

Of Time, Dissonance and the Symphonic-Poetic City

Les Roberts, University of Liverpool

The ‘time’ of Terence Davies’s celebrated cine-poem *Of Time and the City* (2008) can in one sense be characterised as linear inasmuch as it accords with a biographical period – the 1940s to 1970s – that maps on to the history of a specific place: the port-city of Liverpool in the north west of England. The duration of the seventy-five minute film is thus homologous to that of the director’s own time growing up on post-war Merseyside, from his birth in 1945 until 1973 when he moved away from the city. In other words, the film tells a story that unfolds as a linear narrative: a time-line of geobiographical memory. But the ‘time’ of *Of Time and the City* also conveys a different temporal geography, one that works against the linearity of narrative form. Time in this other sense is poetically woven from the fluid and contingent temporalities of Terence Davies’s Liverpool: a city reassembled from the excavatory fragments of an archaeology of memory.

It is as fitting to describe *Of Time and the City* as a ‘symphony’ as it is for other classics of the genre, such as Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) or Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). However, the film’s rich orchestration of archival memory (around 85% of the film consists of archive material) and its dissonant poetics of everyday time map out the contours of what might better be described as a ‘symphonic-poetic city’. It is less the strident modernism and dynamism of a city barrelling its way progressively forward than a melancholic and elegiac meditation on absence: a city that can only exist in and as an archive (Roberts 2012, 2014). While the former (the city as symphony) scores a sense of historical and collective urban mobilisation (the modern city ‘on the move’), the latter is more reflective in mood, its rhythms more contrapuntal and ‘teemed with lacunae’ (Bachelard 2000: 19). Where one is expansive and declamatory the other is drawn more tightly around an interiority of being: the city as refracted through the salvaged lens of an archival consciousness (Russell 1999).

Historiographically, the metaphor of the archive shifts the temporal cartography of the city film away from a surface diachrony of historical narrative towards verticality and depth. Re-envisioned as an archaeology of deep memory, it is not the linearity of historical time (the space of narration) that determines the way archival images are mapped, than ‘the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam’ of urban spatial memory (Benjamin 1999a: 576). The prevalence of archaeological tropes of ‘excavation’, ‘unearthing’, or the ‘layering’ of urban ‘strata’ in relation to film and cultural memory, as well as reflecting Benjaminian ideas on

time, memory and history, also signals the emergence of a critical spatial imagination that has begun to leave its mark on studies of film and urban space (Dimendberg 2004; Roberts 2012; Hallam and Roberts 2013). The ‘orchestration’ of an archive city such as that ‘composed’ by Davies in *Of Time and the City* is thus resonant with a poetics of space (Bachelard 1994) that runs counter to the linearity of narrative. In this respect, the symphonic-poetic structure of the archive city is better understood as a relational assemblage of archival image-spaces rather than as a virtual chronology of individual filmic ‘narrative moments’ (‘like the beads of a rosary’ to cite Benjamin [1999b: 255]). To illustrate this it is worth briefly considering the example of another Liverpool documentary made up of archival footage of the city, one which is strikingly different from the symphonic-poetic form of *Of Time and the City*.

