



## BIRTHS, MARRIAGES AND DEATHS

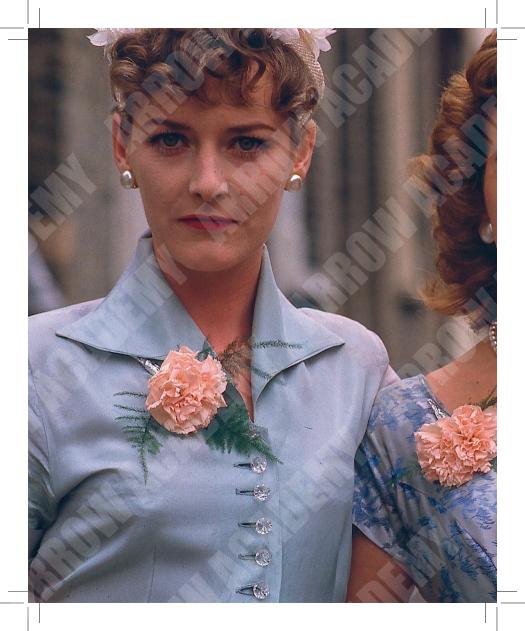
#### by Christina Newland

If Liverpool, England exists in the public imagination of most non-Britons, the working-class port city is most likely linked to youth subculture, The Beatles, and the burgeoning rock and roll explosion of the fifties. In the wake of the Second World War, the badly damaged city was glum and licking its wounds — but inside its terraced houses a generation of youths were set to change the cultural landscape forever.

In his 1988 debut feature *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, Terence Davies' home city is a world away from this mid-century image of social ferment. In the '40s and '50s, Davies was raised in a traditional, cloistered community of housewives and factory workers; a young boy amidst the terror of air raids and a gay man in an era where homosexuality was both illead and near-unthinkable.

The film takes a digressive, loose trip through Davies' own adolescent memories, and discovers within both the tender and the brutal moments of family life. The clan is based on the director's own: a quiet mother, tyrannical father, and two older sisters, Eileen and Maisie. The youngest — an avatar for the filmmaker himself — is the boyish Tony. The fragmented patchwork of Davies' film is deeply indicative of the nature of memory; the opening scene features a static shot of a staircase, with the dislocated sound of footsteps, as invisible siblings skip down it. Davies' tendency is to pan steadily across the family home or local pub and to cross temporal lines in so doing. His pans span from one occasion or year to the next, crossing into past and present with little inkling of narrative equilibrium.

It's a turbulent household, sometimes oppressively so; as the cadaver-faced father, played by Pete Postlethwaite, bullies and dominates his children and wife. One heartbreaking sequence sees him violently beat his wife to the floor, and his middle daughter Maisie swearing to murder him but only as long as she knows her vow is inaudible. Yet he is not wholly monstrous, showing a terse favouritism for his pretty oldest daughter Eileen – and the sort of rare occasional kindness that makes one flinch, waiting for his next bout of rage. Nonetheless, there's also incidental humour that makes certain you're never in an airless abstraction or bleak museum piece. Mostly, this humour comes from the mouths of worldweary women – who are in the position to laugh at the vicissitudes of life.





In the aftermath of their father's death, the family goes on with both sadness and unspoken relief, indicated by Davies in a gorgeously blocked sequence where the children's elderly grandmother cries desperately for her son. The three youths and their mother watch her, forlorn and dry-eyed. Time rolls on, and Eileen, then Maisie, are married off. Their husbands are stitched into the fabric of the family, whether they be good or gruesome. Children are born and baptised. Bad times come and go. Weathering it all, the three siblings are intimately connected, often beyond words.

In its own way, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* communicates more emotion via music than it does through dialogue. You might even call it a sort of raw-boned musical. Its characters sing pub songs and ditties whenever they're together, snippets from Irish folk and local tradition, American movie musicals and famous radio tunes of the day. They sing in tones that are fine and rough, broad and squeaky, with choked tears or peals of laughter in their voices. They sing throughout their lives to express community and boozy friendship; grief and iov.

