HOME

Relationship remembered

Andrea Luka Zimmerman's film *Estate, a Reverie*, is an unruly celebration of extraordinary everyday humanity. *At the Open City Documentary Festival on 21 June 2015.*

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Writing up my doctoral research on Samuel Richardson in the 1980s I was lucky enough to have a series of conversations with my friend and younger contemporary, Simon Schaffer, polymathic expert in the history and philosophy of science of the period. I remember him talking about the genius astronomer, Edmond Halley, who paid for the publication of Newton's *Principia* in 1687, and wrote "a fulsome poem for the front of the book", exclaiming about his fellow natural philosopher, "No closer to the gods can any mortal rise".

Simon was full of anecdotes about the intertwined groups and real relations between the thinkers of that time, ranging far beyond the Royal Society and all over the civilised world. But I remember he was also particularly interested in who lived and worked and talked together in coffee houses in various districts of London, in the half century preceding the production of Samuel Richardson's great novels. He and his students had been mapping particular areas of the city, an exercise that prompted me to look into the novelist's own extraordinary circle of intimates in the 1740s, including among others his friend and physician, George Cheyne, his doctor John Freke, author of a *Treatise on the Nature of Fire,* and the 'English mystic' William Law.

The Fire Scene, from Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Estate, a Reverie, 2015. All rights reserved.These are the moments in years of research that take one in a quite different direction, and for my part led me to a particular re-reading of Clarissa centred on its 'Fire-Scene', in which the villain-hero Lovelace deploys a fake fire to drive Clarissa Harlowe into his arms, a ruse that fails but nevertheless sends him another step closer to destroying everything he loves in this life.

In that reading I set out to show that if the earlier bestseller, *Pamela*, was a pastoral comedy, designed to take Richardson's readers through some of the challenges of everyday life, the towering *Clarissa* was a Christian tragedy arguing about the impossibility of happiness in a fallen universe fundamentally characterised by a fatal divide – hence its 'divided correspondence' – between Clarissa and Lovelace, the light (claritas) and the fire, the love and the wrath of God.

What Richardson's circle of friends shared in particular was the conviction that this tragic conflict was at the same time the essence of life, and the necessary condition for undergoing the test that returns us to the heaven we have lost. Evil – and fire – exist in order that good should come to know itself, a process that duly ensures Clarissa's victory in death, over a "rake… all her oppressors and the world besides."

I'd always been particularly struck by Clarissa's cry, "the world is one big family. Originally it was so. What then is this narrow selfishness that reigns in us, but relationship remembered against relationship forgot ?… What a world is this? What is there in it desirable? The good we hope for so strangely mixed, that one knows not what to wish for! And one half of mankind tormenting the other, and being tormented themselves in tormenting!" And here, it seemed to me, was the cosmological explanation for the profound objection that this odd novel – the longest in the English language – lodged against the rational, pragmatic tendencies of Richardson's age – one he arraigned for its "Kill-Time amusements".

'Clarissa'. Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Estate, a Reverie, 2015. All rights reserved.Fast forward to 2013, and I was just getting used to openDemocracy's recently acquired office space in Dalston. Imagine my surprise to discover through a friend a young film-maker just around the corner in this busy part of London, engaged in making a film about the gentrification process that was spelling the slow, undignified demise of her Hackney housing estate – undignified, that is, had it not been for the residents 'left behind' who are the subject of her film.

Cast, from Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Estate, a Reverie, 2015. All rights reserved.Estate: a Reverie, the deeply moving portrait of a community when it is 'time to go', tells what happened and what was still happening when, some time in the 1970s, their homes were designated a 'problem estate', the caretaker sacked, maintenance and repairs withdrawn. It would have been downhill all the way, had the residents not fought back, going on rent strike, and rallying over and over again. And now there were only a few people left. One of them, who had grown up on a pioneering Munich housing-estate, one of Europe's largest, and lived at Haggerston for 17 years, was the film-maker, Andrea Luka Zimmerman.

Here was a film, as John Berger says of it, that would set out to "remind us that, both politically and humanly, the past is not behind us, not obsolescent, but beside us and urgent". So it was intriguing enough to learn that this exercise in social housing was built on the landed estate where Edmond Halley was born in 1656, from whence he had visited Newton in Cambridge and worked out why the comet named after him would reappear every 75 to 76 years.

But the real surprise in store for me related to a more recent, Utopian chapter in the history of the British welfare state in the 1930s, when the group of architects who flattened the slum-dwellings on that land to raise the Haggerston Estate, decided for some reason to name the hopeful new blocks after the characters of Samuel Richardson's novels of moral improvement, including Clarissa, Lovelace, Pamela and Samuel himself. Andrea was looking for someone who knew something about Samuel Richardson… would I like to see Pamela Street and Clarissa Street for myself? I would have to be quick: demolition was imminent.

Pamela House

Pamela House, from Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Estate, a Reverie, 2015. All rights reserved.

An invitation to a barbecue

An e-mail exchange later and it became clear that an even more irresistible promise was in store. I could meet Clarissa, and Lovelace! As part of Andrea's groundbreaking approach to a collaborative and performative cinema, workshops with the residents around the naming of the blocks had led to some short but significant dramatic reenactments of their story – reveries in a film that was about a condemned estate, yes, but also about time and place, dreams and wonder. Two of the residents had been cast for the lovers' parts. They were perfect and maybe I should come and meet them and talk to them.

Workshop for Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Estate, a Reverie, 2015. All rights reserved.This was quite a thought! What could I possibly say? How might they be reading Richardson's Titanic characters? There were some clues. Surrounded as they were by new developments called 'Avant-garde Tower' or 'Ability Plaza', Andrea's team were intrigued by the aspirational narrative of social rise that may have prompted the naming of these blocks. That was OK – I could talk about the driving Harlowe ambition to 'raise a family', or Richardson's Pamela and Fielding's spoof Shamela.

