

Articles

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Capitalist realism: Glimmers, working-class authenticity and Andrea Dunbar in the twenty-first century

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Abstract

This article thinks through how registers of ‘the real’ have operated in working-class representations, from social realism (in film, theatre, drama and soap opera) to reality television and appeals to ‘authenticity’ in publicity and marketing materials for cultural products purporting to represent the working class. It argues that the ubiquity of ‘the real’ in representations of working-class experience is one way in which Fisher’s ‘capitalist realism’ asserts itself. The article argues that experiments with form and intertextuality can offer ‘glimmers’ through which slippages in claims to absolute reality are revealed. It explores the possibility for such ‘glimmers’ in experimentations with Andrea Dunbar’s work in the twenty-first century, reasserting the importance of form in dismantling the neo-liberal political project.

Keywords

realism

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During the week I began work on this article, in May 2019, the television programme *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (broadcast by ITV) was suspended indefinitely following the suicide

of 63-year-old Steve Dymond, who had recently appeared as a guest. *The Jeremy Kyle Show* was a reality television tabloid talk-show, in which the eponymous host encouraged guests to explore complex personal issues, such as family feuds, infidelities and questions of paternity. Aired regularly on weekday mornings over sixteen series between 2005 and 2019, programmes were often highly emotionally charged, with confrontations between angry and distressed guests who might be relatives, friends, lovers or ex-lovers of one another. Importantly, for the concerns of this special issue, the guests were usually presented as working-class: more specifically as the poor, abject working-class who have been understood in mainstream discourse and elsewhere as the 'underclass' (Hayward and Yar 2006; McDonald 2008; Garrett 2019), and stereotyped as 'chavs, as feckless, immoral and utterly 'bad taste' (Skeggs 2005; Taylor 2013; McKenzie 2015). *The Jeremy Kyle* show offered a platform on which poor working-class people were, unusually for UK popular media forms, highly visible and able to speak for themselves, but it also worked to portray the lives of working-class people *in general* as chaotic and dysfunctional – and often presented the guests as physically unattractive (deliberately dressed in unflattering clothing – with minimal make-up under stage lights¹), inarticulate and impulsive (due to the highly charged, emotional nature of the content), shoring up negative and damaging images of working-class people that circulate more widely in British culture. In *Jeremy Kyle*, as elsewhere, the working class are positioned as 'other' to the viewer, setting up a dynamic which implies the supposed moral inferiority of those on screen – compounded by not only their behaviour but the signifiers of 'low class' evoked by clothing and accessories. This is despite the fact that, of course, working-class

people watch *The Jeremy Kyle Show* and understand very well that this is how they are seen and judged by wider society (see also Beswick 2019: 43–44).

Reality television programmes that exploit the UK public's 'prurient fascination' (McKenzie 2015: 12) with the lives and lifestyles of the poor working class have been labelled 'poverty porn' (Jensen 2014). Although this term is usually applied to documentary reality television programmes, talk-shows such as *Jeremy Kyle* (preceded by the similarly formatted *Trisha* in the United Kingdom and the phenomenally popular US series *The Jerry Springer Show*) might similarly be considered as poverty porn in the way that they facilitate a homogenous depiction of the working class as 'shameless scroungers, overdependent, unproductive, disruptive and unmodern' (Nunn and Biressi 2010: 143).

Following the suspension of *The Jeremy Kyle Show* numerous conversations emerged on online social media platforms, often repeating public debate that has circulated around the show during the years of its broadcasting. In many of the conversations I witnessed the position of *The Jeremy Kyle Show* as 'reality' was central. Two main tropes emerged in these discussions of *Jeremy Kyle* and reality: the first acknowledged that the programme dealt with the 'real lives' of guests in one way or another, and resulted in discussions about the impact of portraying real lives in this way for both those depicted and for viewers; the second denied that the guests on *Jeremy Kyle* were actually 'real' and sought to expose the project as entirely fictional.