When Eileen and her two closest girlfriends perform the jaunty tune 'Buttons and Bows', they express the longing a working-class English girl might feel for the finer things. In an era where American womanhood was idealised and commercially packaged, the girls wear fashionably-cut dresses, red painted fingernails, and love attending dances. But in Eileen's case, her ambition is inevitably stymied by her marriage to a gruff man of her own class background, who expects her to get her head out of the clouds and perform only the domestic drudgery he expects of her. In another sequence, the women cheerfully sing an Ella Fitzgerald tune, their jovial mood badly matched to the lyrics about domestic abuse and murder: "He's stone cold dead in the market/l killed nobody but my husband!"

Davies' use of music is perhaps the most evocative and ingenious in English-language filmmaking since Martin Scorsese's, running the gamut from comedic to cruelly ironic. Brimming with meaning and also cultural and class identity, the songs of *Distant Voices*, Still Lives are among its most moving elements.

With its careworn textures and bleak longueurs, it might be tempting to lump Davies' film clumsily into the category of British social realism. If realism is a concern of Davies', it is realism only in the most general sense: a genuine feel for the textures and specifics of time and place, with almost no regard for the actual structures of that time and place. It's an utterly unconventional, dissonant approach to what should be fairly run-of-the-mill material on paper: a family's ups and downs after the death of their often-cruel father. Filmic realism is of no concern, exchanged for a rare lyricism in application to the subject matter.

There's nothing of kitchen sink's fidelity to quasi-documentary, and certainly none of its penchant for male bravado. In its place is a deep well of empathy for the generational struggles of women, and a monument to matriarchal strength. The film's women – friends,

aunties, sisters, mothers – are hemmed in and stifled by the men in their lives, and Davies' depiction of the push-and-pull between them and their men is one of the most fascinating elements of the film. He attributes them strength while never denying their victimhood at the hands of men; he gives them grace and humour while the men are often sullen and humourless. The fierce empathy he has for his female characters is unusual for period pieces in general, and his focus on it is as unromantic as it is heartening.

The combined specificity and strangeness of the Liverpool cityscape is a key element of Davies' film - thick regional accents, brick-faced terraced houses and pristine lace curtains leave no doubt of the specificity of location. Yet, the feel of the film is deliberately cloistered; removed from the wider world. If the finest artwork is on a hair trigger between the big picture and the small details, this paradox is at the centre of Davies' film. Distant Voices, Still Lives is practically cultural anthropology in its attention to detail, and yet its insistent circling around family life and its incidences – births, marriages, and deaths – are immediately familiar to anyone.

More than once, Davies paints static portrait shots of the family members, who gaze ahead as if posing for a photographer taking a family snapshot. Their eyes are despondent or distractible, their faces taut. There's little artifice about them. Tony's homosexuality is hardly even a subtext in the film itself, and only evident in extratextual knowledge of Davies' own experience. Yet there is a difficult-to-parse unease in Tony, with his silent burden.

Distant Voices, Still Lives is ascendant filmmaking not because it conveys realism but because it conveys truth, or as much truth as one can piece together from memory. It is generous to even its most abhorrent characters, with a profound sensitivity toward each human being it trains the lens on. It sees where each of us are broken and how we manage it; Tony's father singing a tune as he brushes a beloved horse; Maisie cursing in quiet rage in the cellar; Eileen at a singsong in the local pub, avoiding the inevitable disappointment of returning home to her bullying spouse.

It's a film that depicts the upright pride of working-class Liverpudlians, their warmth and community, as much as the camera's distance often gives us a sense of alienation from it. In the conclusion of the film, Tony is finally married. But instead of celebrating, we find him outside, alone, weeping bitterly. The final shot sees the backs of Tony's mother and sisters recede from view down a darkened street, arms linked together. They are drawing closer to the darkness, away from Tony and his own memories of them. In spite of all his tenderness for them, they can never know the reality of Tony's own future. As the moments pass, their images fade and disappear out of sight.

Christina Newland is a freelance journalist on film and culture. She has written for Sight & Sound, Little White Lies and VICE.







