Poetic Realism in British Cinema

Learning Outcomes

Students should be able to:

• demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the term Poetic Realism and be able to recognise a poetic realist aesthetic in the work of key practitioners;

• identify the distinctive visual style and the poetic realist storytelling techniques used to explore the common place details, activities and gestures of everyday life;

• discuss the following elements of Poetic Realism and explain their purpose in key works by contemporary film-makers:
  - thoughtfully composed motionless or near motionless images;
  - slow, silent explorations of spaces;
  - intense close-ups;
  - visual rhymes;
  - recurrent visual and auditory motifs; and
  - a meditative tone or mood of poetic reverie or imagination; and

• analyse and discuss the use of poetic realist conventions in previously unseen sequences.

Course Content

“In film as in no other medium”, Annette Kuhn writes, “the active forward movement that characterizes narrative and drama (what the experimental filmmaker Maya Deren calls the horizontal plane of development) can combine with the in-depth ‘vertical’ investigation, the exploration of a detail or a moment, that distinguishes poetry. In film, an action, an image, can be slowed down or brought to stillness; a moment can be stretched out (horizontally) in time so that it can be contemplated (vertically) in depth. In this way, film can accommodate a meditative attitude that is akin to reverie.” (Kuhn 2008)

In the context of Moving Image Arts, ‘poetic realism’ refers to a realist aesthetic that is used to explore the lives of ordinary people in a way that seeks to look more deeply into their experiences and emotions. As Kuhn indicates, linear narrative and plot gives way in poetic realism to the exploration of a deeper emotional experience and resonance.

A poetic realist aesthetic can be identified in the work of two key British filmmakers. In their depiction of working class characters and their emotional lives, Lynne Ramsay’s Ratcatcher (1999) and Terence Davies’ Distant Voices, Still Lives (1988) belong to the tradition of British social realism.
**FACTFILE:** GCE MOVING IMAGE ARTS A2 - POETIC REALISM IN BRITISH CINEMA

*Ratcatcher* is set in a Council estate in Scotland during a strike by binmen that leaves the streets strewn with garbage and infested with rats. The film begins with a traumatic event which ripples throughout the narrative – the accidental drowning of a child.

*Distant Voices, Still Lives* is a fictionalised autobiographical film in which Terence Davies recreates the domestic space of his childhood home as a place of memory and imagination. Like *Ratcatcher*, the film also explores trauma in its depiction of the violence inflicted on a working class family by a tyrannical father.

Yet both cinematic works step outside the ordinary and depart from the conventions of realism with transformative moments of visual poetry. As Annette Kuhn explains, “Both films take it as read that meaning and food for the imagination lie in the everyday details of the most apparently unglamorous of lives. A meditative (‘vertical’) look at commonplace details, activities and gestures, of the kind that normally go unregarded.” In the words of Terence Davies; “You can say important things by concentrating on the small...And I think you can do that for ordinary people because I do passionately believe in the poetry of the ordinary.” (Kuhn, 2008)

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**Case Study: Ratcatcher**

The poetic exploration of ‘moment’ in *Ratcatcher* takes many forms as Kuhn explains; *‘lingering, thoughtfully composed, motionless or near-motionless images; slow, silent explorations of spaces, intense, searching close-ups; visual rhymes; recurrent visual and auditory motifs.’* (Kuhn, 2008)

Director Lynne Ramsay often plays these ‘poetic’ moments in complete silence, while at other times the musical soundtrack underscores the visual lyricism. The effect is, however, the same. Both *soundtrack and silence* signal a transition in thought and feeling to a *mood of reverie, wonder or imagination.*

It is in these poetic moments that the director invites us to enter the inner world of her characters, “a world separate and different from, and yet still to be found within, the everyday.” (Kuhn, 2008) One such moment is the scene where the young protagonist explores his new house in the countryside and escapes into another world. This scene attains a level of lyrical intensity as the director conveys the sense of awe and wonder experienced by the young boy as he enters through the window into a world of beauty and spiritual repose.

**Sequence Study**

(Timecode: 00:41:20–00:42:25)

The boy is introduced in medium close-up as he enters the room, framed against the minimalist décor and white door of the brand new house. As the boy looks out of the screen with eyes full of intense curiosity, the evocative music that begins on the soundtrack transports us to a world of childhood imagination.

The image that holds the boy’s attention is introduced to us through a *slow tracking camera movement* that juxtaposes striking images of *exterior and interior landscapes*. Through the window frame, a vision of natural beauty has transfixed the boy, while inside the house, the bare walls and unplugged sink speak of dull domestic life. The desire to escape, to experience the freedom of the open countryside is communicated by the upbeat, uplifting music and the *forward tracking camera* which follows the boy as he jumps through the window. It is as if he has entered a painting.

The striking image of the boy running into the landscape of blue sky and golden wheat field as the window frame disappears, is like an idealised memory. The director uses careful composition to reinforce a sense of freedom and escape. The window acts as a *frame within a frame*. As the camera slowly tracks towards the windows we move from drab interior to beautiful exterior. A tilt up during the shot gives the sky greater prominence. As the boy plays, *rule of third framing* is used to create a sense of space.

