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Article nº 3-011

**SPECTRES OF THE CITY
URBANIZATION AND THE MIGRANT IN BRITISH
CINEMA**

Dr Gareth Millington

SPECTRES OF THE CITY**Urbanization and the migrant in British cinema**

Gareth Millington

University of York, UK

gareth.millington@york.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that a short cycle of British films (1999-2007) concerned primarily with migration offers a rare, sustained examination of urbanization and the right to urban life, in relation to both the city (London) but also to the transformation of sites 'outside' the city that occupy subordinate positions within London's power geometries. The first section of the paper introduces Rancière's understanding of the relationship between politics and aesthetics. The second section examines planetary urbanization and explains why this emergent terrain is haunted by the spectre of the city. Following this there is a discussion of the urbanization-migration nexus, which it is suggested is just one of the neglected social and cultural dimensions of existing literature on planetary urbanization. This is followed by an analysis of concerned primarily with migration. This analysis is split between 'images of the city' and 'images of urbanization'.

KEYWORDS: urbanization, cinema, migration, city, spectre

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a small part of my new book—titled *Urbanization and the Migrant in British Cinema: Spectres of the City*—which is to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in August 2016. This book is part of a broader project I have conducted over the last couple of years to examine the neglected cultural aspects of so-called planetary urbanization.

This paper begins from the premise that British cinema during the late 1990s and 2000s offers a rare, sustained examination of urbanization and migration, in relation to both the city (London) but also to the transformation of sites ‘outside’ the city such as suburbs, small cities and towns that occupy subordinate positions within London’s ‘power geometries’ (Massey 2005). The seven films examined here—*Beautiful People* (Jasmin Dizdar, 1999), *The Last Resort* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2000), *In This World* (Michael Winterbottom, 2002), *Dirty Pretty Things* (Stephen Frears, 2002), *It’s a Free World* (Ken Loach, 2007), *Ghosts* (Nick Broomfield, 2006) and *Somers Town* (Shane Meadows, 2008) have not been examined in terms of how they relate to critical urban theory and concerns with planetary urbanization, the dissolution of the city, displacement and the right to the city. They have not previously been recognised or analysed as a ‘cycle’ of films that acts as an ‘art of exposure’ (Sennett 1990) in redeeming the material and human realities of urbanizing space/s that hitherto lacked an image. Of course, it is usually only with hindsight that a selection of films is recognised as a film cycle, that is, ‘a historically circumscribed group of films sharing common industrial practices, stylistic features, narrative consistencies, and spatial representations’ (Dimendberg 2004: 11).

In a general sense, this film cycle supports Lefebvre’s (2003: 57) assertion that the reign of the city is ending and that the city exists only as a historical entity. The city is never viewed or grasped as a totality as is the case in the classic mid-century cinematic image of the city found in Jules Dassin’s (1948) *The Naked City* where the skyscrapers of lower Manhattan are pictured from an oblique overhead angle (see Figure One). This was an era of centripetal urbanity where it appeared eminently possible to ‘see’ the city as a navigable whole. Donald (1995: 92) suggests that ‘the city’ should be understood as a ‘historically specific mode of seeing, a structure of visibility [...]’. Certainly, in the cycle of independent British films examined here, the image of the city (London) is always fractured. The city is never visually ‘mastered’.

Figure 1: Manhattan, The Naked City.



Source: Jules Dassin, 1948.

This paper takes as its theoretical focus—a focus that cannot, of course, be separated from praxis—the problematic that Henri Lefebvre identifies between the planetarization of the urban, which he views as economically and technologically driven, and the emergence of a global urban society based upon ‘the re-appropriation by human beings of their conditions in time, in space and in objects—conditions that were, and continue to be, taken away from them [...]’ (Lefebvre 2003: 179). The contradiction here is that urban society is made possible by the same processes that threaten to diminish urban life. It is suggested here that cinema reflects urbanization as a process but potentially also contributes, in a hermeneutic sense, to ushering in global society.

This project began with four questions: (1) How does this cycle of films ‘make sense’ of contemporary, expansive urbanization (2) How does this cycle of films create an image and/or aesthetic for contemporary urbanization that is distinct from that of the image of the city? (3) What role does the figure of the migrant play in this image and/or aesthetic? (4) How might this cycle of films make an ‘active’ contribution to the production of space and processes of urbanization? This paper is going to talk mainly about the second and final questions concerning images/aesthetics of urbanization (as opposed to the city) and how the cinematic image contributes to urbanization itself, especially the more emancipatory notions of urban society posited by Lefebvre.