## BITTERSWEET SYMPHONY

#### by Beryl Bainbridge

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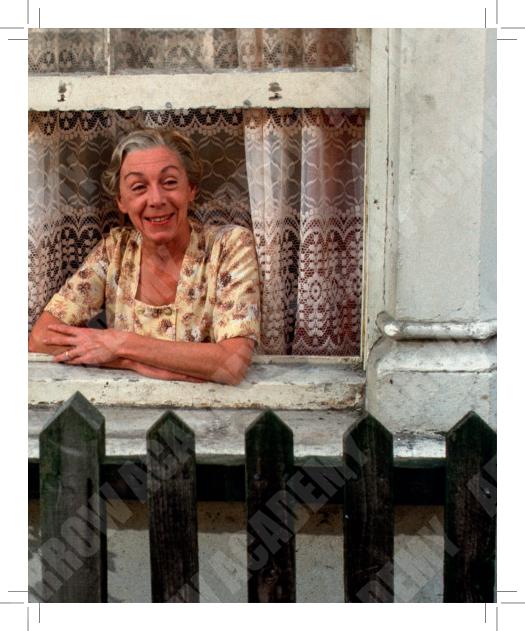
Every Saturday afternoon throughout my childhood, my parents took me to a picture house in Southport. It was called The Forum — a Latin word for a meeting place in which ideas and views could be exchanged. In those days, such cinemas were palaces; the manager, in evening dress, stood at the top of a stairway whose walls were hung with huge photographs of film stars, past and present. Sometimes, before the screen flashed into light, a Wurlitzer organ rose up out of the floor and a lady in a long dress made thunderous music. We got to our feet when she played the national anthem.

The first picture I remember seeing, aged nine, was called *Bombay Clipper*. Apart from it happening on an aeroplane, I can't recall either the plot or the names of the actors. The second, *History Is Made at Night*, featured Charles Boyer; he had a vein in his forehead that throbbed whenever he felt emotional. For years afterwards, as I sat slumped in the back of my father's car which was fuelled with black market petrol, Boyer sat beside me and held my hand.

No other film had quite the same effect on me, until I saw *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. The director, Terence Davies, said it was about memory and the mosaic of memory. Autobiographical in content, it was released in 1988 and awarded the Cannes critics' prize. After a lapse of almost 20 years, I am still mesmerised by its originality of structure, its use of music, its attention to detail. A coral filter was used to subdue all primary colours except the red of lipstick, and further bleached to intensify the stark reality of time past. Films shot in near black and white are more compelling, less distracting, than those produced in colour.

In two parts, Davies tells the story of a working-class family: mother, father and three children, two girls and a boy, living in a terraced house in the Liverpool of the 1940s. Poverty and deprivation have turned Dad into a violent brute subject to outbreaks of depression and rage. Mother does the best she can to keep the home together; her bony face expresses both misery and resignation. Pete Postlethwaite plays Dad. With his Liverpudlian face, high cheek bones and thin mouth, he's natural for the part. Freda Dowie as Mother is equally brilliant. Indeed, the whole cast could not be bettered.





This isn't the usual kind of cinematic experience. There are no interruptions in plot or frequent shock effects to keep the audience on its toes, but rather a slow and penetrating recording of a past that, however long gone, can never be forgotten or erased. In some ways, it's like turning the pages of a photograph album. There's no nostalgia, no sentimentality, no crying out for pity, just images. Added to this is the use of music, both popular and classical, which often replaces dialogue: pieces such as Benjamin Britten's *Hymn to the Virgin*, Sammy Fain's 'Love is a Many Splendored Thing', Vaughan Williams' *Pastoral Symphony* and Dickie Valentine crooning 'The Finger of Suspicion'. And there's 'My Yiddisher Mama', the words of which I know by heart. We often sang it in the 1940s, Catholic by faith or not. It had nothing to do with what was happening to the Jews — we didn't know about the camps — just that it was a mournful song guaranteed to arouse emotion. One critic commented that there was enough sing-song in *Distant Voices* for it to be classified as a musical. I prefer to call it an operetta.

The film begins with the soundtrack of a posh voice reciting the BBC shipping forecast, followed by intermingling scenes of a wedding and a funeral. Dad has just died, and one of the daughters is getting married. The past and the present weave seamlessly together. The family pose outside the church, flowers in buttonholes; sit beside the bed of dying Dad; Mother screams as he beats her with a yard brush; Dad wakes for a moment and tries to say something; Mother, on her knees, scrubs the front step; the children, out looking for firewood when an air raid begins, narrowly escape being blown up and run home terrified and covered in dirt; seeing them, Dad smacks his eldest daughter violently across the face. We know, somehow, that his crazed response stems from relief.

