

Concrete universality: Tower blocks, architectural modernism, and realism in contemporary British cinema

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of tower blocks in Last Resort (Pawlikowski 2000) and Red Road (Arnold 2006). Commonly associated in the popular imagination as the site of major social problems (crime, poverty, anti-social behaviour), the concrete high-rise has become the symbol of the decline of contemporary Britain. Both films recognise the structural decay that characterises many post-war housing developments and acknowledge the social problems that plague them, yet they seek to understand this deterioration as a consequence of larger social and political decisions and developments. Last Resort records the transformation of tower blocks into holding cells for asylum seekers. Red Road turns the proliferation of CCTV cameras on a Glaswegian housing estate into a metaphor for a society fearful of those people and places incongruent with a modern, affluent Britain. In each case, dramatisation enhances documentation rather than compromises it, and the tower block becomes the setting for what Žižek terms 'concrete universality', the process whereby 'fiction explodes documentary from within' (Žižek 2006: 31). In this way, these films constitute a revitalised realism in which the truth of the antagonisms that divide society can best be shown in the guise of fiction.

Keywords

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The tower block occupies a special place in the symbolic vocabulary of British realist cinema. Long derided as planning folly, the concrete high-rises of the 1960s serve as an objective reminder and architectural remainder of an era in the history of housing now commonly understood to have been as corrupt as it was misguided. The image of the tower block silhouetted against the sky has become part of the basic vocabulary of British cinema, most often invoked as a visual signifier for the marginalised and menacing. But should the tower block necessarily serve merely as an object lesson or cautionary tale? Much contemporary British realist cinema wrestles with the legacy of mass housing schemes and examines the ways in which life and community persists in the allegedly inhospitable, cold, concrete surroundings of high-rises and tower blocks. *Ladybird* (Loach 1994), *Nil by Mouth* (Oldman 1997) and *All or Nothing* (Leigh 2002) all examine the working-class terrain of the council estate and, whatever struggles and traumas form the substance of their narratives, firmly resist condemning the spaces wholesale or demonising the people

who live in them. *Last Resort* (Pawlikowski 2000) and *Red Road* (Arnold 2006) continue in this tradition, even as they depart somewhat from conventional forms of cinematic realism. *Last Resort* and *Red Road* both represent the tower block as a privileged symbol and primary symptom of contemporary Britain, yet to do so they mobilise a revitalised realism that admits into its workings abstractions and distortions of reality.

Pawel Pawlikowski and Andrea Arnold draw on a national cinematic tradition of social realism to document the conditions of life in the disintegrating towers and schemes of the post-war period, but they do so in the recognition that the concrete high-rise is symbolically overdetermined. These spaces are routinely associated in the popular imagination as the sites of, and symbols for, the major social problems of contemporary Britain (crime, poverty, anti-social behaviour), but such identification, by politicians and the media especially, frequently serves only as a cover for anti-working class and anti-immigrant sentiment. Neither *Last Resort* nor *Red Road* turn a blind eye to the structural decay and disintegration that characterises many of the post-war housing schemes nor do they ignore the social problems that plague them. Instead, they dramatisise the connections between local conditions of existence on the peripheries of contemporary British culture and the national, even global, political decisions and conditions that give rise to them.

In both of these films, setting is integral rather than incidental. Tower blocks constitute a striking visual symbol for the alienation and anomie of characters and communities, but they are also the material, even concrete, terrain that registers a history of uneven development and the persistence of social and economic inequities. Originally identified with the modernist and modernising enthusiasms of the welfare state, tower blocks now house those who have been left behind or are out of sync with the dominant fantasies of a fully modernised British state. Pawlikowski's *Last Resort* records the transformation of the towers of Margate – renamed Stonehaven in the film – into holding cells for asylum seekers, while Arnold's *Red Road* turns the proliferation of CCTV cameras on a Glasgow housing estate into a metaphor for a society fearful of those people and places incongruent with a contemporary, affluent Britain. In each case, dramatisation enhances documentation rather than compromises it, and the housing estate becomes the setting for what Žižek terms 'concrete universality', the process whereby 'fiction explodes documentary from within' (Žižek 2006: 31). As such, these films constitute a revitalised, contemporary realism in which the truth of the antagonisms that divide contemporary British society can best be shown in the guise of fiction.

