

Inarticulate lives: a reading of the opening to Terence Davies' *The Long Day Closes*

The early feature films of Terence Davies openly bare their use of quotation and allusion. Like mosaics fashioned by a cultural bricoleur, the films are rich in recontextualised borrowings from other films, television, radio, popular music, and painting. Indeed, part of the particular pleasure that *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* (1988) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992) offer lies in spotting these references, often densely embedded in the films' narrative worlds. The opening to *The Long Day Closes* – a travelling shot of two minutes and twenty seconds along a derelict street – represents just such a fragmentary series of quotations. The film does not conceal its borrowings, even if many viewers may be unaware of their origin; it is abundantly clear that these non-diegetic voices are not strictly part of the world of the street. In this article, I concentrate my focus on this opening shot with the intention of complicating the conventional explanation of the film's use of quotation offered by critics.

Colin MacCabe, speaking in chorus with many other writers on the film, suggests that '[y]ou could kind of psychologize it, and say that it's Bud's unconscious ...' which assembles the fragments through 'which he interprets his reality' (quoted in Koresky 2014: 105). Such an argument allows a productive reading of most of the film. Bud (Leigh McCormack), for most of the film's running length, is positioned as a



focalising figure, centripetally drawing together the disparate cultural references through the implied associative logic of his memories, interests, and fantasies. However, the opening shot employs an equivalent mosaic structure before the introduction of Bud. I am interested in how these quotations are to be read in the absence of a cohering character, and how this alternative reading strategy can inform and shape an understanding of the film more generally.

As the opening credits dissolve into an unspectacular shot of a red brick wall, a gong sounds. Neither time nor place can be ascertained from the image, although it appears to be night. As the sound of the gong fades, the voice of Margaret Rutherford from *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (Frank Launder, 1950) is heard: 'A tap, Gosage, I said "a tap" – you're not introducing a film'. While the voice speaks, shifting lights play across the brickwork, anticipating the projector's flickering light in the film's later cinema sequence. The gong – a sound associated with the opening of Rank Organisation

film releases – and the quotation forge a link between *The Long Day Closes* and British cinema of the 1940s and 1950s.

These British references are succeeded and complicated by the grandiose Hollywood sound of the Twentieth Century Fox fanfare, almost absurdly re-introducing the barely-begun film; as though inspired by the dynamic music, the camera begins to crane down and across the brick wall, exposing a tatty sign for Kensington Street L5 and an even tatter poster for *The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953), starring Richard Burton. The grandiose fanfare lends these ruined signs a kind of exhausted grandeur. *The Robe* – a film set within an Empire whose remaining traces throughout Europe are in many instances in the form of magnificent ruins – was the first film to be shot in CinemaScope and the first to use the revised fanfare with choral embellishments heard in *The Long Day Closes*; the music haunts the dilapidated poster as a memory of the excitement and innovation associated with the film's 1953 release. *The Robe* is invoked simultaneously in the past

moment of its triumphant release and in a later moment in which its poster hangs limp and forgotten on a bare brick wall in Liverpool.

This juxtaposition of grandeur and decay is central to the achievement of the opening shot. As the fanfare fades away, the camera cranes down and pans right, revealing a terraced



street in Liverpool, derelict and ready for demolition, photographed in velvety darkness and unrelenting rain. This present moment of dereliction is hard to locate historically; it could be the moment of the film's release, or an earlier decade when many terraced streets in Liverpool were bulldozed for new housing. Whenever this present is, it is haunted by the voices of a post-war cultural past. As the camera completes its pan and reveals a symmetrical wide shot of the street, a plaintive, disembodied voice calls, 'Louis'; unremarked, this voice (which belongs to Alec Guinness in Alexander Mackendrick's 1955 film *The Ladykillers*) disturbs the silence of the abandoned street as it seems to wait for a response.