Andrea told me her Lovelace was mortified by the whole idea of rape, and as I should see, actually quite lovable – a big problem Richardson had with his own readers that had prompted considerable rewriting in the 1740s. This hinted at a possible sentimental deviation. It might be worth my pointing out that the name, Lovelace, was pronounced *Loveless* in the eighteenth century. But then wouldn't it be desirable to add, to suggest, that this made his devotion to Clarissa considerably more mysterious? Could I raise the questions this posed for me – was their love, a glimpse of the divine, possible in this world? What exactly was the attraction? Was there a mysterious purpose behind the suffering? Any purpose?

Steve/Lovelace/Loveless in a carriage in costume. Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Estate, a Reverie, 2015. All rights reserved.But it was a flattering sort of opportunity, and so with some of these questions in mind, on one lingering August evening I accepted a generous invitation to join the residents for a barbecue in the courtyard outside Samuel House. They were going to record Olivia Chaney's songs for the film. I'm not sure if I fully understood that for those involved, this was the last intimate but big shoot. I was probably more intent on what I was going to say when I met Lovelace, and how I was going to pay a proper tribute to his creator, founder of the European romantic novel…

I need not have worried. Andrea and her fellow residents had already grasped long ago anything that really needed to be said about that, as fast became evident as we hung around chatting over food and wine, mingling with the cast, and circling around the model of an elegant Georgian house that at some point in the evening, was going to be completely, dramatically consumed in flames.

Hadn't Andrea told me, "My main concern in the film are the people who live there in this place"? Everyone there knew this, and the effect of years of trust on that summer evening next to a crackling fire, was quiet, wistful, expectant, comradely and not to be forgotten.

Resistance to erasure

Go and see the film and you will instantly see that in this multi-layered dream tapestry, there are very few profound aspects of what Uriel Orlow refers to as, "survival, dignity, solidarity and community in the face of their erosion" that have not been captured in moving life transactions – sentiments, as Ken Worpole says, almost entirely missing from our contemporary political vocabulary, but embodied with great care in the people to whose determination, ingenuity and vivid imaginations this film is a glowing tribute.

Everyone will have their own favourite moments. For me, it is wonderful that the opening, as the voice calmly explains that, "only because it was time to go did we have *that* kind of time. The time that we had, the living of time. And we were all in it together. So we got on with it, and there was nobody left to tell us what we could or couldn't do"… is a tunnelling towards the bright light, *claritas*, that will become the destructive fire of Haggerston's Fire Scene. Between these visions, an eighteenth century pastoral idyll Richardson would have envied, a morning scene in which the camera pans across the window, from the dog regarding the cyclist riding by the swan on the canal, until it comes to rest on the cat seated at the other end of the sill. A brief moment of companionable harmony.

But there is no doubt that the film's heart lies with the truly Titanic characters of the Haggerston Estate, and their resounding victory, in screen time at least, over "their oppressors and the world besides." From the moment that John H's piano accordion starts up, it is their story, their unruly celebration of extraordinary everyday humanity that holds sway, cooking, gardening, painting, hairdressing, talking to their neighbours and to their beloved pets, reminiscing, and above all telling us what it has all been about.

Jeff. Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Estate, a Reverie, 2015. All rights reserved.The anecdotes are priceless – everyone on that estate should have been writing for openDemocracy. What wouldn't I have done to be able to publish the story of lovely Dave the squatter who went several extra miles before he was stopped, Bruce on plastic waste all over the world, Jeff on how to survive a cold winter night in his youth and on who the real thieves are, Marjorie or John B on war, or John B on the phone to the social services: "Do you need help from social services" "Yes." "Can you tell me what do you need help with?" "Not really no."… "You don't have a land line?" "No…..Got a parrot …" "Do you live alone?" "Can do" "Fill out the form will you? You do know you can give us a call when you need help?…"

As the flats get boarded up and the estate gets 'oranger and oranger' until the 'orange is winnin' – outsiders are best observing at a respectful distance. The history of stoked fear, contempt and misinformation about the estate and its heroic occupants is a long, long one. We watch the residents in discussion take ownership of their reputation and see them wrestle with a state ranging from the incompetent to the brutal in many life and death situations.

Installation. Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Estate, a Reverie, 2015. All rights reserved.None of this is dwelt upon except with a careful intelligence. A gentle riff on what it is to be welcome or unwelcome in images from the estate, moves on to the smaller and larger victories of life forms, flowers growing out of the crevices or overflowing window boxes as a kind of appeasement for what has gone before, knitted bedcovers, chicken pieces prepared earlier, perfect bags for storing your possessions if you have to leave home suddenly, like the Ghanaians in Nigeria, or Maciej, unconfirmed from Poland and forced out of a flat then left empty till demolition. Children and animals have their say in this film, faces are lingered upon. People just talk and talk it seems with all the time in the world: and you couldn't have better company anywhere in the capital or more on which to feast the eye.

Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Estate, a Reverie, 2015. All rights reserved.In her 'manifesto' published on openDemocracy to coincide with her earlier film, Taşkafa, Andrea writes:

"Film works as a memory of what once was (at the time of its making), but also as a deeply felt, present tense means of cultural-activist resistance to the ongoing erasure… where co-existence is banished."

Samuel Richardson would have been the first to acknowledge that *Estate: a Reverie* is the opposite of the "Kill-Time amusements" he so excoriated. Maybe that explains as well this feeling I have, that I'd like to watch it over and over again. Don't miss!

Estate, a Reverie has its UK premiere at the Open City Documentary Festival on 21 June 2015.

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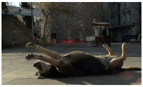

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