The tower block and British film

Before turning to these recent films, however, I will sketch a brief pre-history of the conjunction of realist cinema and modernist housing projects by considering a number of documentaries that appeared in the era of the council housing boom. It is in the context of a documentary tradition that fiction films addressing the complications and contradictions of estate living began to emerge. It may seem somewhat ironic that fiction filmmakers so frequently appeal to the most conventional of modes, realism, in

order to represent the experience of modernism and modernity. Part of the answer to this juxtaposition of mode and cultural logic lies in the rich vein of documentaries, only a few of which I will consider here, that largely precede and anticipate fictional forays into the same territory. These documentaries alternately promulgated and critiqued the rhetoric of progress that came with the elevation of Le Corbusier-inspired modernism to 'the official architecture of the welfare state' (quoted in Hanley 2007: 105). In the midst of what was everywhere claimed to be a new era came the desire, felt in documentary most powerfully at first but quickly extending to fiction filmmaking, to represent directly the feelings and experiences of everyday life and everyday struggle. As such, the realist impulse in contemporary British film should be linked not to older forms of life and community, but to the experience of the modern itself and the built space of modernity.

Housing has long been a focus of British cinema, with the documentary tradition in particular returning time and again to questions of substandard dwellings, slum clearances, and urban renewal. *Housing Problems* (Elton and Anstey 1935) sets the standard for the documentary investigation of living conditions that also serves as a manifesto for renewal and revitalisation. The film gives voice to those who live in ageing tenements, but also details the efforts that the 'experts' of the state – planners and architects – are undertaking to alleviate such conditions. Elton and Anstey made their film under the auspices of the British Commercial Gas Association, so perhaps it is not surprising that the cold, hard look the film directs toward poor housing conditions is followed by plans and prescriptions for their amelioration.

There are a number of films which follow the model *Housing Problems* provides in offering problems and solutions to housing crises simultaneously, including *Glasgow Today and Tomorrow* (Masters 1952) and *Cumbernauld, Town for Tomorrow* (Crichton 1970), both of which present visions of the future crafted by planning and development corporations. There is, however, also a counter-tradition of documentaries that critique these official plans and programmes. *Let Glasgow Flourish* (Dawn Cine Group 1956) was produced by a socialist film-making collective to indict the delays and failures of the renewal projects detailed in *Glasgow Today and Tomorrow* and to demand the immediate construction of new housing for those living in substandard conditions in the Gorbals. Another collective project, *Not a Penny on the Rents* (Cinema Action 1968), documents the efforts of tenants' associations to block rent increases imposed by the Greater London Council to fund the building of further council towers. What all of these films show is that the same images – those of crumbling terraces and litter-strewn alleys, but also of new concrete high-rises and open green spaces – can be deployed to very different political ends. Concrete itself has a semiotic liquidity, representing in some instances the very material of the future while in others assuming the feel of cold incarceration, of subordinating those within it to the state's desire for rationality and modernity.

Who Cares (Broomfield 1971) brings this tradition full circle as it documents the effects of renewal schemes on those being relocated to tower estates on the outskirts of Liverpool. The new tower blocks presented, in

the immediate term at least, an improvement in living conditions. For many, however, relocation came at the cost of community. *Who Cares* gives voice to those reluctant to move from their traditional terraced houses and to those disenchanted with the life and culture of the council towers. In the credits of *Who Cares* Broomfield acknowledges the help of Edgar Anstey, who was by this time one of the elder statesmen of the British documentary tradition. In so doing, Broomfield acknowledges the continued usefulness of the documentary techniques that Elton and Anstey pioneered in *Housing Problems*, even as he questions the solutions to the housing crisis that the earlier film had so passionately advocated.