As the echo of the voice fades, a lush opening chord introduces Nat King Cole's 'Stardust'; the camera, almost imperceptibly, begins tracking forwards down the street. The song's romantic lyrics – its references to 'purple dusk', 'twilight time', and 'meadows' – are counterpointed with the images of gutted terraced houses, and this juxtaposition gestures to the strange beauty of the street: evocative pools of shadow, the light catching the drops of "Hollywood"-style rain' (Davies quoted in Everett 2004: 100) as it falls in perfect, drenching sheets, and the sound of the rainfall like gentle applause. Before the explicit and stabilising introduction of a

character, the quotations imbue the images of the grimy street with varied associations of romance ('Stardust'), humour (*The Happiest Days of Your Life*), suspense (*The Ladykillers*) and glamour (the Twentieth Century Fox fanfare).

On the soundtrack, Nat King Cole sings of the song that 'will not die' and the camera tracks 90 degrees to the right



and moves in on the open door and dilapidated hallway of one of the houses. The music stops. The percussive sound of rain is insistent, urgent. The camera climbs up to the hallway. The voice of Alec Guinness from *The Ladykillers* says, 'Mrs Wilberforce? I understand you have rooms to let.' The rain continues to fall inside the house, unchecked by the absent roof. The transition from the undatable present to the past of the 1950s continues as, in the empty house, a voice calls across time, 'Mam, mam'. A slow dissolve reveals the hallway's past with Bud sitting on the stairs.

Inarticulate Character

The opening shot of the film resists the kind of character-centred explanation which sees cultural references as 'the icons of subjectivity' (Elsaesser 1998: 291). In the film's slow opening, Bud is both absent and yet to be introduced; to read the Bud of the later narrative back into the sequence is an imposition. His interests, memories, and fantasies have not yet been established, and they cannot be constructed as a secure interpretative framework through which to read the complex, layered opening. The unspecified time of the sequence suggests a point in the future, but an older, retrospective Bud

cannot be inferred with any confidence. Criticism has often argued that Bud – shy, withdrawn, anxious, his muteness a possible result of his unexpressed homosexuality – finds the challenges of articulating his desire relieved by a utopian popular culture which allows an escape from and expression of both the humdrum and traumatic aspects of life. This argument has typically avoided detailed engagement with this troublesome Bud-less beginning, and the strain is quickly felt when the character-centred approach is used to read the opening shot.

Jim Ellis argues that characters in the film experience pleasure 'vicariously through the arts' and that 'this investment in fantasy makes life tolerable' (2006: 141); it is, however, unclear whose pleasure and fantasy the opening shot documents, and what the role of tattiness and disrepair is in such a fantasy. Jefferson Hunter argues that 'Davies's people make a larger and brighter world for themselves out of [...] [this] culture' (2010: 249) and that, for example, '[m]usic gives inarticulacy a way to be eloquent' (245), but the opening shot presents no people doing this and it is uncertain what is being articulated through the use of the inappropriately reappropriated Twentieth Century Fox fanfare. Michael Koresky suggests that '[t]he people *are* the music [...], their profoundest unspoken emotions expressed only through melodies and lyrics' (2014: 69), but it is unclear whose emotion, unspoken or otherwise, is being voiced through 'Stardust'; its mature retrospections seem a strange fit for a young boy. Wendy Everett suggests that the film marks a 'recognition of the centrality of popular culture [...] in the articulation of subjective identity' (2004: 102), but, again, no subjective identity has yet been established to be articulated. Each of these general critical statements on the film struggles to make sense of an opening which gathers together its quotations in the absence of any explaining character; there is no sense at this stage in the film that Bud, or any other character, is securely controlling the mosaic structure.

Inarticulate Forms

The reading which follows does not lose sight of the characters who become so important through the film, but it

loosens the tether between the shot's meaning and the interests, memories, and fantasies of the yet-to-be-introduced Bud. It suggests that the audio-visual richness of the opening is not simply speaking on behalf of the mute Bud. Indeed, that richness amounts to a saturation which complicates, and does not ease, reading. Far from relieving Bud's inarticulacy by providing a compensating eloquence, the relentless piling up of mismatched quotations is a kind of *formal inarticulacy*. If 'articulation' – allowing the term to resonate with both its senses – may be defined as the arrangement of elements in an expressive structure in which the transitions (or joints) between those elements operate invisibly and without resistance, an *inarticulate* structure is one in which the joints creak, in which the transitions declare themselves. I take inarticulacy not to be the *absence* of articulation, but rather its *complication*. This structuring conceit can be seen at work in the opening shot's arrangement of quotations. For all its control and sense of careful composition, the film's structure is not seamlessly continuous and, instead, seems to stutter in an inarticulate bricolage of pre-existing, inherited elements.