The director conveys a sense that the boy has entered a new world of joy and hope, where he can be truly free. The *extended long shot* of the boy tumbling over in the wheat field as the window frame disappears, is like an idealised memory. The director uses careful composition to reinforce a sense of freedom and escape. The window acts as a *frame within a frame*. As the camera slowly tracks towards the windows we move from drab interior to beautiful exterior. A tilt up during the shot gives the sky greater prominence. As the boy plays, *rule of third framing* is used to create a sense of space.
at rest and then running or tumbling through the golden wheat.

All of these images are captured through hand-held camera technique that conveys the restless energy and exhilaration of the teenager as he rushes through the field, basking in the sunlight and the sense of freedom. The poetic beauty is reinforced by the use of **lens flare**.

There is a magical, dreamlike quality to this sequence conveyed by the **evocative soundtrack** and the striking images of a boy alone with nature. Two low-angle shots frame the boy in a moment of quiet contemplation. The second composition frames the boy on the left hand side of the screen in medium long shot looking towards the unsteady camera, the only human presence in a stunning landscape, golden wheat stretching to the far horizon.

Throughout the film, the **stark realism of the urban settings** and post-industrial landscapes is invaded and **transformed by the magical** and the contemplative. “Ordinary reality morphs into poetic reverie within the space of a single shot... the out-and-out fantastic bursts into the space of the everyday, as in the scene that ends when a white mouse is launched into the air, tied to a balloon, and is next seen landing on the Moon.” (Kuhn, 2008).

*Ratcatcher* is a film that persistently seeks out the beautiful in the ugly, as Kuhn explains: “Because *Ratcatcher* weaves together several realities in an extraordinarily complex manner, it can bring together and explore the relationships and rifts between outer and inner worlds, worlds of external reality and worlds of imagination and fantasy. In this way, the film finds unique ways of looking at the transcendence to be found in ugliness, waste and detritus; of showing how danger, death, epiphany and redemption may imbue the familiar and the everyday.” (Kuhn, 2008)

Case Study: Distant Voices, Still Lives

As an experimental filmmaker, Terence Davies has been deeply influenced by T.S. Eliot’s last major poem, *Four Quartets* with its memorable line, “Time the destroyer is time the preserver.” The poem’s highly musical rhythm and structure and its themes of time and memory are key sources of inspiration for *Distant Voices, Still Lives*.

The film is a radical departure from traditional narrative cinema with no discernible plot or linear progression as Michael Koresky explains: “The whole of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* is constructed of seemingly disconnected scenes, threaded together by a complex series of voiceovers, popular songs and religious hymns, and, occasionally, synched dialogue that is used to sound-bridge disparate spaces.” (Koresky, 2014)

From the film’s opening **tracking shot** of a terraced house as heavy rain begins to fall, we have the impression that we are journeying through a landscape of memory. The director creates a dreamlike space with **static, stylised compositions and still poses** suggestive of moments frozen in time. **Slow, elegant tracking camera shots** traverse this space, evoking a sense of movement through time.

“The film is about memory, and memory moves in and out of time all the while”, the director explained. Tracing narrative circles, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* “constantly turns back on itself, like the ripples in a pool when a stone is thrown into it”. Terence Davies has spoken of Eileen’s wedding as the central scene in the film where the flow of memories begins. “It seems to me that 7/10ths of the film is in that first scene; it’s the day of her wedding, she remembers her dad. That’s the pebble dropped in the pool, and then there are the ripples of memory, which is what the film is about.” (Everett, 2004)

One of the most daring stylistic innovations in Distant Voices, Still Lives is the way in which Terence Davies uses **music to structure his memory narrative** and to create meaning. Music is heard for over half of the film’s running time. Never simply a background element, it is one of the film’s primary ‘voices’, as Wendy Everett explains: “The clear-cut stark opposition between moments when music is heard and moments when it is not, must be recognised as a vital component of the film’s meanings, particularly in relation to the father’s traumatising violence. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that whereas the mother’s presence is almost always marked by
music, especially song, the inarticulate violence of the father is signalled by oppressive silence, and the songs and music which shape the landscapes of memory are almost only heard when he is absent.” (Everett, 2004)

In a different way to Lynne Ramsay, Terence Davies employs stillness and suspended time to create moments of poetic exploration. A key example is the scene where the family is posed in front of the photograph of the father, with both camera and characters remaining largely static. These tableau-like compositions - the “still lives” of the film’s title – are strikingly evocative of the mysterious role of the remembered past in our lives and the treasured moments we refuse to give up or forget as time passes.

For Michael Koresky, Terence Davies, “seems to construct films as a way of locating a hidden lyricism – to create a poetics of trauma that narrows viewers’ common perceptions of the gulf between pain and pleasure, joy and grief, memory and fantasy.” (Koresky, 2014)

As Terence Davies says, “My particular bag, if you like, is just the ordinary things happening. I find ordinary things happening just extraordinary, because they are just ordinary, you know...You know there are all different kinds of visual poetry, but you can tell when it’s true somehow.” (Everett, 2004)

References