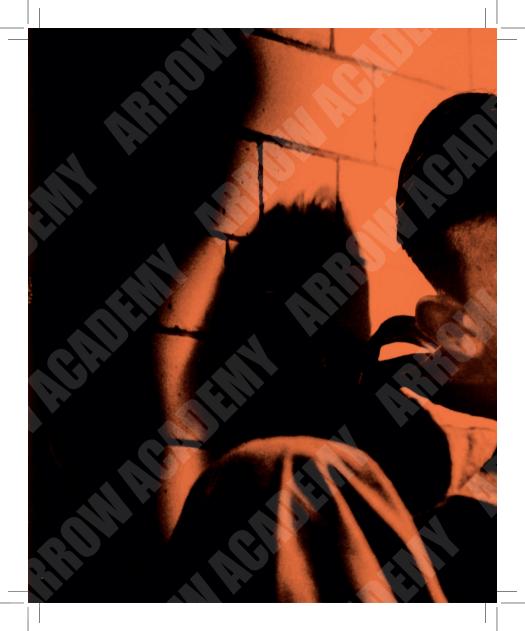
The children sit in silence, waiting for the next upsurge of anger. Nothing matters beyond keeping Dad calm, keeping Mother safe. Each child will feel blame if Dad erupts. No matter how often it happens, the result is always the same, an increased beating of the heart, a crumpling of the face, a wish that he'd die. And yet, sitting at the bedside of the dying man, their faces show grief.

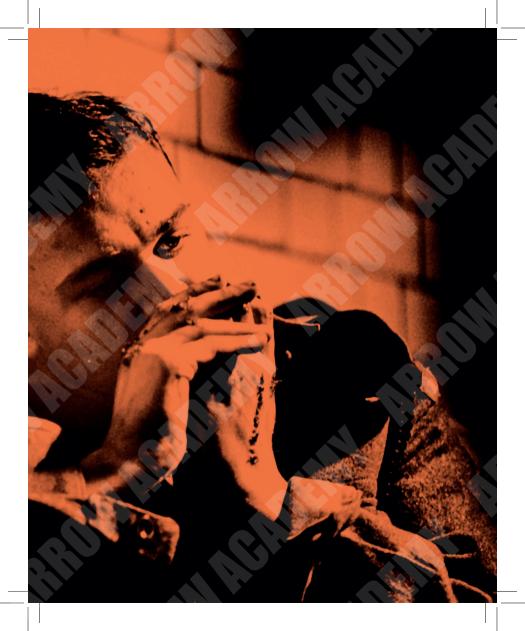
In the second half of the film, daughter Maisie has just had a baby. The family celebrate the birth in the local pub. Four things enlightened the lives of the working class: going to Mass, the pictures, the pub and the dance hall. Dad had always disapproved of the latter, possibly because he worried that the saucy beat of the band would quickstep one of his girls into the family way. But as the daughters grow older, they grow bolder, less afraid. Following her husband's death, Mother too becomes more assertive, even though her face is stamped forever with the mask of servitude. There's even an outing in the sand hills of Formby, 12 miles down the coast, the marram grasses swaying in the wind. The son, fragile on account of his sex, is more damaged. Called up for national service, he goes absent without leave, is caught and flung into a cell. Crouched there, he thinks of his dad. I thought then one song Davies could have used, one we sang in the school playground: "When the man is dead and gone/We'll go dancing down the street/Kissing everyone we meet." It referred to Hitler.

As the film continues, we realise nothing has altered. The men in the girls' lives, husbands and friends alike, haven't really changed. Brought up in households where mothers were incapable of shielding them from thrashings, they demand obedience and respond with petulant violence when things don't go their way.

For me the film was an emotional experience. Like Davies, I was born in Liverpool and experienced the war years, and my father came from the same background. He lived with his sisters, Margaret and Nellie, in a similar one-up, one-down terraced house; poverty and a lack of nurture in his early years had left him full of rage and anger. Auntie Nellie was a dressmaker; Margaret worked 12 hours a day in a munitions factory in Speke. She came home on a tram, got off at the Cabbage Hall, and, smoking a fag, dragged herself up the Bingley Road. When Father visited them in later life he was encouraged to put his feet up; he lay like a corpse on the sofa. I understood that men, being wage-earners, were always exhausted, needed fussing over.