This bricolage – which Jacques Derrida defines as the 'borrowing [of] one's concepts from the text of a heritage' even though 'their form and their origin are heterogeneous' (1978: 360) – explicitly draws attention to its mosaic structure. The notion of a superficially benign set of cultural texts which renders difficult lives tolerable and permits self-expression is not sufficient to explain the full operation of the film's inarticulate bricolage. Even as the sequence establishes its own distinctive sense of style, both its images and soundtrack also frustrate the emergence of a reassuring continuity; the image, despite its use of a continuous take, climaxes in a temporally disorientating dissolve, and the soundtrack is principally made up of non-diegetic borrowings inserted into the sequence without explanation or smooth transition. The sequence, then, renders transitions visible and audible, liberating their potential as disruptions. The opening is dislocated (an effect contributed to by the uncertainty of the place's identity and the fake-real status of the studio set). What Michael Koresky describes as 'daring dissociative aesthetic choices' (2014: 49) create a disorientating text which is initially hard to navigate. Recontextualisation complicates; it is unclear

what meaning can be attributed to the Twentieth Century Fox fanfare, for example, when it is encountered outside of its usual positioning at the head of a film. Denotation is almost entirely stripped away (as this is, according to the preceding quotation from *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, emphatically 'not introducing a film'), and the connotation that remains is uncertain. These quotations from heterogeneous cultural sources form a disjointed inarticulate structure which speaks in the *absence of any character*.

At the same time, the opening shot dazzles with its broad range of quotation: Hollywood cinema, mainstream British film, popular music, fine art, autobiography. The sequence is suffused with a dilapidated glamour, a celebration of the redemptive possibilities of the arts. The litany of remembered quotations uncovers the romantic possibility in the squalor of an abandoned, forgotten street. The film's elaborate opening travelling shot reveals a street suffused with a kind of radiant dilapidation, a muted exquisiteness. The past is made splendid as it is embellished with the arranged particles of popular culture in a play of recontextualised quotation. At the same moment, it also creates a discordant and uncanny landscape in which reliable categories collapse in the vertiginous shifts from one quotation to another. The film's urban space is rendered as both grimly naturalistic and clearly artificial. These counterpoints resist harmonious synthesis into a clear account of a character's remembering consciousness. The street is both immortalised and demolished by the sequence, beautiful and pitifully ruined, transfigured by and broken into the fragments of the quoted texts; it becomes frightening as well as reassuring, its surface romanticisation both unconvincing *and* convincing.

A reading of the opening shot which is not predicated on the coherence of a retrospective imposition of the character of Bud recognises the contingency of any interpretation; its statements embrace the hesitant, doubtful, subjunctive mood of 'could' and 'might', and recognise the achievement of the sequence's uncertain connotation. The brick wall with which the sequence begins could be the impassive sign of solid endurance or restriction. Margaret Rutherford's querulous voice from *The Happiest Days of Your Life* declares that the unseen Gossage is *not* introducing a film; this line, at the

very moment in which the film *is being introduced*, calls into ironic doubt the film's ontological status. At the very least, the film's identity as *a* film is thrown into question, as the emphatic indefinite article sits uncomfortably with the structure of *The Long Day Closes*; this is not just *a* film, but a compendium of voices, images, and publicity from many films. (As a line from a school-set farce, it may also be seen as a foreshadowing of the persecution which Bud will himself endure at the hands of teachers and fellow students, an abject disavowal of the notion that school represents a period of unique pleasure.) Given the context of the shabby street, the Fox fanfare can be read as both dynamic and overstated; the conflation of the pomp of the music and its associations with the mundane drabness of the street results in both the elevation of the humdrum and an absurd bathos. The poster for *The Robe* invokes the Bible, the central cultural lynchpin in 1950s Catholic Liverpool (tying cinema to the kind of oppression which Bud later feels at the hands of the Church). The image of the poster may retain a certain nobility, leeching from the fanfare and the foregrounded cinematographic conceit; however, in concert with the detritus which remains strewn around the set, its torn surface seems also corrupt and moribund.