In one post underneath a news story about the suspension of *Jeremy Kyle* on the social media platform Facebook, a commenter claimed that she personally knew someone who had been paid to appear on the show in an entirely staged scenario. This claim

echoes claims that had circulated for some time on social media platforms including Reddit, where there are numerous threads debating the shows veracity, in which participants claim to have (conflicting) first-hand knowledge that the show is either 'real' or in some way 'fake'.

The debates around the nature of 'reality' sparked by *The Jeremy Kyle Show* are revealing because they serve as a way in to understanding how reality television operates as part of a wider landscape of the 'authentic real' (Beswick 2019: 29–39) – whereby the cultural preoccupation with 'authenticity' fosters an appetite for the consumption of the real in a variety of forms, but especially in depictions of working-class people, and where 'authenticity' (often made by claims to first-hand experience in one way or another) becomes synonymous with truth and reality. In the case of the Jeremy Kyle show the register of the 'real' is established by the programme's status as reality television, and it's 'authenticity' comes from the presentation of the guests, which serves to further authenticate stigmatizing representations of working-class people in the culture more widely. The register of the 'authentic real' established by *The Jeremy Kyle Show* is familiar beyond reality television, and I propose is related to the establishment of realism as the dominant register for the portrayal of the working class in UK screen, stage and literary representations, particularly through the development of social realism during the twentieth century (as I discuss in more detail below).

In a contemporary landscape where almost every working-class representation involves a depiction of working-class people that makes claims to authenticity in one way or another, representations of working-class lives become totalizing narratives: that is they assert themselves as definitive, true, meaningful stories, which are fixed and

absolute. Elsewhere, the tendency to understand representations of marginalized groups as totalizing has been described as a 'burden of representation' (Shohat and Stam 1994; Stoddard and Marcus 2006: 27). However, what this term fails to capture is the way that this burden of representation operates by paradoxical appeals both to the reality *and* to the fiction of 'realistic' constructs. In this way the negative *affects* of stigmatized representations on individuals (viewers, guests, documentary subjects) is disavowed, while the underlying 'truth' of the narratives *underneath* the fiction is upheld. I want to think about this complex dynamic within a framework of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009) in order to explore the ways in which such complex and often paradoxical operations of neoliberalism, particularly the neo-liberal tendency towards concealing the means of production, condition the 'horizons of the possible' for working-class representation through form as well as content.

In the remainder of this article, then, I expand my argument about the limits of the register of the real within a landscape of capitalist realism, I explore how realist conventions operate within what we might understand as a 'capitalist realist' circulation (where they seemingly appeal to a social progressive politics, but actually offer 'no alternatives' to either the material conditions they represent, or the dominant narrative of working-class lives). I conclude by thinking through the legacy of working-class Bradford playwright Andrea Dunbar, and how her work has been revisited by several artists in an attempt to trouble the realist register through which her plays operated. I argue that these experiments with Dunbar's work point to productive ways that realism might give way to excavation of working-class culture and offer 'glimmers' (Fisher

[2009](#)) that allow for a more plural view of working-class life – because they require intertextual reading and can't therefore be taken as 'totalising' representations.

Realism/naturalism/authenticity

The depiction of working-class lives via a register of the 'real' might be traced via the emergence of realism as a form related to naturalism, and, in the United Kingdom the extension of realism into social realism in the twenty-first century. Samantha Lay defines social realism as constituting texts in which 'there is a high degree of verisimilitude, placing an emphasis on ensemble casts in social situations which suggest a direct link between person and place' (Lay 2002: 20). I would add that social realist texts tend to deal with social issues pertaining to structural inequalities. The terms 'realism' and 'naturalism' are broadly related, and, as Innes has noted, are often conflated in everyday speech to refer broadly to work which is 'presented in a recognisable social context, and stress[es] ordinary details that accurately reflect the way people of a time actually live' (Innes 2000: 4). However, the terms do have distinct meanings, even if these distinctions are not agreed across scholarship (see Williams' refutation of Strindberg's definition in [Williams 1977](#)) – and different relationships to class. Raymond Williams offers a neat distinction between realism and naturalism. The former, he proposes, consists broadly of three main characteristics: 'a conscious movement towards social extension', where the lives of the working classes are represented; contemporary action, that is, the 'siting of actions in the present'; and 'an emphasis on secular action' ([Williams 1977](#): 64–65). Higson adds to this by noting that realism also demands a 'novelistic attention to detail', which can often translate into a 'fetishistic' surface concern with detail; he calls this 'the spectacle of the real' (Higson 1984: 4). McKinney (1999) locates this concern with the

