

Maria Walsh

Catherine Yass: *Last Stand* (2019)

The film opens with the camera tracking up along the numbered storeys - from 2 to 12 - of a concrete tower core on a development site in Nine Elms, Vauxhall, London. This development, which includes the Battersea Power Station Development and the new US Embassy, is, as Anna Minton says, one of the capital's 'most epic [...], both in terms of its size and in iconic status'.¹ The oddness of a smooth count-up, an inverse of film leader countdown, hardly prepares the viewer for revelation at the top of this minimalist-like structure of a slight, solitary figure in long shot, facing towards the screen and the place where the viewer too will take a stand.

LEVEL 12

The view from on high was written about in the second half of the twentieth century in relation to two towers that were emblematic of modernity – the Eiffel Tower (Roland Barthes) and the World Trade Centre (Michel de Certeau). Anachronistic in relation to our contemporary moment, they are nonetheless a place to begin to scope out the stakes involved in Yass's uptake of the bird's-eye view. For Barthes and de Certeau this view affords pleasure. For Barthes, it offers both the satisfying 'continuity of panorama (duration)' as well as 'decipherment of parts within it'.² The former enables the paradox of an autarchic immersion in what is surveyed, the latter, the joy at recognising familiar landmarks and conjuring those that can't be seen but are topographically known to the surveyor. These two twentieth-century writers move out from the bird's-eye view in different directions. Barthes remains on top of his tower, whereas de Certeau, to whom I shall return when Yass's camera descends, moves away from the 'voluptuous pleasure' it affords and delves into the city below.³ Barthes meditates on how the Eiffel Tower is both a lookout that turns the city into an object for the gaze and is itself an object that can be gazed at from other vantage points in the city. This doubling of the look is replicated in its construction as a vertical structure that is nonetheless formed by open-latticed cross-sections that allow this tower to be looked through as well as at.

LEVEL 11

Yass's tower, standing twelve storeys high, is a lookout that no longer affords, in both senses of the term, the hazy view of the city spread out beneath it like the sea, the kind of view that so captivated the French writers.⁴ For Yass, the lookout is transformed into a stare at a horizon populated by looming cranes and rising luxury apartment blocks that obstruct the bird's eye view. The durational contiguity of Barthes' autarchy is superseded by the no-time of development modelled on the computerized fantasies of architectural corporations and aided by neoliberal planning deregulation. Its topos is the sky's virtual liquidity, what Yass calls 'the privatisation of the sky through selling it as real estate'.⁵

LEVEL 10

Reflexively propped on the off-screen crane that is building the tower Yass stands on, the camera sweeps round to its right side, revealing the block to be one of two concrete modules. The interval between them could tempt a parkour stunt, a projection that is swiftly knocked on the head by its swerve, floating in mid-air, to the back of the tower. Its empty core is exposed. It is as if the facade of this building will be constructed on nothing, much like the economic transactions it symbolizes: the abstraction of money, once tied to gold, now unfettered in speculative finance. A weird loop joins this hollow mass and the horizon that Yass looks towards, her back turned to the viewer like Caspar David Friedrich's *Rückenfigur*. The horrific emptiness of the Burkeian romantic sublime has here been recast as a fantasy of infinite reflection in the gleaming mirrored glass and steel that characterizes contemporary property development. What kind of body does this produce? Elizabeth Grosz claimed that 'built environments cannot alienate the very bodies they produce' as bodies and buildings are co-constitutive and inscribe one another in each other's image.⁶ However, she also admits that 'what may prove uncondusive is the rapid transformation of an environment such that a body inscribed by one cultural milieu finds itself in another involuntarily'.⁷ *Last Stand* proposes a body at odds with its environment, a body that stands in for the invisible bodies – 'the destitute, the homeless, the sick and the dying'⁸ - that have been displaced to make way for techno-sublime lifestyles.

LEVEL 9

Nine Elms is a seven-phase development. There are plans for a Sky Pool, 'a swimming pool suspended ten storeys up in the air [spanning the space] between two luxury tower blocks'.⁹ For Minton, this plan is 'a symbol of the divisive housing market with the super-rich literally able to look down on everyone else while they swim'.¹⁰ I don't think they will look down, though. Much as the sun-worshippers who might have populated the therapy room atop the Sun Tower proposed for Paris in the competition won by Eiffel,¹¹ I think they will look up to the sky, their Ultra-High Net Worth protecting them from what are considered the problems of urbanisation – the pollution, crime and filth of the streets below.¹²

LEVEL 8

Yass is protesting the privatised sell-off of the London skyline, a sky that is also zoned by the flight paths that bring in Russian, Middle Eastern, Asian, Chinese and some British investors to London.¹³ As Minton documents, London's rapacious property developments, which include leisure and cultural arms - the creative industries playing a supporting role in accelerated regeneration - are manifestations of a shift from housing as a social good to being a marketized commodity. Thirty years prior to Minton, but using a similar critique, Elizabeth Wilson wrote that the high value of land in the city 'means that the working-class populations are shovelled out [...] to be replaced by glamorous and profitable property developments'.¹⁴ She observed that '[w]omen, ethnic minorities and the working class in general have been caught between a paternalistic form of planning in which surveillance and regulation played a key role, and a profit-driven capital development that has been unbelievably destructive of urban space'.¹⁵ Concluding optimistically, Wilson proposed that more involvement by women might make city planning more conducive to multiple users. A quarter of a century later, Minton also concludes optimistically with examples of positive grassroots protests such as Focus E15, a campaign by mothers threatened with eviction from temporary accommodation in Stratford, and the reactivation of movements such as 'Right to the City', which promotes the collective reclamation of urban space. But the cranes march on, indefatigable.