The camera, having descended the wall and passed the poster, pans to the right and settles momentarily, facing the street. The voice of Professor Marcus (Alec Guinness) from *The Ladykillers* calls for 'Louis', a character whom, in the film, Marcus intends to kill. The tonal complexities of Alexander Mackendrick's film (a black comedy about a heist by a homosocial and inept group of disparate crooks, in which knowledge and ignorance, lawfulness and criminality, strength and vulnerability are comically confused) confuse the emerging meanings of *The Long Day Closes*. With each quotation, the sequence further strips away the interpretative supports customarily expected in a film opening; as Douglas Pye argues, '[f]ilm openings then [typically] orient the spectator to what is to follow [...] [with] initial indications of how the film will address its audience and how the audience will be invited to respond' (2007: 18). These orientating gestures are muddled in *The Long Day Closes*. There remains an emphatic invitation to respond, but the terms of the invitation are

confused by the simultaneity of two impressions: the dense network of quotations could be a charming period marker or the threat of an overwhelming and alienating cacophony. In relation to the opening shots of Davies' earlier film, *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, Pye writes that

It is impossible to produce more than hypotheses at this stage. The film invites these kinds of interpretative manoeuvres but deliberately withholds a framework that could enable us to anchor the significance of what we see and hear, encouraging initial processes of association but no certainty. It holds us at a distance in various ways – spatially, temporally, cognitively, evaluatively – so that we are required to interrogate what the film is doing and ask what kind of thing it is even as we experience the intensity of feeling communicated by the songs, and begin to understand something of the family and social context being evoked. (27)

The effect of the disorientation of *The Long Day Closes*'s opening is even more profound: the cultural quotations are more densely structured, the family less immediately defined, the social context more hazily presented in the image of the abandoned street. Nor is the disorientation restricted to this stage of the film; the concluding shots of the night sky offer no more solid a framework than the opening. In *The Long Day Closes*, the significance of the reappropriated, recontextualised, connoting quotations cannot be finally determined.

Inarticulate ideology

While it is important to decentre Bud in the film's opening sequence, it is also productive to consider the opening's position in relation to the wider film, and not merely as a standalone exercise in bricolage. Lacking the 'cultural cohesion' identified by critics such as Koresky (2014: 70), the inarticulate cultural landscape of inherited and fragmented texts pre-exists, delays, and even eclipses the emergence of characters' voices, defining the limits of what they can say and contributing to their muteness. The particular quality of this muteness can be usefully considered in the terms of Paul de Man's differentiation between *silence*, which 'implies the possible manifestation of sound at our will', and *muteness*,

to which we are 'condemned' because 'we are dependent on this language' (1984: 80) over which we have limited control and which must be inadequate to the job of expressing the extent of our experience. This dependence on an inadequate language which pre-exists the speaker suggests that muteness is, in fact, a kind of inarticulate bricolage; it is the compulsion to use existing terms to make a statement that can only ever hope to be an approximate expression of a personal experience.

Later in the film, the relationship between inarticulate mosaic form and character muteness becomes clearer. In the penultimate scene, a mute Bud stands in the coal cellar. This safe space for quiet despair is a mundane place which is presented in relationship with cinema; its solid darkness is broken by a single beam of light which recalls the projector beam from the earlier sequences set in the cinema and bares the device of the scene's own artificiality. Abandoned by his best friend, anxious about his developing homosexuality, Bud weeps for the only time in the film. (His position and the extent of his despair may be reminiscent of Maisie [Lorraine Ashbourne] in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* when she stands in the same cellar after her father has beaten her.)