realistic depiction of the working-class environment within a painterly tradition; she points to the painter Gustave Courbet's 1850 work *The Stonebreakers*. She notes that his statement about the painting, 'I have invented nothing. I saw the wretched people in this picture every day as I went on my walks', suggests a political dimension to his work (McKinney 1999: 36); simply by drawing attention to the detail of working-class life, the social and economic structures which produced inequality could be revealed. The use of realist conventions then, particularly in relation to the representation of working-class space, often troublingly implies, as Innes has noted, that work is valid, factual, and objective (Innes 2000: 4). It also often implies, as McKinney's observation suggests, that the work is operating for social good: either to raise class consciousness or to contribute to a progressive politics that will change the status quo offered in the depiction itself.

Naturalism, in contrast, is, according to Williams, distinct from realism because it 'is not primarily defined as a dramatic or more general artistic method' (Williams 1977: 65). Rather,

Naturalism is originally the conscious opposition to supernaturalism and to metaphysical accounts of human actions, with an attempt to describe human actions in exclusively human terms with a more precise local emphasis [...] Naturalism was seen as that which merely reproduced the flat external appearance of reality with a certain static quality, whereas realism – in the Marxist tradition for example, – was that method and that intention which went below this surface to the essential historic movements, to the dynamic reality.

(Williams 1977^a: 65)

Williams proposes that, in the theatre '[t]he novelty of the naturalist emphasis was its demonstration of the *production* of character or action by a powerful natural or social environment' (Williams 1980: 127). In this way, we can see a clear connection between

Lay's social realism and Williams' naturalism; although I would point out that while social realism generally focuses on representations of the working class, the naturalism to which Williams refers more commonly deals with middle class subjects – whose behaviour is bounded by an environment which structures social relations and behaviours, but from which it is possible, although difficult, to escape. This is epitomised by the '[drawing] room' (Longhurst 1987: 636), which features in high naturalist drama as a 'crucial part of the action'. In the drawing room, the characters

have soaked into this environment which in a sense materially reflects back at them their lives; yet at the same time the environment is crucially active in their lives – the actual physical restrictions of the room, the sense of a particular kind of fixed landscape.

(Williams 1979: 204)

An important distinction between Williams' high naturalism and social realist drama is that in the former the middle class subjects of the performance are the intended audience for the drama. While, in mainstream social realism, the conventional understanding is that the work is produced for an audience predominantly made up of those who might consider the **working-class environment depicted as 'Other'.

Indeed, the origins of social realism in UK theatre, film and television can be understood as a means by which the 'reality' of the 'Other' was communicated to the middle-classes. The development of social realism might be mapped onto the formation of the welfare state and a general turn towards class-consciousness in the twentieth century in the wake of two world wars, as the needs and living conditions of the poor became urgent problems that required public investment and understanding. Glen Creeber traces social realism's origins to the 'British documentary movement of the 1930s which tended to regard itself an artistic mechanism for social reform, education,

and even spiritual uplift' (2009: 424), although Armstrong notes that early examples of British realism in film were not always popular with working-class audiences, who preferred Hollywood 'genre movies'. The social realist movement, which continues to the present day (with films such as *Fish Tank* [2009], *I, Daniel Blake* [2016], *Funny Cow* [2017]; television programmes such as *Top Boy* [2011–13, 2019] and *Shameless* [2004–13]; and theatre productions such as *Elmina's Kitchen* [2003], *Jerusalem* [2009], *Off the Endz* [2010]), is concerned with fictional stories set in 'realistic' worlds, where verisimilitude is achieved through highly realistic depictions of working-class life and vernacular – it retains some of the moral imperative and 'high seriousness' (Armstrong n.d.) that Creeber and Armstrong identify in the British Documentary movement.