The first section of the paper introduces Rancière’s understanding of the relationship between politics and aesthetics. The second section examines planetary urbanization and explains why this emergent terrain is haunted by the spectre of the city. Following this there is a discussion of the urbanization-migration nexus, which it is suggested is just one of the neglected social and cultural dimensions of existing literature on planetary urbanization. This is followed by an analysis of a short cycle of British films (1999-2007) concerned primarily with migration. This analysis is split between ‘images of the city’ and ‘images of urbanization’.

2. RANCIÈRE AND AESTHETICS

Aesthetics is dealt with here in a quite specific manner. For Rancière (2004), the aesthetic regime creates a terrain where art is no longer held at a ‘representational’ distance from social life. It is no longer tied to the ‘sensible’ as it is presented to us. Art is an autonomous and singular practice but art is also invigorated by being brought into contact with heterogeneity, with the social world; which itself, is now believed to be able to be reformed under the influence of aesthetic values. As such, these films divulge not only the changing physical and human landscape of urbanization but—in establishing vital links between spectators and otherwise isolated subjective experiences (Isaacs 2013: 12)—they also participate in the becoming of a new urban imaginary; that is, an urban (political) aesthetic that amounts to a reconfiguration of urban space and time without the city. Second, in providing images of urbanization—in screening a barely perceived urban form back to spectators who may themselves be experiencing various forms of urban dislocation—cinema constitutes an active determinant in what Lefebvre (1991) refers to as the production of space. Cinema then ‘can be both a symptom and a catalyst of [socio-] spatial transformations’. In terms of Lefebvre’s famous triad, cinema is, primarily but not exclusively, a ‘representational space’. It offers a deeply subjective, experiential and creative realm. And yet, like any representational space, it runs the risk of being dominated by the abstract conceptions of space of technocrats, developers, capitalists.

Why are city images/ images of urbanization political? City images are not only oriented towards the past (nostalgia). They also project towards the future by striving to ‘attain something not yet present’ (Lefebvre 2014: 582). Images are prospectors in the ‘distant territory of what is possible and what is impossible’ (ibid). In addition, the symbolic dimensions of the city are very much entangled with its materialized social relations (Balshaw

and Kennedy 2000: 5). Prakash (2010: 2) argues that even if we do not always realise it, visuality is integral to our knowledge and practice of everyday life. City images make the city 'present', even where it may be absent; they also make the city mobile, allowing it to 'communalize' beyond its actual territory. And, as Bender (2007: 219) explains, visual representations of cities are also representations of a 'public' or civic culture. The image of the city reveals (and creates) the forms of centrality that urban life is composed around. In so doing it consolidates a sense of cityness. It generates a sense of belonging or purpose. It can instil the desire to be a part of something and to act in ways that enhance rather than derogate the form. As Castoriadis (1987: 373) argues, society is not only concerned with knowing itself; the ultimate goal is for society (or the city) to escape the self-alienation of the imaginary and to *make* itself. In this sense, the image can act similarly to the dis-alienating effects identified by Jameson in his concept of 'cognitive mapping'.

3. PLANETARY URBANIZATION AND SPECTRES OF THE CITY

In understanding the expansive spread of urbanization this paper adheres generally to the now well-established neo-Lefebvrian perspective (e.g. Brenner 2013; Merrifield 2014). Where it makes a critical intervention, however, is in addressing with some of the most pressing cultural dimensions of the dissolution of the city. The cover of Neil Brenner's (2014) now seminal edited collection on planetary urbanization *Implosions/Explosions* features an image of Tar Sands in Alberta, Canada. Inside the book there are similar images that also dramatically capture the planetary spread of urbanization. Yet despite the vaguely celebratory reception of such images (the pleasure taken from how they support Lefebvre's prescient predictions about the spread of the urban fabric), in the main they lack any social or cultural content or resonance, any acknowledgement that these are lived (or worked) spaces. There is little sense of the experience or travails of contemporary urbanization or a reflection upon the rights that inhabitants, migrants or workers may or may not enjoy. Bender (2002: 221), for example, worries how the paucity of images of contemporary urbanization translates to growing uncertainty around notions of urban citizenship (see also Purcell 2008; 2013).