Released in 1957 to mark the 750th anniversary of the granting of the Liverpool Charter that inaugurated the birth of the city, the British Pathe-produced (and Liverpool Corporation-sponsored) documentary *This in Our Time* was one of the first city films to advance a cinematic ‘timeline’ history of Liverpool. Drawing on Pathe’s own extensive archive of Liverpool material dating from the 1910s, as well as footage showing the city’s 700th anniversary celebrations filmed in Wavertree Park in 1907 and clips from Anson Dyer’s ‘city symphony’, *A Day in Liverpool* (1929), *This in Our Time* offers a visual paean to the city’s modernity, progress and resurgent post-war spirit as refracted through the first fifty years of moving images of Liverpool. For 1957 audiences, events recaptured in the film fell within the living memory of many Liverpudlians. Fifty years on, audiences watching the DVD release of *This in Our Time* look back with nostalgia to a past that has shifted inexorably from lived to archival spaces of memory. The release of the DVD in 2008 coincided with that of Terence Davies’s *Of Time and the City*, a film whose post-war landscapes of nostalgia and remembrance evoke more recent memories that remain vivid and resonant with many older Liverpudlians (both films were released as part of celebrations marking Liverpool’s year as European Capital of Culture in 2008). As companion pieces both films allow contemporary audiences to revisit or, given that much of the archive footage will have never been seen publicly, *discover* the cinematic histories and geographies of much of twentieth century Liverpool. But more pertinently, both films were commissioned by – or in the case of *Of Time and the City*, made in association with – Liverpool City Council to mark key civic and cultural events which, fifty years apart, played an important part in constructions of heritage and cultural identity in the city.

Looking backwards from the vantage points of 1957 and 2008, the discursive productions of memory that informed respective understandings of the past provide insights

into the ways official popular historiography has shifted over the last half century. In *This in Our Time* – ‘our’ time denoting an unambiguous collective recall – time is yoked to the forward march of history, each piece of footage a milepost in a narrative journey that motors towards the horizon of a consolidated present: Charter Year – a staging post en route to the future city. To the extent that the film could be said to evoke nostalgic sentiment amongst 1950s audiences, Boym’s (2001) distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia provides a useful measure by which to compare the cartographies of memory in *This in Our Time* with those evident in more recent productions such as *Of Time and the City*. In the former documentary, nostalgia performs a restorative function insofar as it prompts the recall of collective memories, monuments, or traditions intended to bolster civic pride and local or national belonging. Establishing a sense of historical continuity and collective identity, the desire for *nostos* (homecoming) reflects a social and political intentionality that promotes the restoration of a particular representation of the past as a consolidating exercise. While in many respects antithetical to the temporality of progress and modernity, restorative nostalgia may also be looked upon as the collective amelioration of ruptured national histories. In 1950s Liverpool, with much of the city’s urban fabric still in ruins following the devastation of the second world war, the restorative function of the Charter Year events can be clearly evinced.

By contrast, the nostalgia that has thrived as part of civic celebrations in 2008 is overwhelmingly reflective in tone. More wistful and playful, in the contemporary city nostalgia for the past reflects less a sense of collective or national *nostos* than an abiding mood of *algia* – longing, loss and yearning. Expressive of individual and cultural memory rather than Halbwachsian notions of collective memory, reflective nostalgia is often characterised by ironic detachment from a past that holds a more ambivalent relationship with the present. Restorative nostalgia, as Boym asserts, ‘manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia *lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history*, in the dreams of another place and another time’ (2001: 41, emphasis added). This description of reflective nostalgia lends itself well to Davies’s poetic invocation of memory and remembrance in *Of Time and the City*. While archive footage in the film charts, of sorts, a history of the city from the 1940s to the 1970s (the period Davies lived in Liverpool), the time of autobiographical memory lingers longingly amidst the ruins and relics of a world that transcends history, finding meaning in the emotional patina of landscape and memory. For example, archive film of high-rise housing blocks being demolished – the failed vision of a post-war New Jerusalem – is accompanied in counterpoint by the wistful strains of Peggy Lee

singing 'The Folks Who Live on the Hill', evoking irony ('We'll build a home on a hilltop high, you and I, Shiny and New...') and nostalgia in equal measure. Similarly, footage from Denis Mitchell's 1959 documentary *Morning in the Streets* showing images of children singing and playing is overlaid with a sacred song from the Romanian Orthodox Church performed by the soprano Angela Gheorghiu.¹ Again, with music working in haunting counterpoint to the images on screen, the sequence conveys an acute sense of longing and present-absence, the contemporaneity of the original documentary footage now a poignant evocation of time passed and of Davies's own childhood growing up on the streets of Liverpool.