The adults in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* have no such luck. Dad has always been a tyrant, Mum his chattel. They don't put it into words, but the children know the score. Davies' film is thought to come under the heading of unfinished business. I disagree. The creative process involved in the reconstruction of an anguished past puts it to rest.







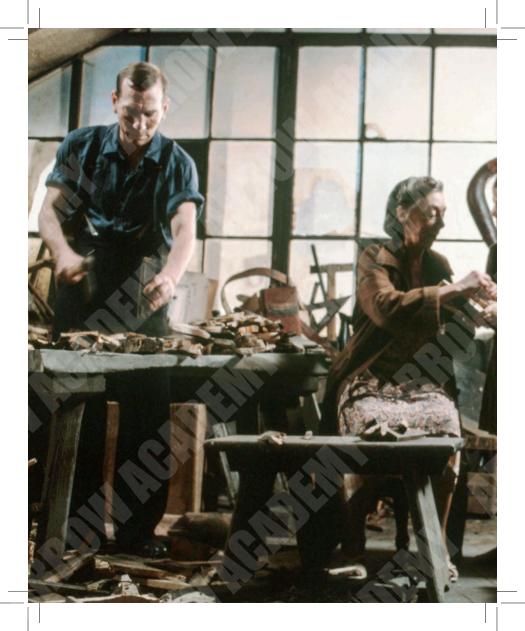
# THE ART OF MEMORY: TERENCE DAVIES' DISTANT VOICES, STILL LIVES

#### by Adrian Danks

There is something indescribable about the very real pleasures of Terence Davies' breakthrough film, *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. It is a slippery, intangible work and its most beautiful moments (of which there are many) emerge from a combination of evocative sounds, more particularly music, the exactness of composition, and the vicissitudes of camera movement. Most descriptions of the film and even the title itself suggest it embodies a kind of anti-cinema that is defined by notions of stillness, isolated sound and enclosed tableaux and yet this says little about the film's atmosphere or explicit textuality (which are both self-conscious and felt). A film which can, in turns, effectively evoke the cinema of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, Bill Douglas, Yasujirô Ozu, and the MGM musical must be considered in terms that respect its cinematic specificity.

Despite not even glimpsing Davies in the film, *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* is a tellingly autobiographical work – his following film *The Long Day Closes* (1992) is much more about Davies' childhood with particular emphasis placed upon the exploration and cultivation of a young boy's burgeoning cinematic consciousness. Despite the obvious continuity of *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*' two halves – they were actually shot two years apart using very different crews – there is a subtle variation of light and tone which marks each. For example, the second part of the film, *Still Lives*, is much gentler, less mournful and more dream-like: as the family starts to die (both literally and figuratively) it takes on different formations and enters into a different time and place (mostly of increasing isolation, and in relation to such compartmentalising media technologies as radio). The ties that bind, but also the tension of the film itself, loosen as the cultural and social landscape shifts, culminating in a flood of rain and tears.

The basic structure of *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* consists of an ephemeral string of images and events evocatively joined by a sense of place, time, character, class and social milieu. The film comprises a kaleidoscopic, though stylistically precise, collection of tableaux vivants. The artificiality of the images, their exquisite framing, occasional gentle panning.





and often long-held 'emptiness', facilitate us perceiving these images as isolated fragments that are unlocked and remembered before our eyes and ears. Davies presents these vignettes as shards of memory which conversely contradict and rhyme with one another.

The basic effect of this is to produce a complex emotional, social and familial landscape in which no character (not even the violent and unhinged father) is drawn simplistically or holistically. These memory images contrast and compete with one another to produce a range and ambiguity of character rare in such a fragmented and heartfelt autobiographical cinema. The effect is like that of memory stratified, where memory images trigger other memory images, creating a structure that seems to lack predetermination. Rather than an expected randomness, a sense of wholeness and a uniqueness of structure emerge, within which no compositions, expressions, gestures or snatches of music (flooding the soundtrack or defiantly sung by one of the film's many stoic female characters) seem out of place.