Urbanization is a result of the concentrations of population and activity that necessarily accompany the capitalist mode of production. Since the industrial period, large cities have grown, or rather concentrated, to the point that they have exploded; a motion that gives rise to suburbs, industrial complexes and satellite cities (Lefebvre 2003: 4). In turn, this causes the 'urban fabric' to grow and extend its borders (*ibid.*). As Lefebvre (*ibid.*) explains, 'a vacation home, a highway, a supermarket in the countryside are all part of the urban fabric'. Lefebvre develops the notion of 'implosion-explosion' to describe how as cities achieve greater concentrations of property, speculation and (post)-industrial activity the traditional urban centre (existing throughout the eras of the political and merchant city until the industrial era) implodes, acting as a spur to the expansion, or 'explosion', of urban society, causing 'the projection of numerous, disjunct fragments (peripheries, suburbs, vacation homes, satellite towns) into space' (*ibid.*: 14). The logic of centrality means that centres are inevitably points of exclusion, 'the place of sacrifice [...] where accumulated energies, desirous of discharge, must eventually explode' (Lefebvre 1991: 332). 'Full' centres exude an aura of finitude, promulgating a series of repressions that limit the potential of urban society. As the city undergoes dissolution, it becomes home instead to stipulative, authoritarian and repressive signs and codes (Lefebvre 2003: 14). One of the many problems created by expansive, explosive urbanization becomes how to build, or even imagine, the "something" that replaces what was formerly the city?' (*ibid.*: 15). How—without the city—can urban society be born? Lefebvre (*ibid.*: 169) categorically states that urban society cannot be constructed upon the ruins of the city. Rather it is upon the 'shaky foundation' provided by expansive urbanization that the urban must persevere (Lefebvre 1996: 129).

The effects of implosion-explosion are most felt during the age that we are currently living through; the era of the dissolution of the industrial city and the planetarisation of the urban. Lefebvre (2003: 14) even has a name for this interregnum, which he calls ‘the critical zone’. What is occurring, and which happens behind our backs so-to-speak, is that industrialization itself has become the dominated reality; dominated by its own product: the urban. This results ‘in tremendous confusion during which the past and the possible, the best and the worst, become intertwined’ (ibid: 16). The city itself, with all its exclusions and privations, disappoints us. It has lost its vitality; it has become ‘an historical entity’ (ibid: 57). The city is becoming a museum of itself. We become obsessed with the image of the city; we indulge nostalgically in ‘cultural cityism’ (Millington 2016b) largely because our actual urban reality—the ugly, uneven, divisive spread of technocratic and market driven urbanization—is so socially and culturally impoverished.

Wachsmuth (2014) argues that in the absence of the historical reality of the city, intensified attraction to the concept of the city should be considered a fetish: ‘the city-as-a-representation is not neutral or innocent, but rather is ideological, in the sense that its partiality helps obscure and reproduce relations of power’ (ibid: 76). The city, or at least what now appears to be the city, exists merely as an ideological form. In Lefebvre’s (2003: 57) words, the city has become a ‘pseudoconcept’. Yet the decline of the city is by no means a simple matter; rather, ‘the urban core (an essential part of the image and the concept of the city) splits open and yet maintains itself [...]’ (Lefebvre 1996: 74 emphasis added). The core, the centre—the very image of ‘cityness’—is maintained through monuments, museums, commerce, bureaucracy and culture (not least cinema).

The point though is that as the historical form of the city is superseded by a more expansive urbanization, the city becomes a phantom, or shadow of urban reality (Lefebvre 2003: 35):

[...] An image or representation of the city can perpetuate itself, survive its conditions, inspire an ideology and urbanist projects. In other words the “real” sociological “object” is an image and an ideology! (ibid: 57).

This exercise in cinematic urbanism is concerned with recovering a series of urbanizing spaces—in and around London—that are occluded from dominant political narratives. It is likely that in such spaces—rather than the gentrified city—our collective urban futures will be located and fought over. And yet, despite an emphasis on the peripheral in the film cycle examined here, the spectre of *the city* is rarely far away. As Lefebvre (1996: 74) puts it, ‘the urban core (an essential part of the image and the concept of the city) splits open and *yet maintains itself* [...]’ (Lefebvre 1996: 74). As the city gives way to planetary urbanization, ‘the city’ maintains a presence through its image rather than actuality. Even where the city is not visible on screen, we might still be able to ‘make out’ its shadowy presence or influence. The understanding of the spectre developed by Derrida (1994) and Jameson (1999/2008) is useful here. For Derrida (1994: 6) the spectre is the body of *someone* as *someone other*. In typically suggestive language he argues, ‘we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part’ (ibid). The spectre disturbs historical time. It is unsettling. It bears over our actions and thoughts:

‘Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us’. (Jameson 2008: 39)

It is suggested here that ‘the city’ (or a particular idea or image of it) haunts the cinematic scenes of marginal London and also those of urbanizing space on the periphery common in this film cycle. Neither of these ‘types’ of contemporary urban settlement feels solid or enduring. Sennett (2007) writes, for example, of the ‘Brittle City’, explaining how modern urban environments decay much more quickly than the urban fabric inherited from the past. The present and future of many city and non-city urban settlements is by no means secure or predictable. They feel somehow ad-hoc, the undesired, mongrel products of twentieth century planning, anarchic free-market capitalism and contradictory state migration policies. Yet, what the spectre communicates is that these contemporary forms of urban centrality and peripheralisation always owe something to ‘the city’. Neither can conceive of themselves, nor be understood by others, without recourse to the notion or image of ‘the city’.