Documentary film-makers have by no means had a monopoly on the representation of housing problems or the claims and consequences of modernisation. The sheer number of cramped bedsits and crumbling terraces in the history of British cinema is evidence that housing has long been a prominent, if not always primary, subject for fiction films as well. Housing is of particular significance in the films of the British new wave. *A Taste of Honey* (Richardson 1961), for example, addresses the problems of substandard housing in the way that it shows Jo (Rita Tushingham) being forced to move from one dreary space to another. Likewise, *Billy Liar* (Schlesinger 1963) represents its protagonist (Tom Courtenay) as being trapped in the space of his parents and of the past, desperate to break out of the traditional confines of the terraced house into something new and extraordinary. But it is *Cathy Come Home* (Loach 1966) that represents the watershed moment in terms of a fictional film's projecting questions of housing and homelessness into wider public consciousness. Appropriately, Loach's film assumes a hybrid form, docudrama, and it draws its energies both from an established documentary tradition and emerging forms of contemporary realism. Loach's film follows a young, newly-married couple, Cathy (Carol White) and Reg (Ray Brooks), as they try to secure a home for their growing family. In their efforts to do so, they confront obstacle after obstacle, from a workplace injury that leaves them without income, to a series of ruthless landlords, to the callous indifference of the council authorities. Soon they are unable to find any lodgings at all and Cathy and the children must resort to living in a council hostel while Reg searches desperately for work that would pay well enough to make the rent.

Before the downward slide of Cathy and Reg begins in earnest, they visit a new modernist low-rise development. They know instantly, however, that the rent, whatever subsidies or support they may be offered, is still well beyond their reach. Furthermore, it is made clear to them that the waiting list for such developments far exceeds the number of units actually available. This scene exemplifies the contradictions of mass housing projects in the post-war period. The formal regularity of their modernist design facilitated construction on a mass scale, yet the demands for housing far outstripped production. As a result, the image of the modernist housing scheme, whether in the form of tower blocks or low-rise slabs, is at least initially invested with the allure of a modernity that for many remained out of reach. Indeed, given the ubiquity of negative representations of mass housing projects that came in the decades after it, this scene in *Cathy Come Home* serves as a valuable corrective to the historical understanding

of these projects and the people who desired to live in them. Such a desire is not simply naïve or misguided, but rather is borne of genuine desperation and deep desire.

There are a number of films in the decades following *Cathy Come Home* that point to the disappointments that came with the building of tower blocks and low-rise schemes, but one in particular is worth mentioning since the cultural history of the tower block and reactions to it forms an integral part of its epic scenario. *Our Friends in the North* (Cellan Jones, James, Urban 1996) is a nine-part, ten-hour serial drama that follows the lives of four friends from Newcastle from the 1960s to the mid-1990s. The compromises and corruption that characterised the building of council tower estates in Newcastle is at the heart of *Our Friends in the North*. Throughout the series the tower block serves as a powerful metaphor for the failures of the sixties and of the welfare state more generally.¹ Deeply elegiac in tone, *Our Friends in the North* uses the forlorn image of the tower block as part of its lament for the missed opportunities of modernisation. As Patrick Wright argues, in the wake of the enthusiasm for mass housing projects in the sixties came an immediate and vigorous disavowal and disidentification on the part of just about everyone hitherto involved in their promotion, planning and construction. As a result, the meaning of the tower block has dramatically shifted within the popular British imaginary from being a symbol of modernity to an icon of the failures of the same: 'Stripped of its progressive aura, the council tower block has (. . .) undergone a symbolic conversion and emerged as a monstrous emblem of the futility of all State-led reform' (Wright 1991: 129). In visual terms, this monstrosity manifests itself in the image of inhumanly scaled towers looming over more traditional neighbourhoods. A further consequence of the 'symbolic conversion' Wright identifies is the extension of this monstrosity to those who live within the towers or more generally on estates. As such, condensed into images of the tower block and windswept estate is a whole history of modernisation, its perceived failures, and of those left behind or excluded from its promises and benefits.²