LEVEL 7

Of course, the tactics of the street and the unpredictable assembly of communities occur despite this march, but what kind of protest can an individual artist make if she feels their demolitions in her body? Yass's 'last stand' reaches a filmic climax that is more of a diminuendo than a crescendo. As the camera revolves to the tower's left-hand side, her vulnerable frame passes in front of and covers over the phallic high point of the Nine Elms Tower opposite, making it disappear for a split second. Meeting her opponent in a duel she has called but ultimately can only lose, it is as if for that moment at least she had regained the autarchy of the bird's-eye view. Yass refers to the asceticism of Saint Symeon the Stylite, the Medieval saint, who lived on a post in the desert for thirty-seven years, as a kind of precursor to her resistance. I think of Simone Weil whose asceticism, in solidarity with the suffering of those in occupied France during WWII, resulted in her death from starvation (or anorexia) – an anti-heroic sacrifice in which something larger than oneself *almost* defeats the individual body.

LEVEL 6

An abrupt cut to the only close-up in the film brings the viewer level with this female surveyor. Immobile and stern, her features meld into a silhouette that *almost* merges into the whitish blue sky striated by a passing plane. In her confrontation with the anonymous face of Capital, her army are the squawking birds, heard but not seen, in this *almost* indexical image of dissolution.

LEVEL 5

The camera tracks back down and around the tower to stare up at the solitary figure. No *Rückenfigur*, she is bereft of a lookout that would affirm her existence. In her last stand, she becomes the blind spot in the unseeing gaze of Capital which subjects everyone to a life of exile, some to privacy and luxury, others to loneliness and deprivation.

LEVEL 4, 3, 2....

Level 1 is missing in Yass' filmic analysis of the tower. It will probably be a gated car park and entrance fitted out with security systems that rank as high as the tower. But the spatial everyday tactics of those practitioners who occupy de Certeau's ground level of the streets will continue despite, and in conjunction with, the sell-off of the

sky. Bypassing the imaginary totalizations of the bird's eye view, de Certeau claims that '[t]hese practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms'.¹⁶ However, *Last Stand* is rightly a pessimistic film. Resilient to the end, Yass's impervious figure stands resolute but foreshadowed by the unseeing object that casts its hollow mantle over London's clay fields. The equally blind, but unloving, face of Capital.

Bio

Maria Walsh is Reader in Artists' Moving Image at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London. She has published on artists' moving image and critical theory in *Rhizomes*, *Angelaki*, *Screen*, *film-philosophy*, *NECSUS* and *MIRAJ*. She is Reviews Editor of *MIRAJ* (Moving Image Review & Art Journal) and her art criticism appears regularly in *Art Monthly*. Recent publications include: 'Female Solidarity as Uncommodified Value: Lucy Beech's Cannibals and Rehana Zaman's Some Women, Other Women and all the Bittermen', in *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image* (Bloomsbury, 2019). She is author of *Therapeutic Aesthetics: Performative Encounters in Moving Image Artworks* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

¹ Anna Minton, *Big Capital: Who is London For?*, (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 20.

² Roland Barthes, 'The Eiffel Tower' in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997 [1979]), 3-18, p. 11

³ Michel de Certeau, 'Walking in the City' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London University of California Press, 1984), 91-110, p. 92.

⁴ While de Certeau is predominantly critical of the aerial view and its totalizing vision, he immerses himself in its 'voluptuous pleasure' in the first few pages of 'Walking in the City'.

⁵ Artist's notes. Email to author 2 December 2019.

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, 'Bodies-Cities' in Beatriz Colomina (ed) *Sexuality and Space*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 241-253, p. 249.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-50.

⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture From the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2001), xvii.

⁹ Minton, p. xii.

¹⁰ Minton, pp. 23-24.

¹¹ Barthes, p. 6. For more detailed information about this proposal, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Angela Davies, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California and London: The University of California Press, 1988), pp. 128-133.

¹² See Minton for a discussion of how the super prime property market for 'Ultra-High Net Worth Individuals' – there are estimated to be 4,900 of these individuals in London – is interconnected to the housing crisis, p. xii. Average-income earners and the poor move to the periphery or out of the capital altogether. High Net Worth Individuals in London are estimated to be in excess of 500,000.

¹³ See Minton, p. xiii.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City*, (London: Virago Press, 1991), p. 143.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁶ De Certeau, p. 93.