4. URBANIZATION-MIGRATION

The urbanization-migration nexus is another neglected aspect within existing literature on planetary urbanization. In addition, Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2015) argue that much migration studies literature places migrants outside of city making or locality making. Segregation, dispersal or ghettoization tend to be viewed as mechanisms that marginalise migrants and exclude them from participating as actors in a range of local dynamics (ibid: 3). Their argument is that by ‘highlighting processes of capital accumulation that currently are encompassing people everywhere within mechanisms of dispossession, displacement and emplacement allow us to set aside the assumptions of binary difference between migrants and non-migrants’ (ibid: 4 added emphasis). *Everybody*, they suggest, is now caught up within the churn of capitalist urbanization. For Çağlar and Glick Schiller, it is the three concepts of dispossession, displacement and emplacement that provide the analytical tools with which to situate the relationships between migrants and cities /urban localities of varying power (ibid: 5). These concepts are entangled with—no less products of—the re-structuring and positioning of localities and the accumulation of capital. In breaking away from the migrant/native binary it is important to acknowledge how all of us ‘are subject to the forces of dispossession and displacement and it is by being part of these processes that people in various localities search for ways to construct sociabilities of emplacement’ (ibid). This latter term—*emplacement*—refers to ‘the relationship between the continuing restructuring of place within multiscalar networks of power and a people’s efforts, within the barriers and opportunities of a specific locality, to settle and build networks of connection’ (ibid: 5-6). Emplacement is therefore a fragmented, localised experience. Çağlar and Glick Schiller argue that ‘urban restructuring and migrant displacement and emplacement are part of a single globe spanning process [that produces] instances of [...] the neoliberal process of the destruction and reconstitution of capital’ (ibid: 6).

In a similar vein, Nail (2015) argues that expulsion is a centrifugal movement that drives out; it involves the deprivation of social status. But expulsion, he suggests, is also a form of expansion, a ‘process of opening up that allows something to pass through’; moreover it signals ‘both an intensive and extensive increase in the conjunction of new flows and a broadening of social circulation’ (ibid: 36). Nail is careful to explain expulsion is—or at least can be—negated by the capacity of the migrant to actively create an alternative logic. For example, the migrant has his or her own forms of social motion in ‘riots, revolts, rebellions, and resistances’ (ibid: 7). Displacement is not simply ‘a lack’ but also a ‘positive capacity or trajectory’ (ibid: 12). Migrants are agents of urbanization in addition to being its ‘victims’. This position is consistent with that espoused by David Harvey (1996) in his famous paper *Cities or Urbanization?* For Nail (ibid: 17), the figure of the migrant prefigures an emerging model of citizenship and subjectivity: ‘there are empirical migrants, but their meaning and potential extend beyond their empirical features under the current conditions of social expulsion’. As Mezzadra (2011: 136) puts it, migrants *act* as citizens, independent of their

legal status of citizenship. Such forms of citizenship may be understood as traversal in the sense that the migrant ‘recognises (or institutes) the right to act across or against frontiers’ (Isin 2012: 149).

5. IMAGES OF THE CITY

The closest depiction to a ‘classic’ image of multicultural London—a cinematic trope that has roots in films such as *Pressure* (Horace Ové, 1976), *Babylon* (Franco Rossi, 1981) and *Young Soul Rebels* (Isaac Julien, 1991)—is found in the earliest film in the cycle, *Beautiful People* (1999). The film is set in 1993. Migrants from the Bosnian conflict (1992-1995) are shown living in centrally located housing estates (of the pre-WWII kind rather than the 1960s high rises). This kind of estate is evoked as an authentic, primal site of multicultural London (see Figure two).

Figure 2: London housing estate, *Beautiful People*.



Source: Jasmin Dizdar, 1999.