The terrain of the tower block: Last Resort and Red Road

Last Resort and *Red Road* both inherit this dominant conception of tower blocks and council estates as spaces of danger, deprivation and despair, yet work to overturn these simplifications. They do so without denying the way in which estate dwellers have been maligned and marginalised by a society that cannot properly place them within it. In *Last Resort*, the towers house asylum seekers, perceived as foreign elements that do not have a place within the British body politic. Those in *Red Road* are likewise treated as elements out of place within, or non-synchronous with, contemporary British society. This cultural and cinematic fascination with the terrain of the tower block suggests that, far from being irreconcilable with contemporary Britain or simply the shameful residue of a failed programme of modernisation, the tower block stands as the truth of Britain's political situation today.

In making such a claim, I draw on Žižek's rehabilitation of the Hegelian concept of concrete universality in his discussion of cinema's ability to present 'the Real of subjective experience' (Žižek 2006: 30). The

1 For a book-length consideration of the series, see Michael Eaton's *Our Friends in the North*, published as part of the British Film Institute's TV Classics series (Eaton 2007). The connections between the series' fictional politician, Austin Donahue (Alun Armstrong) and the real life 'Mr Newcastle', T. Dan Smith, forms an integral part of Eaton's analysis. Smith wanted to transform Newcastle into a city of the future, the Brasilia of the North, but to do so he cut both corners and deals. After an initial acquittal on corruption charges, he pleaded guilty to further charges in 1974 and spent six years in prison. Despite this, he remained an influential figure in Newcastle.

2 For more on the history of council estates and tower block development, there are three sources which approach the topic from different perspectives. Patrick Dunleavy's *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain, 1945–75* (1981), in addition to providing a wealth of statistical information, examines the political contexts in which high-rise development emerged, peaked and then dwindled. Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius's *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern*

Ireland (1994) likewise provides an historical account of the political changes that affected council housing policy, but is distinguished by the architectural and design analysis it provides. Finally, Lynsey Hanley's *Estates: An Intimate History* (2007) provides a cultural history of the council estate via a personal memoir.

tower block in particular is such a potent image because it bears enormous weight in public discourse and the visual imagination of contemporary Britain. Through a kind of symbolic condensation it has come to represent all the problems of the British present, and thus serves as the thing that 'sticks out' – in both crudely visual and ideological terms – and prevents the nation from being fully itself. Žižek describes this process as a short circuit between the universal and the particular, and uses an example intrinsically related to that of tower blocks and council estates:

the Universal acquires concrete existence when some particular content starts to function as its stand-in. A couple of years ago, the English yellow press focused on single mothers as the source of all evils in modern society, from budget crises to juvenile delinquency. In this ideological space, the universality of 'modern social Evil' was operative only through the split of the figure of 'single mother' into itself in its particularity and itself as the stand-in for 'modern social Evil'. The fact that this link between the Universal and the particular content which functions as its stand-in is *contingent* means precisely that it is the outcome of a *political* struggle for ideological hegemony.

(Žižek 1997: 29, original emphasis)

As Žižek explains, it is not simply that a complex array of social relations can be condensed into an individual image or idea, but rather that politics resides in the very process of condensation, the way in which contingent connections are made to seem both concrete and customary. Such an analysis certainly raises the spectre of *Little Britain's* Vicky Pollard, but it also implies a kind of indexical relation between the body of the 'single mother' and the space most readily associated with her. As such, the tower block can be understood as a monstrous body, an abject concrete materialisation of all that which is at once representative of the nation and incompatible with national fantasies of integrity and modernity.