Indeed, social realist film, television and theatrical works that emerged in the mid-twentieth century took seriously the accurate depiction of working-class lives (*Look Back in Anger* 1956, *A Taste of Honey* 1958, *Saturday Night Sunday Morning* 1960, *Cathy Come Home* 1966 and even the soap opera *Coronation Street* 1960–present), enlarging 'the scope of the drama' by 'remediating an absence' (Lacey 2011: 58) in representation, offering space in the cultural domain for lives that had rarely been depicted on stage and screen before. In this way, social realism on screen and stage drew on traditions of visual realism, whereby, as McKinney suggests, the politics of the works often lay in artists' claims to absolute authenticity (McKinney 1999: 36). This 'absolute authenticity' is of course illusionary – there is no such thing as a neutral representation; all representations both reflect and construct reality at the same time. Absolute authenticity has remained a residual feature of present day working-class representation, wherein social realism is part of a wider culture of realistic registers, in which fictional depictions of the working-

class mirror and borrow tropes from reality television and vice versa. In this present-day context, social realism begins to bleed into capitalist realism (discussed in more detail below) in how it constructs layers of authenticity via complex means in order to conceal its own complexity and, as a result, conceals the means of production whose visibility might give way to gaps in the authentic real.

The result of this is that the fictional stories played out on stage and screen come to stand in for the real lives they depict, often drawing highly politicized depictions of the 'real world' to resist injustice. This politics is usually played out in domestic environments – hence the genre of social realism has often been referred to as 'kitchen sink' – and on run down social housing estates (or 'council estates'), where the life of working-class people is more often than not positioned as grinding and relentlessly grim. This is not to suggest that social realist representations of working-class people are without humanity. As Stephen Lacey notes, plays such as Shelagh Delany's *A Taste of Honey*, which depicted the life of Jo, a 16-year-old girl living with her mother in Salford, who falls pregnant with a black soldier's baby and subsequently lives and is supported by a homosexual man after her mother leaves the family home, expresses their politics through 'complex and sympathetic portrayals of people who are socially marginal' (2011: 65). The authenticity of *A Taste of Honey* was secured not only through the accuracy of the stage depiction itself, that is the realist form of the play, but through the fact that Delany herself was a 19-year-old working-class woman, who could claim 'authentic experience' of the world portrayed in the play (Laing 1986). Narratives of working-class culture are often secured as 'authentic' in this way – through both the identity of the playwright, or others involved in the production (such as actors and

directors) and the social realist form (see [Bell and Beswick 2014](#)). Popular working-class films, plays and television programmes including *Trainspotting* (Irvine Welsh 1996), *Shameless* (Paul Abbot 2004–13) and *Off the Endz* (2010 Bola Agbaje) similarly make claims to authenticity by combining social realism with appeals to the ‘authentic voice’ (Beswick 2019) of the authors or creators of the works, which make it difficult to refute the ‘reality’ of the representations.

This is not to suggest there is no such thing as authenticity, but rather to propose the limits of claims to authenticity in a capitalist system whereby authenticity becomes the product that capitalism consumes, stripping authentic narratives of their radical potential and repackaging them in order to shore up the status quo. In this way authenticity becomes, within mainstream realist depictions, a totalizing mechanism that operates within a structure of ‘capitalist realism’. In this culture, claims to authenticity work paradoxically to imbue social realist works with truth that appears radical (and that has and can have oppositional political impact in terms of prioritizing the voices of those marginalized under capitalism), *and* to condition and legitimize negative and highly stigmatized representations of working-class people, blurring the lines between what is fiction and what is reality to the extent that the division between the two becomes redundant. Every ‘real’ depiction might be dismissed as partly or wholly fictional (and therefore not harmful), while every fictional representation makes some claims to a broader ‘authenticity’, through which the ‘reality’ of the world depicted can be authenticated.