The mise-en-scene of the council estate is untypical of this cycle of films. Despite Mazierska and Rascaroli’s (2003) assertion that the film depicts a fragmented and chaotic London, the scenes set on the estate in *Beautiful People* actually present an urban oasis. Residents tend to potted flowers and hang washing in the walkways of the estate. People leave their front doors open. Music and the smell of marijuana wafts across the estate. In contrast to the bitter divisions and struggle depicted in the multicultural London films of the 1970s and 1980s such as *Pressure* and *Babylon*, this is an urban pastoral. London is viewed here as heroic. It has overcome WWII and the ‘racial’ problems of the inner city. This is a city that is learning to become more at ease with itself; it is a playful, ironic city.

It is significant, when viewed against more pessimistic films later in the cycle, how London is depicted as a post-racial, multicultural urban space that it is still possible to access, be part of and share a stake in. Indeed, early in the film there is a sequence where Pero (Edin Džandžanović) exuberantly strolls around central London in disbelief that he is actually here, in this great metropolitan centre. He wears sunglasses, takes passport photos, and laughs when he glimpses himself on a TV screen in a shop window; when he sees, for the first time, an image of himself in the city (with a red London bus and a Marks and Spencer in the background to add authenticity).

With hindsight it can be taken that *Beautiful People* captures the moment when multicultural London cedes to ‘super-diverse’ London. In providing a dialectical image of the moment of

tensions between historical periods of migration and urban change, this is where the historical value of the film lies. *Beautiful People* heralds a new era or age of migration, but because of the uncertainties of the transitional period the film is set, it cannot help but to situate its narrative within an inherited space, within a soon-to-be outdated (and commodified) representational trope. The historical irony—which would scarcely be believable in the 1970s and early 1980s—is that the humble, maligned inner London housing estate appears in the cycle of films from the 2000s as a spectre of (forsaken) possibility.

This image of the city quickly fractures. Just seven years later *Ghosts* (2006) depicts the city in dissolution. The closest Ai Qin and other illegal Chinese migrants get to London is a piece of waste ground (see Figure 3). There is a caption on the screen to inform the viewer that this is ‘London’. This anonymous location is the culmination of an arduous six-month journey for Ai Qin who has paid smugglers to bring her from her home in the Fujian province to London to work so she can send home money for her young son. There are no landmarks, just scrubland, a bricked up industrial building, some rubble, nondescript trees, a few orange bollards and a couple of empty gasholders. Arrival in London is marked only by the terse instruction to call home to release her final payment to the smugglers. This is purely an abstract city; characterised only in quantities and margins. As Robins (1996: 132) states, ‘[t]he city is no longer imageable. It is becoming lost from view’.

Figure 3: London, Ghosts.



Source: Nick Broomfield, 2006.

In terms of an image of the city, this debris is all there is. This sparse aesthetic emphasises Ai Qin’s alienation and dislocation from the space where she stands. This space is absolutely pivotal in her life history but is bereft of meaning. It feels like an affront to her humanity. By positing this space, cinematically, as the ‘entry point’ to the city is a profound comment about what and where constitutes the city for many of today’s migrants. London is a spectre throughout the film, a ‘non-present present’ (Derrida 1994: 5). Ai Qin and her companions get to see no more of the city than this. Instead they circle London on the M25 in a beat up van before heading to Thetford in Norfolk, where they can find illegal work in industrial farming and agriculture.

It is remarkable to witness how Thetford becomes cinematic in *Ghosts* (see figure 4). Its realisation as an expressive, cinematic space is akin to a shock of the new, an effect achieved not through the qualities of space but through collaboration between milieu and the tools and materials of cinematic production. It is interesting how the oblique angle of the houses

mimics those opening shots of Manhattan’s verticality and density found in *The Naked City*. Indeed, Dassin’s cinematography of the city infiltrates Broomfield’s direction here like a spectre. But there is something else too, in how these images of Thetford offer a transgressive depiction of urban space. In denying a single form of visibility for ‘the urban’, these images can be interpreted as suggestions that Thetford is somehow ‘equal’ to the city, thereby eluding or rather suspending ‘sensible’ distributions of the urban spatial hierarchy. This playful (and political) ‘postulation of equality’ helps gauge how cinema can ‘intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making’ (Rancière 2004: 8).

Figure 4: Thetford, Ghosts.



Source: Nick Broomfield, 2006.