The suturing of a particular content to the empty Universal that Žižek describes is an extension of what Wright identifies as 'symbolic conversion'. Not only does the tower block come to mean the opposite of what it once did, but it is also pressed into service politically in such a way that makes it stand in for a whole set of ideological commitments. Margaret Thatcher in particular deftly forged a connection between the political delusions of the sixties and the image of the tower block, blaming the misplaced idealism of a whole political generation for the creation of a 'block mentality: tower blocks, trade union block votes, block schools' (quoted in Sandbrook 2005: 5). Thatcher established a chain of affiliation between history, spatiality and ideology. The governing image of this chain of abstractions, the one that gives concrete form to the political position that Thatcher condemned, is that of the tower block. It is in this way that the concrete high-rise comes to have concrete political consequences. But, ironically, these consequences occur by virtue of a process of dematerialisation, wherein the concrete form of the tower block circulates as a sign and visual image. Even though cinema might be imagined to be complicit in the circulation of these concrete yet dematerialised images that denigrate those who live in high-rises and on estates, *Last Resort* and *Red Road* both

offer evidence to the contrary. They represent an effort to break the chain of affiliation that renders these spaces and their inhabitants inhuman and marks all forms of state intervention as misguided or futile.

Pawlikowski's *Last Resort* begins at Gatwick. Tanya (Dina Korzun) and her ten-year-old son Artiom (Artiom Strelnikov) arrive from Russia in anticipation of being met at the airport by Tanya's English fiancé. When he does not turn up, Tanya is in despair. Faced with the threat of being deported to Russia, she seeks political asylum for herself and her son. They are sent to Stonehaven, a thinly-disguised Margate, and are assigned a flat in a disintegrating tower block. Tanya and Artiom quickly learn the life of the internee. Tanya seeks work, but without papers cannot get any legitimate position. Artiom, mature beyond his years, barter for the basics that will keep them afloat and makes friends with local delinquents whose situation seems only marginally better than that of the asylum-seekers detained there. *Last Resort* captures the seediness and menace of the decaying seaside town, and alerts viewers to the culture of despair that has emerged in the wake of a viable domestic tourist industry. A seaside resort in the off-season is melancholic at the best of times, but it seems unlikely that summer would bring any great improvement to Stonehaven. In any case, the miserable weather serves the film's purpose with precision. The dreariness expresses Stonehaven's status as a last resort on a number of levels. It is certainly the last place you would want to go on holiday, and it is also an anachronism, a residual holdover from an older way of life and its differing ideas of both leisure and pleasure. But for those like Tanya and Artiom who arrive in England with little or next to nothing and seek asylum out of desperation, it represents the last vestiges of the hope with which they began their journey to the United Kingdom. Stonehaven, in its terminal grimness, gives their desolation material form.

Tanya and Artiom's arrival at their new flat holds within it a distinct irony. Britain held for them the promise of a way of life superior to the one they had in the former Eastern Bloc, yet they find themselves almost immediately in a concrete tower virtually indistinguishable from the ones they might have left behind. The friendship they strike up with Alfie (Paddy Considine), a local arcade manager, leads to one of the film's most poignant sequences in which he helps them paint their apartment azure blue and hangs an immense poster of a tropical beach. Such a colour scheme and image casts into stark relief the disappointments of dreary Stonehaven and unfriendly England, but it is Alfie's kindness itself that is redemptive here. Alfie refuses to abandon Tanya even when she, out of sheer desperation, is drawn into Stonehaven's fledging cyberporn industry as a way to earn the money necessary to bribe her way out of detention. His efforts are the key to their eventual escape from both the detention camp and England.³

Perhaps the most striking sequence in the film comes when Artiom, thinking his mother has resorted to prostitution to make ends meet, drinks vodka with local Margate kids at the deserted Dreamland funfair. As she searches for Artiom, the tower block that serves as their detention centre looms ominously in the background. Such an image communicates something of the complex flows and convergences that operate within the