As a meditation on time and memory, *Of Time and the City*, unlike *This in Our Time*, is not so much a historical documentary of Liverpool, but more aptly fits Davies's own description of the film as a 'visual poem'. As with his earlier autobiographical Liverpool films, *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* (1988) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992), in *Of Time and the City* time does not so much flow as breath, its rhythms and cadences attuned to what Bachelard refers to as the 'countless alveoli' of intimate space (1994: 8). Indeed, the phenomenological sense of intimacy and interiority in the way time and space are rendered in *Of Time and the City* serves as a further reminder that it is 'Terence Davies's Liverpool' not the historical city (although the two are of course inextricably entwined) that we are invited to inhabit for the duration of the film. Alongside popular and classical music, the lyricism of *Of Time and the City* owes much to its use of poetry, which, as with the narration and (occasionally acerbic) commentary, is spoken by Davies himself. The filmmaker's debt to TS Eliot's 'The Four Quartets' provides an obvious point of reference in terms of the film's cyclical patterning of time and memory. 'In my beginning is my end' from 'East Coker', as well as providing a philosophical reflection on the nature of 'time and the city', also presents Liverpool – the archive city – as a place of Proustian returns. As such, Liverpool is represented as a city to which Davies returns to confront the trauma of its associated memories (such as those of growing up as a young gay man in strict Catholic environment), but also to dwell once more in its tender and epiphanic moments.

As Julia Hallam notes, the extensive use of archive footage in *Of Time and the City* – including the aforementioned documentaries *A Day in Liverpool* and *Morning in the Streets*, the Nick Broomfield films *Who Cares* (1971) and *Behind the Rent Strike* (1974), as well as newsreel and amateur film productions – means that the film can itself be looked up as a moving image archive of post-war Liverpool (2010: 284). According to the film's producers, *Of Time and the City* has proved popular amongst ex-pats and other members of the

Liverpool diaspora who contacted the filmmakers to express their appreciation of the film.² For those, like Davies, who emigrated from the city, the possibility to travel back in time and space and nostalgically revisit Liverpool's post-war memoryscapes suggests that, to a certain extent at least, the film does indeed function as an archive and repository of memory.

In the same way that the oblivion of memory determines the form and substance of particular remembrances, it is as much the historical and geographical lacunae in Davies's Liverpool films as that which is rendered present that shapes the way the city is subjectively remembered. For Augé, memory-work – the practice of remembering or forgetting – is likened to gardener's work, involving careful selecting and pruning. 'Memories are like plants', he suggests, 'there are those that need to be quickly eliminated in order to help the others burgeon, transform, flower' (2004: 17). In order to remember it is necessary at the same time to forget. The process of remembrance – the 'flowering' of the past in the present – is therefore as much a process of negation as it is that of retrieval or selection. Applying these gardening metaphors to the intensely personal memory-work of a film such as *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, Davies's remembrance of post-war family life in Liverpool in the 1940s and 1950s, the infusion of happier, more peaceful memories that are explored in the second half of the film, *Still Lives*, can be seen to grow out of a narrative space of oblivion into which *Distant Voices*, haunted by the memory of Davies's violent and abusive father, can retroactively return. Similarly, the 'pruning' of memory undertaken in *Distant Voices* allows for the blossoming of remembrance that unfolds in *The Long Day Closes*, made four years later, and which, like *Still Lives*, is set in the period following the death of Davies's father from stomach cancer.