Higson (1996: 148-9) suggests that the production of the city as image in British social realist cinema—what he calls ‘That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill’—empties the city ‘of socio-historical signification in a process of romanticization, aestheticization (even humanization)’ and ‘tends to separate the protagonist from the space which defines it’. For Higson (ibid: 152) the image of the city is a product of bourgeois sympathies; it reveals ‘the voyeurism of one class looking at the other’. In the case of images of Thetford found in *Ghosts*, an alternative view is offered. It should be noted that Ai Qin and her friends are already separated from this milieu; the typical realist cosiness between protagonist and setting is impossible for them. Likewise, they cannot dream of ‘escape’ from the city because they are not ‘constrained’ in familiar realist custom by place, class, family or humdrum routine. In terms of their individual trajectories, they have already ‘escaped’. The problem is that their belonging to this place has never been established; it remains an open question. Moreover, the image of the city—even if it is a bourgeois creation—need not be viewed as alienating or as a fetish. Similarly, the aestheticization or romanticization of the image need not preclude the political. As Robins (1996: 145) explains, cinema has always been crucial as a way of seeing, imagining, understanding and relating to the city. Crucially, this image of Thetford reveals a place that is ready to be acted upon, transformed. It is a place where dwelling, belonging and a productive life could be achieved. The counterfactual question, really, is why not here? Thetford, in this sense, appears not as an alienated landscape—a spectacle—but as a ‘taskscape’, that which ‘exists only so long as people are actually engaged in the activities of dwelling’ (Ingold 1993: 161). Thetford, an ensemble or array of tasks accomplished over time (just like the city), is discovered in cinema as an embodiment of this activity, an urbanizing place where people have dwelled and people will go on dwelling, tasking, transforming. As Ingold explains, ‘the activities that comprise the taskscape are unending,

the landscape is never complete: neither “built” nor “unbuilt”, it is perpetually under construction’ (ibid: 162). Suburban Thetford is revealed, remarkably, through the medium of cinema, as a possible city.

In revealing ‘an immense and unexpected field of action’ (Benjamin 1999: 229) cinema reveals but also provides an incitement in this scene for migrants to stake their claim for the urban here. The right to the city, it is suggested, can only be claimed outside, beyond or without the city, within the process—the act—of emplacement. But, as the all films unceasingly reflect, even with desire and motivation it is difficult to establish an urban life when deprived of the city. It is an enormous challenge to transfigure ‘the body of someone [the periphery] as someone other [the city]’ (Derrida 1994: 6 original emphasis). The obstacles to the realisation of urban society are manifold and are not to be under-estimated (Millington 2016b). Cinema is a rare representational space where these potentials and obstacles are deliberated.

6. IMAGES OF URBANIZATION

Extended urbanization has become ‘shapeless, formless and apparently boundless [...] making it hard to tell where borders reside and what’s inside and what’s outside’ (Merrifield 2013: 910). This induces a crisis of representation, evoking ‘what Clement Greenberg (1961) called “the crisis of the easel picture”, the crisis of the classic framing — maybe the classic framing of the city’ (ibid: 914). Greenberg’s original point was made in relation to the ‘unframed space’ of Jackson Pollock’s paintings. Merrifield suggests the intense ‘skeins and swirls, spirals and drips’ of Pollock’s art are ‘somehow quintessentially urban’. He argues that ‘[f]lows of investment that produce space [...] have the same vital, spontaneous energy of a Pollock loop’ (ibid). The point that urbanization can no longer be framed conceptually or artistically/aesthetically by ‘the city’ is crucial.

It is suggested here that, more than other art forms, cinema continues to engage with changing urban forms and experience. Two examples of a tentative new aesthetic of planetary urbanization are discussed in some detail below. Both are examples of the poetic or expressive tendency in cinema that ‘thwarts’ stories, scripts and chronological arrangements of events (Rancière 2006).

Figure 5: The Football Match, In This World.



Source: Michael Winterbottom, 2002.

Football regularly features in *In This World* (see figure 5). Jamal and Enayat join in with ‘scratch’ games at many points along their journey: in the camp at Peshawar, in a Kurdish village in Iran, in Istanbul and later, Jamal plays with new friends on the beach near Sangatte in northern France. Football is a way of passing time but also a way of coming together, a mechanism to overcome differences. Play is shown, again and again, to be essential to the spontaneity of urban life (Lefebvre 1996: 172). Football is also used to depict a differential space. In Figure 5 the game takes place on land near a Kurdish village in Iran. The backdrop is spectacular. The flat plain that configures the pitch is enclosed by snow peaked mountains. The scene exposes the ‘flat mundane ontology of the moving people [...] the mobile commons of migration (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013: 179). The village itself is a ramshackle but homely affair. There is no planning, simply a collection of self-made homes.