Capitalist realism

The evolution of the 'authentic real' within representations of the working class has accelerated with the rise of capitalism and in parallel with the erasure and devaluing of the working classes within the wider culture (cf. Taylor 2013). Post-Thatcher, narratives that purport to guarantee an authentic experience of working-class culture become more common, especially on the small screen where reality television has found ever more inventive ways of revealing the authentic abjection of the working class – shows such as *Benefit Street*, *Can't Pay? We'll Take it Away* and *How to Get a Council House* purport to offer 'real' access to the deviant and disgusting behaviour of the poor. By focusing on the 'reality' of these works, such shows operate by making visible one aspect of a work's authorship in order to conceal the ways that the entertainment industry's means of production includes an exclusion and marginalization of working-class people (Friedman and Laurison 2020). This technique of authenticate-to-conceal works through a variety of forms that make appeals to the real in one way or another. As the playwright Arinze Kene has argued, claims to authorial authenticity hide the ways content is conditioned by gatekeepers such as directors and producers who are looking to commission 'the same old shit' (Costa 2013): narratives that bolster a reductive and easy-to-consume world of working-class culture, in which the working class are always pathological in one way or another. In this context, 'the real' has become a significant means of conditioning what Mark Fisher calls the 'horizons of the thinkable' (2009: 7), and 'the authentic real' in terms of realist forms, reality television, documentary and verbatim has become the dominant means of artistic expression. Indeed, Christopher Innes has mapped how realism is now simply the standard form in which cultural products are received, implying that the representation offered through realist means is valid, factual and

objective (Innes 2000: 4). As Michael Vanden Heuvel has noted, 'realism simply replicates existing – and therefore arguably bourgeois, patriarchal, racist, oppressive and oedipal – discourses, and functions as a mode of conciliation, assimilation, adaptation, and resignation to those discourses' (1992: 48). This landscape of 'reality', as Fisher indicates, has expanded and consumed UK culture as the politics of socialism and left-wing radicalism have declined:

In Britain, the fault lines of class antagonism were fully exposed in an event like the Miners' Strike of 1984–1985, and the defeat of the miners was an important moment in the development of capitalist realism, at least as significant in its symbolic dimension as in its practical effects. The closure of pits was defended precisely on the grounds that keeping them open was not 'economically realistic', and the miners were cast in the role of the last actors in a doomed proletarian romance. The 80s were the period when capitalist realism was fought for and established, when Margaret Thatcher's doctrine that 'there is no alternative' – as succinct a slogan of capitalist realism as you could hope for – became a brutally self-fulfilling prophecy.

(Fisher 2009: 4)

Realism then has been part of the process of conditioning the horizons of the thinkable, creating narratives around the working classes in ways that are politically potent, and that secure the working class in fixed and homogenous terms – whereby they are defined by their 'lack' (McKenzie 2015) and abjection (Taylor 2013). Understanding this is important, because film-makers, television executives and playwrights still make appeals to radical politics through claims to authenticity, seemingly failing to understand the limited ways in which the 'authentic' operates within a circulation of capitalist realism. Alfie Brown, drawing on Fisher's work, describes how

in a capitalist realist system, expressions of opposition to the socio-political situation, from Nirvana to *The Hunger Games*, are always-already transformed by the smooth logic of capitalism into its very products for sale. Likewise, acts of subversion, resistance and even protest are absorbed and re-presented not as attempts to develop alternatives, but as parts of the capitalist conversation open for negotiation only in its own language.

(Brown 2017)

For Brown and Fisher the potential of cultural representations to provide an alternative to the dominant order relies on their ability to create ‘glimmers of alternative political and economic possibility’ (Fisher 2009: 80). As Brown argues, the possibility for these glimmers to create possibilities for change have accelerated since Fisher’s work in 2009, as the neo-liberal seal over the west has been broken and the far-right have stepped in to fill the space for ‘alternatives’ that evade the left. As Brown (2017) argues ‘the rise of the far-Right, embodied not so much by Trump as Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage, Beppe Grillo and even non-politician populists like Milo Yiannopoulos, should not be seen so much as a “symptom” of neoliberalism as the work of successful opportunists’ stepping in to takeover as neoliberalism implodes (see also Winlow and Hall 2016).

