to the fore by default has provided no substitute.

Endemic unemployment, poverty and crime continued into the '90s and '00s, despite endless attempts by local and national government quangos to rebrand the city and attract inward investment. The only significant result of it all has been a temporary and fragile substitution of call centres for some of the vanished heavy industry, no more than sticking plasters over a ruptured artery.

The end stop of this long decline of Liverpool's social and cultural capital came in the form of an insulting, wounding paradox: the Capital of Culture year - a humiliating reminder that the zeitgeist had long since moved on, and that social handouts of one kind or another were all that was left. Begging

for regeneration funding under the guise of the City of Culture banner has been deeply shaming.

Â [IMAGE]

Image: Liverpool's City of Culture symbol, the Super Lamb Banana

Terence Davies and His Rise and Fall

So where does Terence Davies' film, funded by the festival, fit into all of this? *Of Time and the City* is a mature work by Davies; his first two films look at the period just before the start of Liverpool's modern cultural rise, while this one takes in the city from the mid-1940s to the present, and comes as a personal valediction. It differs from his early work because it is a documentary constructed entirely from previously shot footage. Nonetheless, like them, it is a lyrical and sentimental portrait both of Liverpool and of Davies himself, full of all of the city's stark gradations of light and shade.

He has been lucky to get the chance to make it. Like the city of his birth, Davies has had his wilderness years. After his first couple of films, he moved onto Hollywood, but the mastery he displayed on his home turf did not accompany him across the Atlantic. When he switched to American subjects and themes his films fared badly. *Neon Bible* (1995) was an adaptation of a John Kennedy Toole novel, set in a rural town in the American south during the 1940s. Thematically, it is connected with the earlier works, examining the repression of Catholicism, male violence and the mixed emotions stirred by looking back at early life. Regrettably, the slow pace that matched the unhurried life of Liverpool's pubs and its measured domestic narratives was slightly, but fatally, out of time with the stately rhythms of the Deep South.

His next film, *House of Mirth* (2000), was an Edith Wharton adaptation and was mauled, perhaps over-mauled, by the critics. In part it is an able critique of emerging industrial society in America, but mostly a portrayal of women's oppression within it. Films with feminist themes always risk trouble at the box office and this one did not do well. For many years afterwards Davies was unable to attract funding for his projects, though his creative status remained untouched.

Of Time And The City might be his final work. What gleams from the screen before us is an elegy for the town of his youth. Much of it consists of a world that's gone forever; a society in which almost everyone occupied the same threadbare, lower social levels, and lived rigidly similar lives characterised by thrift, with relief provided by the public house, occasional day trips across the river, and - of course - football.

An enormous crowd is seen squeezed onto vast terraces at Everton, and there are shots of trippers flocking to New Brighton - once Merseyside's premier holiday resort, with a huge art deco swimming pool and a tower to rival Blackpool, all of it long gone. There are long shots of women in back yards engaged in the punishing hard labour of the weekly wash, of a delivery boy cycling up a grimy terraced street.

Davies' own recollections dominate. He is gay and from a working class Catholic background, a fraught combination then and now, and these aspects of himself feature heavily in his choice of archival material. There's footage of a wrestling bout, of the variety Davies used to frequent, driven by the sexual longings that made life so difficult for him. In the same vein, there are shots of Catholic church services, priests and altar boys, with Davies telling us in his voiceover of terrible guilt thrust upon him by his piety.

History moves on quickly. There comes the catastrophic rebuilding of the city (the planners finished what the Luftwaffe started, as the city's pensioners are given to saying) with alienating tower blocks and estates - that disastrous collision between modernism and the working class - all featuring together with the newest parts of the city, its shiny (and largely untenanted) office blocks and private, high rise, residential development.

Â [IMAGE]

Image: still from Terence Davies' *Of Time and the City*, 2008

The Voice of Liverpool

The problems start with the soundtrack. The voice of Liverpool, the lyricism of its speech, is absent. Instead of a Scouse accent for Davies' voiceover, we get his plummy middle class declamations (he's definitely Terence Davies, never Terry). Davies' dulcet tones of privilege are a betrayal, though he cannot bear all the blame for this. During the 1960s and 1970s, while working class actors were on the rise (albeit, in retrospect, in surprisingly small numbers), it was much less acceptable for a director to have obvious proletarian origins, so Davies would have had to jettison any identifiable traces of who and what he was to succeed. And yet, tragically, in his voiceover there's nothing left to link him to his own city, a city whose hallmark is a phenomenal oral culture which Davies has had to cut himself away from.

Ironically, as a film-maker, that oral culture is the gold that shines through his first two films. Liverpool has always been a working class city. That is behind its glory, and its downfall. When you hear the voices of middle class Liverpool of yesteryear, of George Melly and Beryl Bainbridge, or the fraudulent Scouse impersonations of John Peel, it becomes painfully apparent that they might as well have sprung from the home counties for all that they have in common with most of the people of Liverpool. They are not Scousers, because Scousers are working class (the term itself stems from a

dish eaten by merchant seamen and the city's poor, using the cheapest meat and vegetables). Bainbridge has made more than one attack on the Liverpool accent, saying that the city's working class should speak like her to improve their employment prospects. Diversity does not, it seems, extend to Liverpool's street corners.