This image inadvertently evokes a more famous urban image from the mid-twentieth-century, which is L.S Lowry’s painting from 1949 ‘The Football Match’. This composition is characteristically set in the industrial city, in Salford. The match in Lowry’s painting is, like figure 9, a make-shift affair. The goal in Lowry’s image occupies the middle ground rather than in the still where the players shoot away from the camera. Lowry’s painting uses the ‘action’ as a means to include familiar background motifs such as a raggedy flat-capped crowd (though because this is a street or schoolyard game the crowd is small, unlike in his other famous football painting ‘Going to the Match’ from 1953), rows of terraced houses, chimneys and redbrick factories. Lowry’s painting depicts the players and the crowd enjoying leisure, taking a break between working or learning hours. The match is played because of the industrial scene—that is why these people are in the city—but the surroundings enclose or bear down on the action. The pitch and the goals are made to appear unusually small. The freedom of the players feels constrained.

Figure 5 works differently in the sense that the action is more open—there is no pitch as such—and what we can see on screen is very much a post-work scenario. The game is central to the productive life of the village rather than an exception, a scheduled time for play. And so in this instance, despite the evocation of an image from an earlier period of urban modernity, the spectre of the city really arrives from the future.

The ‘advancing city’ is sensed in the very suggestion—the hint that comes from watching activities on the screen—that urban life could flourish here. It is an optimistic apparition, certainly. As a Kurdish settlement in Iranian territory, perhaps this ‘appearing city’ could resemble Derrida’s (2001) ‘city of refuge’? For example, as Derrida explains (echoing Lefebvre), the city of refuge does not entail restoring

[...] an essentially classical concept of the city by giving it new attributes and powers; neither would it be simply a matter of endowing the old subject we call “the city” with new predicates. No, we are dreaming of another concept, of another set of rights for the city, of another politics of the city’. (ibid: 8)

According to Derrida, the ‘free cities’ that we urgently need to create must wrestle themselves free from and elevate themselves above the nation-state in order to provide hospitality and refuge for all stateless peoples (ibid: 9). This comes, in the immediate sense, from migrants or mobile people exercising a right that does not currently exist (Isin 2012: 149): the simple right to settle somewhere, anywhere (even momentarily); and to participate in and experience urban life. And so, this image is utopian but still essentially very modest. Lefebvre (2003: 172) writes that ‘centrality defines the u-topic (that which has no place and searches for it)’, meaning that utopia always searches for a centre point or a wellspring. He also states that ‘this is why urban space is so fascinating: centrality is always possible’ (ibid: 130). This possibility is isolated in this image of urbanization.

Images of urbanization are not always this hopeful. In Figure 6—from *Ghosts*—a familiar sense of flatness is provided by the wet shore of Morecambe Bay in Lancashire. There are no mountains on the horizon—there is no buffer or shield here—just the point where the grey Irish Channel meets a bleak sky. While horizontal, flat space can symbolise openness and possibility—as it does in the previous example—here, these qualities are used to convey the dangers of exposure or the existential threat of the liminal. The horizon is ominous; a warning of the incoming tide. The mood is agoraphobic. And yet, this is also an urbanizing space. We see Mr Lin’s battered van in the distance—an icon of worn out, tired mobility—and the middle ground is occupied by migrant labourers stooping, bent over, working, earning their living among the dirt. (In both images of urbanization, migrant bodies are active; they are shown doing things). This is another image of nascent centrality; an image that conveys the very essence of the urban ‘as a place of conflict and confrontation, a unity of contradictions (Lefebvre 2003: 175).

Figure 6. Morecambe Bay, Ghosts.



Source: Nick Broomfield, 2006)

It is remarkable how reminiscent is this image to Alberto Giacometti’s (1948) sculpture *City Square* (*La Place*). The characters on the shore and in the sculpture are alone, positioned in isolation to each other, but together they comprise a crowd. As Umland (2001: 2) explains, “‘Vision’ as manifested in Giacometti’s work, is a complicated word, referring to the intertwined complexities of outer, retinally perceived effect and inner, psychic affect’. Both works (cinema and the sculpture) reveal the creative tension between immersion and detachment that was vital to the dynamism of the modern city (Robins 1996: 131). Umland (2001: 5) explains how,

[...] the agitated surfaces, slender forms and frozen stances of Giacometti’s postwar sculptures [...] speak to [...] memories of figures, particularly women, seen from a distance [...]. Even when approached, Giacometti’s subjects retreat, remain inaccessible, suspended in a state of petrified mobility, fixed by the artist’s eye at an exact distance. The base of *City Square* reinforces the impression of distance, understood in psychological and phenomenological terms, represented in sculptural dimension’.