Although recognizable Liverpool locations and landmarks appear (albeit sparingly) in Davies's autobiographical short films: *Children* (1976), *Madonna and Child* (1980), and *Death and Transfiguration* (1983)³; in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes* the action centres almost exclusively on the domestic home, local neighbourhood streets, and the church, pub or cinema. The wider social geography of the city rarely intrudes. By contrast, in *Of Time and the City* the city's architectural monuments and everyday public spaces feature prominently. Yet despite comprising of mostly archive material, *Of Time and the City* is still a quintessential Terence Davies film. The film's cinematic geographies do not so much narrate a linear history of post-war Liverpool as serve to prompt or rekindle memories and their associated emotions. In *The Long Day Closes* or *Distant Voices, Still Lives* it is the architecture of everyday domestic life, such as a staircase, that map these affective contours of place and memory. In *Of Time and the City* the geographic canvas

extends throughout the city and beyond, with destinations such as the leisure resort of New Brighton woven into the rich tapestry of remembrance. Yet the film offers a no less intimate and subjective filtering of memory and emotion. As a consequence, events and histories that one might expect to be included in historical documentaries of post-war Liverpool, such as the 1960s Merseybeat phenomenon, are given short shrift. Davies's antipathy for popular music culture of the 'swinging sixties' (he describes The Beatles as looking like 'a firm of provincial solicitors') and the glossing over of this otherwise significant aspect of the city's history illustrates the ways in which 'official' discourses of heritage are resisted and contested by those for whom the period evokes altogether different ideas of time and place. For Davies the cultural boom of the Merseybeat era was simply not a fixture in his cultural memory bank of 1960s Liverpool.

In Davies's archive city, memories are not marshalled by a linear constellation of historical events, or shunted along like box-cars on a fixed narrative timeline. Poetic and impressionistic, the memory-work of *Of Time and the City* is in the first instance crafted through its emotional geographies of landscape and place. The filmmaker guides us through carefully selected portals of archival memory, his 'citation' of the places along the way at the same time a marker – or waypoint – of a particular remembrance evoked by the image on screen. If Davies's narration performs the function of a tour guide, then *Of Time and the City* can be looked upon as a travel film or spatial story:

[T]ours postulate maps, while maps condition and presuppose tours. It is their combination in a narrative chain of spatializing operations that defines for de Certeau the structure of the travel story: 'Stories of journeys and actions are marked out by the 'citation' of the places that result from them or authorize them'. (Morris 1988: 38; de Certeau 1984: 120)

The film's cartography of memory is therefore structured in accordance with the same spatializing logic that underpins the model of the archive city as a relational assemblage: a navigation through different 'stopping off points' in a database of archival film memory. For Conley both cinema and cartography enact forms of 'locational imaging' (2007: 211), and as an 'atlas of memory' *Of Time and the City* provides the spatial framework for a very particular historiographical – and autobiographical – journey through the history and geography of post-war Liverpool. What remains less clear is the extent to which the spatial mnemonics of memory in the film can productively sustain dialogic mediation between

Davies's very personal remembrances and those representative of more collective structures of cultural memory. By extension, the correspondence between Davies's Liverpool – by his own admission, a 'city of my imagination' (Romney 2008) – and contemporary Liverpool (which, bar a few general shots filmed around the city centre, is the film's most prominent lacuna) prompts consideration of the role or indeed relevance of Davies's nostalgia in relation to historical narratives of the city more firmly anchored in local discourses of place and identity. While it offers little in the way of a restorative function (if anything, Davies's iconoclasm and general excoriation of the past has the opposite effect), the film's reflective currents of memory allow for the cultivation of discursive spaces of collective nostalgia where those with shared experiences of life in post-war Liverpool can contribute and exchange their own memories of the period.