This description may make the film sound extremely ethereal, or even pretentious, but Davies also has a keen eye and ear for the rhythms of popular culture, in particular the music, radio and popular cinema of the period (amongst the film's key visual reference points are the rather abstract set pieces of the MGM musicals of the 1940s and 1950s). In the process, the film presents a complex notion of British culture in the 1940s and 1950s: a mix of Hollywood movies, transatlantic popular song at times gently inflected by more exotic elements (such as 'calypso'), British radio (the football results and *Round the Horne*) and the elegiac strains of Ralph Vaughan Williams and Benjamin Britten.

Davies also demonstrates a feel for the transformative and transcendental potential of this cultural material: when characters cry during a screening of *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955) or a solo female character defiantly sings 'I Wanna be Around' we witness a social ritual (attending the cinema, a singalong at the pub) that allows an expression of pain, bitterness, tenderness and even vengeance unable to be experienced or expressed elsewhere. In essence it is the representation of these social, cultural and generational rituals (the violence of men towards women in particular) that is the heart of the film. This sense of a life remembered is delivered more in terms of sensory experiences – a colour, a tint, a smell or a peculiar sound – than exhaustive, concrete or tangible documentation. This is matched by the film's uncanny ability to simulate and reflect the half-remembered, embroidered and 'artificial' recollections of childhood. Throughout, memory emerges as a contested realm full of points of resistance and possible counter-histories, to be rewritten and rescreened but, also, to be respected.

This might sound like Dennis Potter territory but the use of music, rather, is perfectly integrated and expressive (even if directly and painfully ironic). The music arises from the world of the film, is expressed by the characters, and cannot be removed from either. This music – whether sung, scored, overheard, ironic or deeply felt – is as integral as the costumes, colours, light and architecture in creating a 'real' sense of 1940s and 1950s Liverpool.

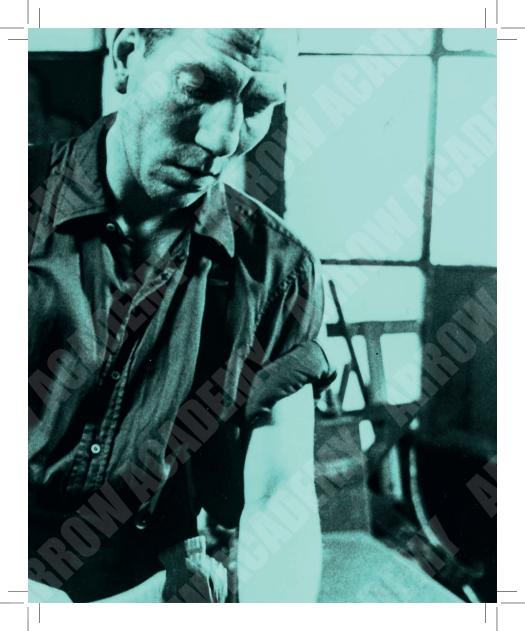
In none of his at times quite lovely subsequent films has Davies achieved the synthesis of form and intent (where a familiar almost graspable world seems equally ancient and lost to time) on display here. Both *The Long Day Closes* and *The Neon Bible* (1995) seem more affected, relying too heavily on the re-presented and mediated nature of the worlds and events they represent. It is only with *The House of Mirth* (2000) that Davies once again hits upon the right balance between artifice and truthfulness, the corporeal and remembered world, and personal and social history that characterises *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. The final title-card of *The House of Mirth*, which reads 'New York 1907', has a similar function to many of the aesthetic strategies of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (such as the use of 'found' music) in that it situates and embalms the characters in a specific time and place, drawing us closer to and distancing us from the diegetic and historical world. The past in these films is indeed like a foreign country – but it is also very like our own.

Distant Voices, Still Lives delves into the mechanics of memory (which it never conceives of as mechanical at all) and the mechanics and possibility of representing this memory in cinema. In the process it investigates the capacity of fictional cinema to act as memory book or family album. The film illustrates an important tension between evocative, realistic and tellingly detailed portrayal and the inaccessibility of the material portrayed to us (which can only be represented, distanced, voiced, stilled). Essentially what it offers is an emotionally charged self-conscious cinema, throughout which we can sense the presence of the camera as it isolates an empty stairwell, cranes up from a sea of umbrellas, lingers over a composition, or perfectly frames and situates character within space. In the end Davies' film shows us duration, emotion, memory, the constructedness of space, and their interconnectedness. In the process it provides a heartfelt lesson in the nature, specificity and beauty of cinema itself.