3 *Children of Men* (Cuarón 2006) likewise seizes upon the transformation of the traditional seaside resort into a detention camp for asylum seekers. Cuarón's film, based on the novella by P. D. James, is set in a near future in which no children have been born for nearly eighteen years and Britain alone has maintained a level of political stability. In the film, Bexhill-on-Sea has been given over entirely to refugees to England and has become a hybrid war zone and detention site.

film's narrative. It combines the past and the present in a single image, with Dreamland and the tower block, even in their state of dilapidation, conjuring up the memory of the past and its hopes and ambitions. The scene also brings together England (Alfie, who eventually finds Artiom passed out in front of the arcade) and its others (Tanya, along with the other asylum seekers), and even desire (Tanya and Alfie's clear love for one another) and its impossibility (the immigration regulations that prevent them from staying together). Gloomy seaside Stonehaven expresses the grimness of Tanya and Artiom's predicament, but the tower block turned detention camp that overlooks a decaying Dreamland powerfully compresses the failures of modern Britain into a single image.

Nevertheless, it must be said that the insight Pawlikowski's film offers into current British social conditions arrives via a realism that in no way purports to be an unmediated glimpse of reality. If the decaying seaside resort and dilapidated tower blocks point to the film's investment in finding symbolic vehicles in reality for Tanya, Artiom and Alfie's situation, the look of the film itself, which frequently veers into the abstract and has the overall feel of a bad dream, keeps the film from lapsing into a more traditional realism or becoming mere fictionalised documentary. However suspect the term may be as a result of its affiliation with socialist realism, it nevertheless seems appropriate to think of Pawlikowski's characters as *typical*. Yet this typicality does not mean the reduction of the characters to mere expressions of universal forces; rather, it allows them in their particularity to stand in for a Universal concept or notion, such as 'asylum seeker'. This sort of 'concrete universality' demands a reconsideration of the operations of realism. As Žižek explains it in reference to Kieslowski, 'the ultimate achievement of film art is not to recreate reality within the narrative fiction, to seduce us into (mis)taking a fiction for reality, but, on the contrary, to make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself, to experience reality itself as a fiction' (Žižek 2001: 77). The fictional aspects, even the unreal dimensions, of the narrative Pawlikowski delivers thus become the condition of possibility for the film's realism rather than that which compromises it.

The same can be said of Andrea Arnold's *Red Road*, which likewise departs from conventional realism in telling its story of a woman who, in the course of her work monitoring the streets of Glasgow via CCTV, catches a glimpse of a man from her past. Jackie (Kate Dickie) is clearly shaken by this sighting, and returns home with the CCTV tapes to confirm that it is Clyde (Tony Curran), the man who several years earlier had killed her husband and daughter while driving under the influence and has now been released from prison early for good behaviour. This synopsis cannot capture the deft and measured way that Arnold reveals the connections between the two characters. She allows Jackie's immediate reaction, a slow tremor across her face when she first sees the video image of Clyde, to indicate the return of past trauma but withholds the exact connection between the two for more or less the duration of the film.

Jackie's initial response to Clyde's return is stunned shock, but soon she begins to take action. Having seen Clyde driving a locksmith's van, she calls the number to expose him as an ex-convict, only to discover that

Clyde himself has started the business in an effort to get himself back on his feet. She also circulates Clyde's picture to her colleagues at the City Eye CCTV station asking them to keep an eye on him in the hope that he will do something that will violate the stringent terms of his parole. Ultimately, however, these efforts from afar, from the safe vantage point behind the CCTV monitors that serve as a screen between her and reality, do not satisfy Jackie. As a result, she decides to intervene directly. Having confirmed the Red Road flats that she routinely monitors are frequently used to house ex-convicts, she takes the bus to the outskirts of the city where they are located.