As a spatial story, *Of Time and the City*'s more specific imbrications of memory and place – of time *and* the city – highlight the underlying spatial geometries that govern the way cinematic memoryscapes are – or can be – made navigable. In this sense, in addition to its reflective modalities, nostalgia also offers a radical potential insofar as it nurtures an image or conception of the archive city as ostensibly *archaeological* terrain, where memory is sifted and sorted and brought into alignment with contemporary urban spaces (Bonnett 2010). Projecting an oblique gaze towards the present, the city's cinematic accretions are re-imagined as the intangible product of material sites of excavation and deep memory. As Benjamin suggests, if the collection (archiving) of these image-spaces becomes merely a positivistic exercise in cataloguing and taxonomy, then the importance of location – of spatial and archaeological provenance – is in danger of remaining critically obscured:

He [sic] who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil... [T]he man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize. In this sense, for authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he *mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them.* (Benjamin 1999b: 576, emphasis added)

This quote could serve equally well as a description of Terence Davies's own cinematic memory-work: the director returning repeatedly to formative sites of personal memory,

turning over the soil of his early life in Liverpool, and remaining resolute and meticulous in his quest for the ‘richest prize’ of authentic memory.

But insofar as it is able to demonstrate the way ‘archival film practices [can] articulate an historiography of radical memory’ (Russell 1999: xv), *Of Time and the City* also speaks to a wider locus of debate concerning the poetics and temporality of the ‘city symphony’ as a cinematic genre. The orchestration (both literally and figuratively) of the *time* of the city in film can evoke a grandiloquent sense of an urban-cinematic form: an architectural hymn to the city-as-future. But equally it can invoke the layered temporalities of a city’s ghosts and memories and allow the cityscapes of the past to infuse the real and imagined spaces of the present. In this regard, the symphonic-poetic aesthetics of *Of Time and the City* present us with a city that is as much an anthropological space of everyday memory as it is an urban-architectural space that has a history coterminous with, but not reducible to, that of the filmmaker himself. For the cine-poet time does not follow a linear trajectory but meanders through a landscape of which Davies is architect, composer and tour guide as much as he is wayfarer, tourist and archaeologist. In allusion to another great poet of cinema, Andrei Tarkovsky, Davies’s symphonic-poem showcases a city that is *sculpted* from time while at the same time never quite being able to transcend it.

Bibliography

Augé, M. 2004. *Oblivion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bachelard, G. 1994. *The Poetics of Place*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bachelard, G. 2000. *The Dialectic of Duration*. Manchester: Clinamen Press.

Benjamin, W. 1999a. ‘Excavation and Memory’, in MW Jennings, H Eiland, and G Smith (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Benjamin, W. 1999b. ‘Theses on the Philosophy in History’, in *Illuminations*. London: Pimlico.

Bonnett, A. 2010. *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*. London: Continuum.

Boym, S. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Conley, T. 2007. *Cartographic Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

de Certeau, M. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. London: University of California Press.

Dimendberg, E. 2004. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. London: Harvard University Press.

Hallam, J. 2010. “‘City of Change and Challenge’: the Cine-Societies’ Response to the Redevelopment of Liverpool in the 1960s”, in R Koeck and L Roberts (eds.), *The City and the Moving Image: Urban Projections*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hallam, J. and L. Roberts. (eds.) 2013. *Locating the Moving Image: New Approaches to Film and Place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Morris, M. 1988. ‘At Henry Parkes Motel’, in *Cultural Studies* 2 (1): 1-47.

Roberts, L. 2012. *Film, Mobility and Urban Space: a Cinematic Geography of Liverpool*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Roberts, L 2014. ‘The Archive City: Film as Critical Spatial Practice’, in B. Fraser (ed.), *Marxism and Urban Culture*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Romney, J. 2008. ‘A Stranger in Town: How will Liverpool react to Terence Davies’ Latest Film?’, *The Independent on Sunday*, 26 October 2008: 28-31.

Russell, C. 1999. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Tarkovsky, A. 1987. *Sculpting in time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Notes

¹ ‘Priveghiativaraugati’ (‘Watch and Pray’), composed by GheorgePopescu-Branesti, and performed by Angela Gheorghiu and the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

² Public interview with Sol Papadopoulos and Roy Boulter from Hurricane Films conducted by the author at the School of Architecture, University of Liverpool, 28 April 2009.

³ In 1984 all three of the early short films were released as *The Terence Davies Trilogy*.