This essay first appeared in Senses of Cinema No 16, September 2001, and is reproduced here by kind permission of the author.

Adrian Danks is associate dean of media at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. He is also co-curator of the Melbourne Cinémathèque and author of A Companion to Robert Altman (Wiley, 2015).







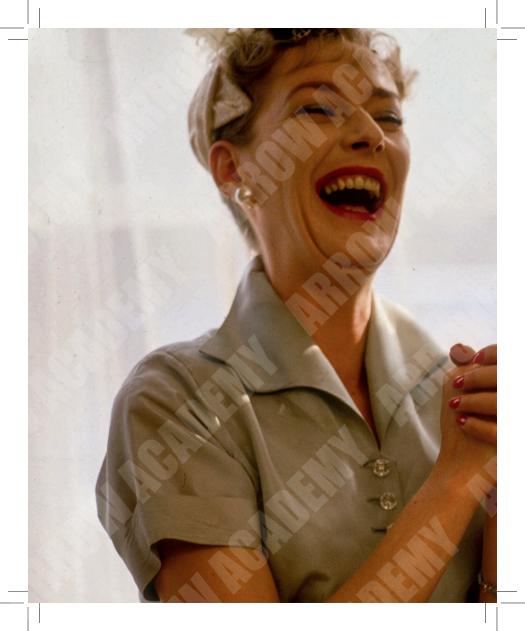
## DISTANT VOICES, STILL LIVES

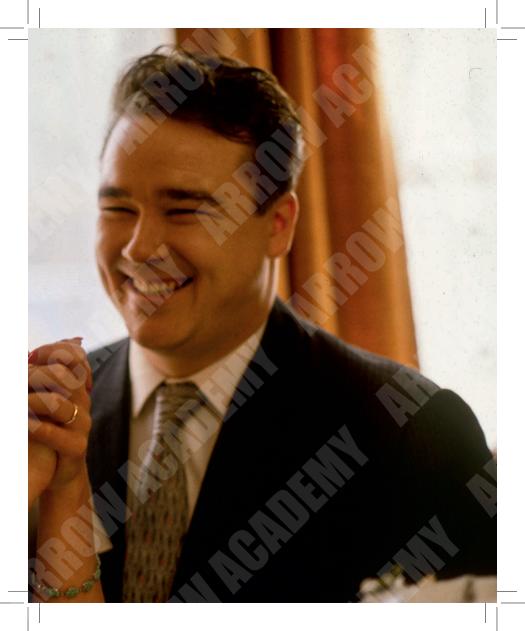
#### by Adam Barker

The following review originally appeared in Monthly Film Bulletin, vol. 55, no. 657, October 1988. Reprinted with permission.

The recent spate of cinematic histories of Britain during and after the Second World War (Hope and Glory, Wish You Were Here, Dance with a Stranger) has done nothing to prepare us for the precious fragments of oral history which Terence Davies has recovered in Distant Voices, Still Lives. Far from viewing the past from an insulated present, as the title might suggest, the film delves painfully into old wounds and relives forgotten pleasures with all the vividness of childhood emotion. The subject of these memories is a domestic dystopia of working-class life in Liverpool, where the wife and children of an overbearing patriarch endure, struggle with, and attempt to escape his malevolent control. Eileen's comment on her wedding day – 'I wish me dad was here' – initiates a series of reminiscences which reveals her remark to be a symptom of ingrained deference rather than nostalgic tenderness. Distant Voices animates the snapshots in this family's album, revealing the turbulent emotions underlying the formal rites of passage – weddings, christenings and deaths.

Memories – one sister pleading to be allowed out dancing, Tony dashing his fists through a window in a vain attempt to communicate with his indifferent father – mingle with present conflicts, revealing the same forces at work in a new generation: Eileen being abused by her husband, her friend Jingles reduced to tears by the thought of the female camaraderie she enjoyed before her marriage. Marriage is presented throughout as a means of reproducing patriarchal dominance by cutting the individual off from communal pleasures, such as dancing, singing and going to the pub. It is not long after Eileen's reply to her sister's comment that she is now well and truly married – 'Yeah, I know. But I don't feel any different' – that she has to stop inviting her friends round because her husband doesn't like them. 'When they're not using the big stick, they're farting,' says one wife of her beloved. *Distant Voices* retains the focus on patriarchal authority from Davies' previous trillogy, but examines its effects on women rather than men.