Like many council estates built in the post-war period, the Red Road development annexed land on the very periphery of the city. At the time they were constructed in the late 1960s, the Red Road towers, at thirty-one storeys, were the tallest residential structures in Europe, built to accommodate 4,700 residents. In Arnold's film, Clyde's flat is in one of the two massive, oblong slabs that accompany the towers. Despite being slightly shorter at 27 storeys, these slabs are the defining feature of the Red Road estate, not simply because of their scale but because each of the three entrances that give access to the flats within are marked by an immense red stripe that climbs the side of the structure. More than any other British city, Glasgow enthusiastically embraced tower blocks as the solution to inner-city overcrowding and slum conditions. The Red Road estate was just one of several developments promised by Glasgow city authorities in the 1960s as the solution to the city's housing crisis.⁴

Jackie's decision to go to the Red Road flats is a matter of breaking the frame that usually mediates between her and reality. By entering this frame, she confronts reality in a way the film suggests has not happened since the death of her husband and daughter. Throughout the film, Arnold engages with questions of mediation, visuality and the gaze. She shows both the limits and possibilities of CCTV surveillance. At times the CCTV is marked as such, with low light or zoom rendering the image indistinct and grainy. The lines of resolution on the screens Jackie that scrutinises in the City Eye control room mark the image as doubly framed, once by the CCTV camera and once by Arnold's digital video camera, which captures the screen from Jackie's point-of-view. At other times, however, the CCTV technology produces images of such high quality and resolution that this frame disappears, creating the sense or even fantasy, of an unmediated reality. Yet, as much as this sense of technologically generated immediacy raises a whole set of questions about the impact of the proliferation of CCTV cameras throughout the United Kingdom, it also formally conveys the drama of Jackie's decision to break the frame of her surveillance and enter the picture directly. Jackie's arrival at Red Road is accompanied by an intense feeling of the uncanny, generated by her presence in a space which hitherto she, and by extension we as spectators, had only experienced at a technological remove.

After following Clyde at a distance for some time, Jackie shows up uninvited at a party he hosts. At this point, the film ventures into dark territory as Jackie's desire for comprehension oscillates between a desire for revenge and sexual desire. Although she flees from their first encounter

4 Andrew O'Hagan's novel *Our Fathers* (1999) presents an extended meditation on the consequences of high-rise development in Glasgow. In the novel, the protagonist, James Bawn, visits his dying grandfather, Hugh Bawn, who was the driving force of tower block construction in the 1960s. He wrestles with his grandfather's legacy, recognising the socialist ideals that lay behind it, but lamenting the compromises that sabotaged the effort to provide adequate housing for Glasgow's poor. For a specific history of the Red Road development and its contemporary redevelopment, see Jacobs, Cairns, and Strebel's "'A tall storey . . . but a fact just the same': The Red Road high-rise as a black box' (2007).

in a panic, she later returns to the estate. Having spotted Clyde on the CCTV cameras going to the local pub, she leaves work immediately to join him there. They return to his flat and have sex, but immediately afterwards Jackie leaves, tearing her clothes and hitting herself in the face with a stone she picked up from the barren ground of the estate so that their encounter will appear to have been violent. Leaving the Red Road flats, it is clear that Jackie performs to the CCTV camera positioned outside the entrance of the building, producing evidence for the rape charge she lodges against Clyde. In doing so, she performs for the blank stare of the camera, for the tape that registers her condition, and for the position of spectator that she herself usually occupies.

Jackie eventually drops the charges against Clyde and her decision to do so facilitates a tense and fragile reconciliation between the two of them. Jackie confronts Clyde after he has been released from police custody and they go to the very corner where he killed her husband and daughter. There, she learns of Clyde's remorse for his actions and accepts that the crash was accidental rather than intentional. This reconciliation comes only as a consequence of her forays into the Red Road estate. Whereas before the towers of Red Road were a forbidden zone, the space of lawlessness and perpetual danger, her contact with Clyde, as well as with his roommate Stevie and girlfriend April, humanises the residents of Red Road, transforming them from mere video images into something more. Moreover, this transformation extends to the estate itself. By the time Clyde sets off to return to Red Road after his conversation with Jackie, the objective features of the estate remain the same (garbage swirling in the wind, crumbling concrete facades, barren expanses of wasteland, immense architectural forms), yet descriptions of it as monstrous, inhumane or wild no longer seem entirely appropriate. The film demystifies Red Road, the name itself evocative of horror and past trauma, by having Jackie confront both the place and its people, which stand in for the trauma of losing her family.