As he stands in the coal cellar, Bud's complex emotions are articulated for him, without explanation or acknowledgement, by what Armond White describes as the 'pure emotional phenomena' (1993: 12-13) of a series of quotations: the narrator (Orson Welles) discussing George Minafer's 'comeuppance' in Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942); Bud's teacher (Robin Polley) discussing erosion from *The*

Long Day Closes itself; and Miss Havisham (Martita Hunt) on her own deterioration in David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946). After Bud has stepped through a doorway into an impenetrable darkness, and as the voice of Miss Havisham instructs Pip to 'play, play, play', the camera cranes up through a spatially disorientating transition to a shot of Bud and his best friend (Karl Skeggs) sitting beneath an enormous and beautiful night sky, the final shot of the film against which Arthur Sullivan's song 'The Long Day Closes' plays. Bud has no voice in this sequence at all; he is spoken *about* and *for* by the non-diegetic sounds of voices from other, earlier films and musical compositions.

This sequence, along with the opening shot, raises crucial questions concerning the relationship between the inarticulate bricolage of the film's form and Bud's muteness. Quotation only happens across the divide of strange reappropriation (a fictional adult American, a disliked teacher, an old and fictional woman of the nineteenth century, and a Victorian composer of largely comic songs) and uncanny presence (it remains unclear whether the voices are located in Bud's memory or somehow independent). While the discussion of just deserts, erosion, decay, and endings may resonate with Bud's experience, the reappropriated lines also impose definitions and associations on Bud's experience. *The Long Day Closes* does more than explore the power of popular culture to speak for individuals who may otherwise be silent; it implies that popular culture defines what it is possible for Bud to say. In the absence of originary and idiosyncratic comment by Bud, the only expression is in the form of quotations from popular culture, which construct the meanings and tone of the sequence.

This effect of speaking independently of the character is felt only more keenly in the film's opening shot. Here, Bud is not only silent; in his absence, the inarticulate sequence establishes the very terms on which Bud (and the film) will be 'dependent', and by which he is 'condemned' (De Man, 1984: 80). Bud's muteness is not so much *reflected* in the opening shot, as *constituted by it*. Bud's identity does not consist of personal declarations with the appearance of originality; instead, statements about him are made in a cultural vocabulary which he has inherited in the form of education, film,

music, religion, and family. Through a structure that offers no definitive means of navigating its disjunctive seams, the film's opening moments intimate the confusions of what will prove to be the most contentious and painful site of mute silence for Bud: his unarticulated, confused queerness. Far from being a means of self-expression, popular culture encourages repression behind a veil of euphemism and generates shame with its preponderance of heteronormative images. The just-over-two minutes of the opening shot half-articulate a series of veiled queer film fantasies: the gently dangerous homoeroticism of the oiled athlete striking Rank's gong, made all the more provocative by the withholding of the image; the gender-disorientated world of *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, in which a girls' school is chaotically moved into the premises of an all-boys school; the disturbed homosociality of both the heisters and the old women in *The Ladykillers*; the gender-ambiguous 'you' of 'Stardust'. Sex is established as a question of disturbing quotation, a reality which Bud cannot escape later in the film as his excruciating desire for a local builder (Kirk McLaughlin) is transformed through a shocking reappropriation of the violence of Christ's crucifixion. This fantasy, the apex of the logic of repression and euphemism, is significantly borrowed from the kind of cinematic Bible narratives alluded to by the poster for *The Robe*.

If the opening shot is read as an establishing of the bricolage structures according to which identity and desire will be articulated through the film, an ideological dimension to the sequence's composition becomes apparent. The jolting transitions and jarring disjunctures between the component parts of the film's bricolage present, in the face of characters' absence or silence, the oppressive puppetry through which cultural myths articulate themselves. Lévi-Strauss writes that a myth's unity

[...] is a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation; and its function is to endow the myth with a synthetic form and to prevent its disintegration into a confusion of opposites. (quoted in Derrida 1978: 362)

The de-mythologising impetus of Davies' films, by drawing attention to the use of music, image, and dialogue through overt quotation, *allows* a disintegration into opposites. The



opening's mosaic texture stages a series of collisions, a kind of intellectual montage, in which the bricolaged fragments create a landscape in which characters arise from (and are not represented by) 'the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined' (Derrida 1978: 360). The splendid ruins of the street suggest both the opportunities and the limitations offered by the cultural texts available to Bud.