It is a shame that Davies has aligned himself, wittingly or not, with this kind of nasty social exclusion, which remains a live issue. In the week the film was released, John Prescott unveiled a television documentary he had made about social class in Britain. On the Today Programme he pointed out to the presenters that people from his class still have very little access to the media; during the lively, ostensibly light-hearted, debate that followed he was patronised repeatedly. Whatever you might think about Prescott, he has never hidden his origins and as a result he has had to spend much of his adult life fighting for the respect automatically granted to most of his colleagues. If a Deputy Prime Minister can't win this one, exactly where does that leave the rest of us? And Davies, literally, voices none of this in his film.

Then there is the content of that voiceover. We are offered quotations from A.E. Housman, T.S. Eliot, Shelley and Raleigh. And there is the musical part of the soundtrack: the score includes Fauré and Mahler, and there is hardly any popular music at all, just one track by the Hollies and with the Beatles deleted from history. The levelling of culture that started to take place in Liverpool in the 1960s is now over, it seems. High culture has made a triumphant comeback, and high culture in Britain is, of course, for most of the time - again - about social exclusion. Scousers are not taught about Fauré and Mahler at school. The film clips Davies has selected show plenty of working class people, but the voiceover and music - the contextualisation, the judgement - is implacable, high culture.

Â [IMAGE]

Image: promotional advertising image for Liverpool's new mega-mall

And in much the same way that Davies constructed the voiceover for his film, the keynote events of the City of Culture festival featured high culture that has nothing to do with the city at all: prominent among them were an exhibition of Klimt (a puzzling imposition of Viennese kitsch) and a Mahler concert (a composer who perennially signifies bohemianism for the irredeemably bourgeois).

Space of Waste

The bitter taste of high culture's triumph worsens when it becomes clear how little Liverpool has benefited from its genuflection to the culture of the ruling class. Once upon a time, of a Saturday night, the city would be crammed with tens of thousands of sailors and dockers, bent on throwing their money around the city with wanton abandon in reckless pursuit of any pleasure available. The Capital

of Culture administrators have displayed a similar profligacy on a massive scale - two billion Euros worth of our money - but with far less imagination; no new and exciting creative shoots are likely to spring from their efforts. It is not that they could not organise a piss-up in a brewery; it is worse than that - there is the suspicion they could not manage a piss down a lavatory unaided. Even had they succeeded, the results would have been to cement the city further into post-industrial poverty. The Capital of Culture scheme has long been discredited as regeneration on the cheap: most jobs in the arts sector are low paid and low skilled. Successful regeneration strategies involve relocating public sector organisations to post-industrial cities - and there are only so many of these to go round - or pumping an awful lot of money into very high skill, high investment industries which can compete in the global premier league. Both these strategies have been conspicuously underused in Merseyside's supposed regeneration.

There were no benefits to be had either from the City of Culture year's creation of associated infrastructure. When it came to the construction of the buildings to house some of these cultural initiatives, the work was mostly carried out by foreign labour. There was a dearth of apprenticeships on offer to locals. This in a city with so few employment opportunities that rubbish tips have to be fenced off from scavengers. The construction itself was limited to a shoddy sprucing up of those parts of the city centre most on public view; the outskirts of the city remain as poor and deprived as ever. The new concert hall, conference centre and other buildings will be chronically underused now that the year is over. In tandem with this public sector excess came spasms of private sector misjudgement. The culture year sparked a positive orgasm of property development which has left the city centre full of empty dwellings. Many would-be members of the rentier class who invested in these properties as buy-to-let investments are now descending into bankruptcy.

Davies' film displays the same kind of financial mismanagement. Despite the fact that no new film was shot at all, it cost Â£100,000. The main expenses of making films are the costs of the film stock itself, and the sets, the shooting and the cast, so it is hard to see how this can be justified. The only outlay was buying in cheap archive material and the editing, and it is difficult to imagine how this can be made to add up, given that so many other British or British directed films are barely commercial ventures, with minuscule budgets and a heavy reliance (up to and including directors), on voluntary labour. Britain's latest independent film success, *Shifty*, directed by Eran Creevy, cost in total almost exactly - you've guessed it - Â£100,000; Shane Meadows' budgets tell a similar story.

[IMAGE]

Image: still from Terence Davies' *Of Time and the City*, 2008

There now appears to be some kind of belated recognition, somewhere in Brussels, that the Capital of Culture Scheme is flawed, but that has not led to its abolition. Vilnius, Lithuania, is 2009's City of Culture, but the latest bright idea will kick in in 2010. The Ruhr is the first Region of Culture. No less than 53 towns and cities throughout the area will come under the Capital of Culture title. The thinking, presumably, is that better value for money might be obtained by spreading it more thinly. Awareness is still lacking that there is no value to be had from investing in a sector that, for the most part, cannot create reasonably skilled and remunerative employment.

Meanwhile, the people of Liverpool are left to reflect on the charade that was supposed to help transform their lives, and leaves them no better off than the shades in Davies' film - perhaps worse off, because at least the Scousers up there on that silver screen had some hopes for the future

Info

Terence Davies, *Of Time and the City*, 2008