The authenticity that underpins working-class depictions that operate in the register of ‘the real’ is a central tenant of capitalist realism, which needs to position the working class as a fixed and homogenous entity in order to convey its message that there is ‘no alternative’. The right has successfully offered alternatives, albeit alternatives that still rely on appeals to a fixed and homogenous working-class culture, positioned as under threat. Making claims to ‘authentic’ working-class backgrounds, evoking ‘authentic’ working-class culture, or appealing to an ‘authentic’ working-class sensibility is a common means of political oratory – as Tim Burrows describes in his account of the

'Essex Man' stereotype, these dominant, totalising archetypes of working-class people and spaces continue to exist because they enable 'the allure of an "authentic" England – whose views coincidentally always align with the politician currently invoking them' (Burrows 2019). Overcoming the crises of neoliberalism requires giving way to a world in which working-class plurality is acknowledged in order to challenge the complicated and plural conditions that structure class inequality. This requires changes and challenges to dominant modes of cultural consumption as well as to the political order itself: troubling the 'reality' through which working-class abjection is created and circulated is a representational (and therefore cultural, and therefore artistic) as well as a political project.

Andrea Dunbar in the twenty-first century: Intertextual glimmers

As the neo-liberal order undergoes seismic changes in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of the right, Brexit and environmental and ecological breakdown, the absolute authenticity offered by social realist forms too has begun to strain. If dominant narratives of the working class have tended to provide layers of authenticity, working with the real so that any gap in the reality is immediately filled by another authenticating mechanism (the true story, filmed on a 'real' social housing estate, written by an 'authentic voice', starring an actor who claims to have grown up in poverty), attention to the ways playwright Andrea Dunbar's work has been revisited over the past decade or so indicates how artists, often outside the mainstream, are beginning to actively rupture social realism in order to make room for 'glimmers' that manifest as gaps offering room for alternative ways of understanding working-class culture.

Andrea Dunbar in many ways typifies the turn towards capitalist realism in social realist work that accelerated after Thatcher. A teenager in the 1970s and 80s as Thatcher was elected to office, Dunbar's first play *The Arbor* was produced in 1980, at the Royal Court Theatre, known for its ostensibly radical, social realist plays, which often stressed the authorial authenticity of its playwrights (see [Bell and Beswick 2014](#)), when she was eighteen years old. Hailed as the authentic voice of the northern working classes, a 'genius straight from the slums', Dunbar's authenticity was secured not only by her adherence to realist forms, the autobiographical nature of her plays and her working-class identity (secured by her upbringing on the Buttershaw council estate in Bradford), but also her youth and vulnerability – when the Royal Court decided to produce Dunbar's play, she was living in a Women's Aid refuge with her baby daughter, having escaped a violent relationship (parts of her play included fictionalized versions of her own trauma). *The Arbor* was followed by two more plays produced at the Court *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1982), and *Shirley* (1986). In 1987 *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!* (exclamation point added), was adapted for film, with Dunbar as the screenwriter ([Stripe 2016](#)). The film was an upbeat, exuberant adaptation of Dunbar's story about two teenage girls who embark on an affair with a married man. It used social realist filmic conventions, with verisimilitude achieved by attention to visual detail, the urban estate setting and the dialogue and language. The film was marketed with the strapline 'Thatcher's Britain with her knickers down', a phrase that suggests the ways in which the film packaged a highly specific story as representative of a wider (working-class) British landscape. Dunbar's widely circulated statement in response to criticism of her depictions of life on the Buttershaw estate that, 'This is life. The facts are there, you write what's said you don't lie', indicate

the way in which narratives of reality circulated around her work to fill in any glimmers created by criticism of the 'real world' of the fiction. This despite the fact that Dunbar herself was unhappy with changes made to her work in the film version of *Rita*, which saw Rita and Sue return happily to the man who had wronged them.