This structure of inarticulate collisions may be seen operating in the opening sequence's use of Nat King Cole's 'Stardust'. At a descriptive level, the lyrics resonate with the film image: 'the purple dusk of twilight time', 'the little stars', 'wander[ing] down the lane'. The lyrics also declare the song's engagement with memory and loss ('the years gone by'), which are key concerns of the wider film. More specifically, the 'memory of love's refrain' – an idealised past recalled in a 'lonely' present in which the lovers are 'apart' – invokes a kind of nostalgia. The narrator of the song claims that '[t]he melody haunts my reverie / [a]nd I am once again with you / [w]hen our love was new'; in turn, the melody of 'Stardust' haunts the opening of the film and the deserted street. Far from being straightforwardly apposite, though, the song's image of love, in which 'each kiss [is] an inspiration', introduces a kind of romance which will remain determinedly absent in the film, and one of its most poignant sources of pathos. This kind of cultural representation of romance, in which the narrator finds 'consolation / [...] in the stardust of a song', establishes – before Bud is allowed to be present – a definition of fulfilment which Bud cannot enjoy. Unlike the song's narrator, he has no memories of his own to sustain him. His only interests, memories, and fantasies are of songs and films that 'will not die', perpetual reminders of an ideal which he cannot aspire to.

Those critics who have seen the film as 'sentimental, particularly in [its] retailing of certain stereotypes of working-class life' and who have argued that Davies is only interested in 'a kind of history', that is 'a memory realism' (Ellis 2006: 134), have underestimated it. It is the ideological operation of history, especially cultural history, which provides the film's central theme. Susannah Redstone argues that Davies' films are apolitical and nostalgic because they present 'versions of events as always-already there' and are

not 'discursive enunciation [which is a form that] lays bare its partiality' (1995: 42). Radstone's comments do not engage with the notion that the film's political comment is that the terms through which individuals may speak *are* 'always-already-there' (demonstrated within the film by the fact that the quotations begin before Bud is introduced), and that this suggestion is not nostalgic in her apolitical sense, but in a new political sense which exposes nostalgia as a scripting of lives in which culturally endorsed euphemism and cliché (such as that schooldays are the happiest days of your life) are preferred. Within this politicised critique of nostalgia, the evils of homophobia, bullying, and domestic violence are inscrutable, and the landscape is one of suffering relieved only by moments of cultural access which are both relief *and* repression, both enchantment *and* indoctrination.

This tension is already encoded in the opening shot which collapses the comic and the sinister, the nostalgic and the ruined, the city as opportunity and the city as failure, the street as lively and the street as dead, all evoked through the counterpoint of quotations, an inarticulate bricolage of incompatible voices which creates a complex series of connotations and significances that is both compelling and disturbing. From this bricolage, Bud emerges as a character constituted by the popular culture which pre-exists and then surrounds him. Characters become performative reiterations. Criticism on the film which has sought to define Bud as a focalising figure who exerts a centripetal force on the film's proliferating meanings distorts the film by overlooking the suggestiveness of the opening shot. *The Long Day Closes's* inarticulate form, openly performing the mosaic structures of borrowed terms at work in the construction of both texts and selves, marks a centrifugal pull away from the potentially grounding centre of such a clear focalising character.

Rejecting the arguments of Radstone and others that Davies is an apolitical director, this article has sought to identify the ideological critique at work in *The Long Day Closes*. Popular music, cinema, theatre, and art construct the heteronormative models of romance (disavowing the realities of homosexuality and brutally unhappy matrimony), nostalgic accounts of history (disavowing the characters' painful pasts), and irresistible narratives of the inevitability

of institutions (justifying the harsh regimes of church, school, and home) within which characters must define their identity. Song lyrics and film narratives offer them the relief of escape or expression at the same time as encouraging their senses of themselves into orthodox positions. It is not just that Bud feels the difficulty of discussing his emergent homosexuality, his sense of isolation, or his fears of violence; he *does not have the language* with which to speak of his emergent homosexuality, isolation, and fear. The cultural communicative tools which have been given to him do not allow for such an expression. Both Bud and the film itself speak in borrowed words, but by making those borrowings visible they show the ideological and inarticulate operation of the culture from which they borrow.

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