History, hope and tower blocks

The spectre of death haunts representations of the tower block, not least because the very stuff from which they are constructed, concrete, is imagined to be a cold, lifeless substance. Both *Last Resort* and *Red Road* emphasise that lives are lived within the space of the tower block and convey a sense of disappointment about how these structures that were built with the promise of a better quality of life have been allowed to decay so dramatically and become dumping grounds for the disempowered and disenfranchised. In adopting an elegiac tone, neither film succumbs to nostalgia for the era of tower development nor advocates a return to it. Rather, these films lament the evaporation of hope that has emerged in the wake of the collapse of the welfare state. However compromised and corrupt the building of tower blocks seems to have been, they nevertheless serve as a symbol for the effort and necessity to think of the future and of change. Since the tower block had once been one of the primary symbols of the future, to abandon them to decay and dilapidation is tantamount to the loss not only of that future, of a modernity defined by the benefits of technology and planning, of state investment and public infrastructure, but of the hopes

and desires that generated it. In *Requiem for Communism*, Scribner argues that one of the things that characterises the present political condition of neoliberal consensus is the longing for a sense of the possibility for change:

Until recently, utopian thought offered an alternate route away from implacable historical reality. Now, at the purported 'end of history' when time seems to pause in the eternal present, utopia veers into the longing for History itself – for the touch of the real that postindustrial virtualization threatens to subsume. Nineteenth-century modes of production that were long considered violent and destructive return to us as the object of nostalgic interest. At the same time, much recent art and literature manifests the desire not only to recollect ways of living and working that were imagined to be possible under the rubric of the socialist alternative, but also to resuscitate the principle of hope that inspired much of the last century's social and cultural production.

(Scribner 2003: 9–10)

As Scribner notes, the return to a past era and its products need not be understood as mere sentimentality or reactionary nostalgia but rather can be seen as the only way to keep hope alive in an era characterised by the absence of utopian thought and the seeming impossibility of political alternatives. Wright argues that tower blocks, despite the complex array of historical forces that led not only to their proliferation but also to their neglect and decay, have come to represent the 'tombstone not just of council housing but of the entire Welfare State' (Wright 1991:131). Yet in becoming so, they also function as reminders of what has been lost; what, to use Scribner's phrase, 'was imagined to be possible'. The scheduled demolition of the Red Road flats seems to intensify their power in Arnold's film, since with them disappears not only the sign of the errors and mistakes that have been made, but also the trace of what might have been. To imagine them as such is not to gloss over the very real failures that were involved in the planning, construction and maintenance of these structures, but to acknowledge the possibility of a world different from the one we now inhabit.

The realist impulse that drives both *Last Resort* and *Red Road* is one that seeks to represent the complexities of the present as well as the past, but in order to do so, they must imagine a present that contains within it any number of unrealised dreams and desires. As part of this process, those things that seem most solid and concrete are subject to destabilisation. Such a word surely seems the wrong one to use in the context of tower blocks, but in the grip of a political moment that has resolutely turned its back on the construction of public housing of any sort, and has turned the image of the tower block into a sign for those beyond redemption and unwilling to help themselves, such a destabilisation is surely necessary. It is in this concrete political situation that both *Last Resort* and *Red Road* intervene, employing and developing a contemporary form of realism that articulates the truth of the present through particularity and that acknowledges the distortions and abstractions necessary to represent the real.

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