The shoreline in *Ghosts* is like a proto-city square. The city appears once again in this non-city setting as a spectre. The city, as a possibility, was lost to these migrants a long time ago. *This* isn’t any kind of city at all. Rather than make a promise, the appearance of centrality here taunts the workers and the viewer (reminding them of what has been lost; of what could

have been). This 'is an image made from the mourning of another image' (Rancière 2006: 103). Like Giacometti's subjects, the migrants in this still are suspended in a state of 'petrified mobility'. They also appear to exist in 'permanent retreat': they must keep moving to stay working, whilst always hiding. Just as in the sculpture, movement is transformed into total immobility (Boyne 2008: 21). Their reality, just like that depicted by Giacometti's sculpture, is 'unshareable' (Berger 2016: 327). Moreover, cinema positions Ai Qin and her colleagues as too far away to warn them of the incoming tide¹. The spectator is engaged but rendered helpless.

In just a short period of time we have come a long way. From the archetypal construction of the pastoral multicultural city in *Beautiful People* to the bleak, violent shores of Lancashire. What makes this cycle of films so remarkable is how a variety of urban and urbanizing places are presented as urban *equals*, rather than existing within the normal 'sensible' hierarchy of cities, suburbs, towns and villages. As Sennett (1990: xiii) writes,

'the cultural problem of the modern city [and ergo extended urbanization] is how to make this impersonal milieu speak, how to relieve its current blandness, its neutrality [...]. Our urban problem is how to revive the reality of the outside as a dimension of human experience'.

These two images of urbanization from *In This World* and *Ghosts* are successful in making milieu speak, not only because they create an aesthetic that captures the human dimensions and possibilities of contemporary expansive urbanization. In redeeming the physical reality of these urbanizing spaces, some of which may ostensibly appear impersonal or bland, using narrative to capture the drama of these sites and visual techniques to convey a materialist consciousness of planetary urbanization, cinema indicates a shift in the urban imaginary. This aesthetic lacks the 'uplifting image' of the city (Lefebvre 2003: 14), but the open spaces, wide horizons and the depictions of play, work and encounter—do signify the open-ended possibilities of urbanization (gesturing that an urban society is possible). But, this is never a romantic imaginary. It also points to the restraints and jeopardy that confront those caught up in the churn of planetary urbanization. It highlights the tensions that have existed throughout urban modernity between immersion and isolation. Moreover, the spectres of the city that haunt these images remind us how urbanization is spatially and temporally layered; that urban history is always discontinuous.

Lefebvre's urban revolution is not concerned with an awakening or a reversal of 'false consciousness' but rather with connecting spaces or fragments of spaces; in the process producing an abundance of virtual and actual centres of simultaneity, gathering, convergence and encounters. Cinema enables this by circulating images of urbanization, by making sense of this fragile urban world and by making its forsaken milieus expressive. The agora must now mean more than the public spaces of the city. The challenge is to pick up the pieces of the public realm and put them back together again in novel forms (Merrifield 2014: 82). As Rancière (2004: 46) puts it, in a memorable passage:

'I always try to think in terms of horizontal distributions, combinations between systems of possibilities, not in terms of surface and substratum [...] I have tried to conceive of a topography that does not presuppose this position of mastery'.

¹ *Ghosts* (2006) is a dramatization of the 2004 Morecambe Bay cockling disaster where least 21 Chinese undocumented migrant laborers were drowned by an incoming tide after picking cockles off the Lancashire coast

7. CONCLUSION

This film cycle introduces ‘dissensus’ into our understanding of the times and spaces of the urban. Indeed it is within these images of contemporary urbanization that an aesthetic is created. In *showing* urbanization cinematically one can detect a stress upon horizontality over verticality, with an emphasis on a flat middle and foreground—a taskscape—that can be found both shielded or dangerously exposed (indeed the struggle for life itself is a recurring feature of this aesthetic). Upon this territory—this proto-city square created by the framing of the lens—the activity and struggle of migrants is placed. Migrants are shown in this way to be creators or ‘bringers’ of the urban. Yet, in this aesthetic place always feels brittle and indeterminate. Temporality and spatiality are also dislocated and disjointed due to the presence of the spectre of the city (from the past, present and future). In relation to subjectivity there is stress upon both negative themes such as displacement, isolation and separation—of being out-of-place—as well as positive themes such as conviviality, friendship and play. The inter-subjective dimension is enhanced by how cinema animates its spectators to engage in these urban encounters, thereby contributing to the production of a meaningful global urban space—a process that Nancy (2007) calls *mondialisation*—that is closely connected with the material world but neither wholly rooted in place nor wholly imaginary; rather an inseparable combination of the two.

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