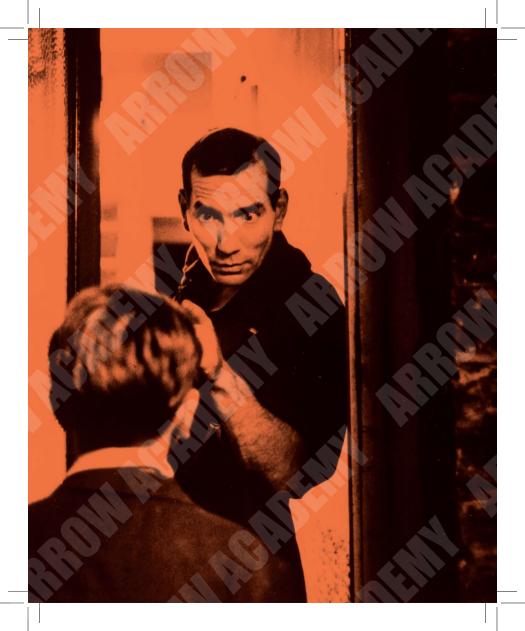
The portrayal of married life as nasty, brutish and protracted is only relieved by the fortitude of the family victims, particularly the women. Eileen's love for dancing, and her sister's talent for singing, are maintained in the face of constant aggression from their father. Violent domestic trauma is presented as the norm of family life in the 1940s and 1950s, and not the criminalised exception as in *Dance with a Stranger*. As a result, the film seems a gruellingly matter-of-fact document of everyday cruelty. The awfulness of the incidents it relates owes much to the stasis of the characters' lives, the compulsive repetition of the same injustices. Their lives are 'still' not just because they are past, but because they are predetermined from the beginning. This frozen state finds formal expression in the excruciating duration of many shots, and their tableau-like composition.

The two sections of the film were shot separately, but with the second more or less a continuation of the first, and scenes of past and present are intercut in both. There is little indication of their correct chronology, or of their stemming from one individual's consciousness. Instead, the narrative seems to spring from the collective consciousness of the family. The difficulty of assembling scenes in a logical temporal order means that the audience is forced to participate in the process of remembering, and to experience it as an attempt to impose order on a confused totality of memory which is ever-present in the characters' minds. Things are a little more complicated here than in Boorman's neatly related memories in *Hope and Glory*.

The overwhelming burden of the past is re-emphasised by the fact that the film is set in the 1950s, depicted in deliberately drab cinematography. The past is thus doubly represented by establishing a historical setting within which characters remember even earlier times, building up a sense of the determining force of history. Distant Voices is the more fatalistic section, beginning and ending with a long shot of the family house, imparting an inescapable circularity to the action. The irony of the film lies in the fact that although Eileen and her family are physically rid of a tyrant by her father's death, they are still haunted by him. Liberation does not follow death, merely a continuation of the kinship rituals which breed more families and more male autocrats. If history is traditionally told by the winners, Terence Davies' film offers a rare, harrowing glimpse of what it looks like from the victims' point of view.







#### ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Distant Voices, Still Lives has been restored in 4K resolution by the BFI under the supervision and approval of director Terence Davies. The original 35mm negative was scanned by the BFI National Archive and restored by Pinewood Studios. An original 35mm print was used as a reference to re-create digitally the bleach bypass process which would have been originally undertaken photochemically. The audio has been remastered using the original stereo magnetic tracks.

Technical Producer Douglas Weir, BFI Colourist Michael Davis, Pinewood Studios Scanning David Gurney, Sarah Vandegeerde, BFI Restoration Jashesh Jhaveri, Pinewood Studios

Thanks to Terence Davies, John Taylor, John Pegg (Pinewood Studios)

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield
Executive Producers Kevin Lambert and Francesco Simeoni
Technical Producer James White
QC Manager Nora Mehenni
Blu-ray Mastering David Mackenzie
Artist Jennifer Dionisio
Design Obviously Creative

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Terence Davies, Christina Newland, Vic Pratt, Peter Stanley, Ben Stoddart