When Andrea Dunbar died tragically from a brain aneurism in 1990 at the age of just 29, her legacy may well – as for so many working-class women – have been lost to history. However, her links with the Royal Court, and particularly the story that she had been 'discovered' by the Court's artistic director, Max Stafford-Clark, who commissioned (and eventually directed) *The Arbor* from scenes written in a school exercise book, proved potent to extending her legacy. In 2000 Stafford-Clark produced a revival of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* with the Soho Theatre and his company Out of Joint (he had also directed the original stage production, and the revival served to cement his role in Dunbar's 'rags to riches and back again' story). The play was shown in a double bill with a new verbatim work, authored by Robin Soans, called *A State Affair* – developed using the 'real' words of Leeds and Bradford residents Soans had interviewed during a 3-week research and development period (Stripe 2016: 27). In many ways, the double bill served to further secure the totalizing, realist portrayal of working-class life that had circulated around Dunbar's work at the height of her popularity (see also Beswick 2019: 90–91). In an article reflecting on his work with Andrea, Stafford-Clark appears at pains to secure the total authenticity of Dunbar's representations:

The Arbor was a misleading title. A pack of abandoned and feral dogs roamed the centre of Brafferton Arbor, the crescent on which Andrea lived. But pastoral it was not. It was bleak. Some houses were boarded up, and some gardens were a tangled mess of grass and weeds, often featuring rusty bits of car engine mounted on breezeblocks; like the

occasional battered caravan that also blossomed in some gardens, they were dreams of escape – hopeless male fantasies doomed to remain for ever in a state of stagnation.

There were a lot of single mothers, but Andrea's own father had stayed with his family, and his violence and feckless drinking had been the dramatic centre of Andrea's childhood. In 1980 this was unusual: in most families the father had fucked off.

(Stafford-Clark n.d.)

Despite the almost totalizing depiction that the 2000 double bill offered, Soans' play included a moment that might be considered a 'glimmer' in the stage reality, giving way to alternative experiments with Dunbar's work that has troubled social realist form and brought its absolute veracity into doubt. During a direct address to the audience, the character of Lorraine, Dunbar's daughter (played by an actor, but speaking what we presume to be Lorraine's 'real words') confronts the authenticity of her mother's work, bringing into question both the wider public understanding of Dunbar's work as 'real', and the very legitimacy of the play in which she herself is speaking (see also Aston and Reinelt 2001: 289)

If I wrote a play I'd do it about the Buttershaw [e]state. It'd show some people getting their lives together with a lot of courage and determination. But it would also show others going up a steep hill, into a big black hole.

(Soans 2000: 134)

The 'glimmer' created by this performance moment has been potent, giving way to experiments with the social realist form of Dunbar's work (Stripe 2016: 33), which have interestingly taken place post the 2008 financial collapse, as the very legitimacy of capitalist realism's overarching narrative has been brought into question. The first of these, Clio Barnard's film *The Arbor*, troubles reality using a technique that Lib Taylor refers to as 'doubling' (2013: 375): Barnard layers documentary footage of Dunbar

herself, scenes from her play *The Arbor*, filmed on the estate where it was set, and uses audio recordings of interviews she has conducted with Dunbar's friends and family, lip-synced by actors who 'play' the friends and family in the film. Although the scholar Alison Peirse (2015) has argued that the gap between reality and representation here is too small to overcome the problematic slippages between the real and the represented, I propose that these slippages or 'glimmers' are precisely the place in which the film makes alternative readings possible. Indeed, the effect of the 'doubling' is that the whole film acts as a glimmer through which the very notion of representational reality is upended. The scenes from *The Arbor* are filmed as Buttershaw residents look on, their gaze and distance from the piece reminding viewers of the constructed nature of all social realism, as well as making visible the very people who the 'reality' is supposed to apply to – but at a distance from the representation so that the distance becomes the literal gap in which the fiction is revealed. The articulacy of Dunbar's friends and family, and the fact that the actors playing them are extremely attractive and composed, begins to offer new frames through which working-class culture might be represented – ones that push against reductive and stigmatizing representations such as *Jeremy Kyle*.

Adelle [Stripe's 2016](#) novel, *Black Teeth and a Brilliant Smile*, published in the wake of the 'Brexit' referendum, which marked another rupture in the fabric of neo-liberal reality as Britain voted to leave the European Union, similarly plays with the real and the fictional. The book is a 'non-fiction novel', or, perhaps, a 'fictional biography', that offers an account of Dunbar's life based on extensive scholarly and archival research Stripe carried out as part of her Ph.D. at the University of Huddersfield – but it deliberately straddles truth and fiction. Stripe writes with a stark, stripped-back prose,

moving between the first and the third person, blurring the lines between what really happened and what did not by filling in the blanks of Dunbar's life with speculation and outright embellishment.

Real people rub shoulders with fictional characters, some utter words from letters and scripts; others are gleaned from occasional references, newspaper cuttings, hearsay or fractured memory. It is not the truth and exists purely within the realm of speculation.

(Stripe 2016: 9)

As Stripe writes in her Ph.D., both she and Barnard's draw on and extend the techniques pioneered in Robin Soans' verbatim work. Her novel works to mythologize the subject (Stripe 2016: 33), acknowledging that biography cannot serve as a totalizing representation, but must always act as a form wherein 'fact and fiction collide', resulting in 'an unstable alchemy, one which is difficult to define precisely' (2016: 35).

Importantly Stripe's novel also begins to rupture Stafford-Clark's role as 'star maker', suggesting that writers Liane Aukin and Kay Mellor were key figures in the playwright's development – making visible how middle-class men secure their narratives in working-class histories in ways that conceal working-class and female labour, while fostering paternalistic interpretations of working-class culture (such as in the quotation above).

This experiment with revealing the space between fact and fiction is extended in the stage adaptation of *Black Teeth and a Brilliant Smile* by playwright Lisa Holdsworth 2019, in which Dunbar watches her own memories played out in front of her as a young version of herself 'scribbles secretly in notebooks' (Love 2019). The fact that the play reveals the process of artistic creation, bolstered by the fact that both Stripe and Holdsworth repeatedly draw attention to the fictional nature of the play in its promotion, again creates

a glimmer through which it is possible to see reality being constructed, and therefore to question the nature of this construction.

Meanwhile, in 2017, Stafford-Clark's own revival of the stage version of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, began to reveal fissures in the uneven means of production, as reality disrupted form. In the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal – which led to the #metoo and #timesup movements that saw women across the entertainment industry reveal details of systemic sexual abuse and harassment – Stafford-Clark resigned from Out of Joint after allegations he had made sexually explicit comments to female employees, including writers (although there is no evidence he behaved inappropriately with Dunbar). A huge press interest in the production (direction of which was taken over by co-director Kate Wasserburg) followed, as its staging at the Royal Court was cancelled and then reinstated as a result of a public outcry during which commentators argued that Dunbar's creative voice should not be silenced because of the disgraced director's actions – although it should be noted that the actual reason for the cancellation of the play was never made clear. This production also troubled some of the authentic portrayals that the social realist productions of the 1980s had fostered. Namely the tendency in social realism for working-class communities to be represented as homogenously white by casting an Asian actor, Taj Atwal in the role of Rita.

The glimmers that these works offer in the absolute reality of working-class representations are importantly strengthened by the relationships of each of the works to one another. Each revival, adaptation or experimentation with Dunbar's work requires reference to previous revivals, adaptations and experimentations. This intertextual landscape makes totalizing depictions of the work difficult. The glimmers offered by

experiments with Dunbar's work suggest the importance of experiments with form as a way to trouble reality and experiment with reality as neoliberalism collapses. They also reveal how the overarching political moment is indelibly connected to the artistic and cultural forms of expression that dominate and emerge, reminding artists of the potency of form as well as content in the politics of their creations.

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Note

[1] Testimonies from former guests and members of staff circulated both prior to and in the wake of **Dymond's** suicide, **attest** that guests were deliberately costumed to adhere

to the abject working-class stereotype (see, e.g. Willgress 2015; Morris 2019; Yeates 2019).

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