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3. Bloch on Film as Utopia: Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives*

Ian Fraser

Distant Voices, Still Lives focuses on a working class family in Liverpool in the Forties and Fifties and centres on a tyrannical father and how the mother and three children, Eileen, Maisie and Tony respond to his overbearing presence both when he is alive and when he is dead. The film in the first half, *Distant Voices*, moves back and forth in time as the characters remember incidents or memories are portrayed of their family life, both happy and sad. The second half, *Still Lives*, focuses on the developing lives of the family without the father as they experience births and marriages. The story is told in such a way by Davies that it offers us a picture of a lost world of the working class that has now been aesthetically preserved forever.

I analyse this film by utilising the potent theories of the Marxist philosopher and cultural critic Ernst Bloch. For Bloch, film is part of his utopian project that attempts to make us yearn for a principle of hope through moments of the 'Not-Yet'. Bloch understands hope as both subjective and objective (Bloch 1995: 7. Cf. Geoghegan: 34). Subjective hope refers to the 'intention towards possibility that has still not become', which is a 'basic feature of human consciousness' (Bloch 1995: 7). Objective hope arises when subjective hope is 'concretely corrected and grasped' and both form the 'hope-contents of the world'. On this basis, Bloch's Marxism is typified by uniting the 'cold stream of analysis' with the 'warm stream' that fires the imagination and passion in the consciousness of millions of people (Bloch 1995: 1369). It is therefore '*humanity actively comprehending itself*', an 'addressed humanity, one which is directed towards those alone who need it' (Bloch 1995: 1357). Moreover, because it is a 'concrete humanity' it 'also contains an embittered streak' because

it depends on which path it will take, 'anger' or 'exhortation', until it 'seeks, finds, and communicates objective salvation'. So even in misery there is a revolting element', which is an 'active force' against what is causing such misery in the first place. Once misery realises its causes it 'becomes the revolutionary lever itself' (Bloch 1995: 1357-8). Hence, 'Bloch's thought is rooted in a humanist anthropology which grounds his critique of oppression and emancipatory perspectives' (Kellner 2014). Consequently, Bloch begins with the real needs and desires of people in terms of their hopes and dreams and analyses what stops them being realised and he identifies capitalism as the main culprit.

Film, as part of this Marxist project of emancipation, is the 'movement of wishful dream'. It uses what is real to show another reality, and so displays how another society or world is circulating, even if it is hindered, in the present one, offering a 'wishful action' or a 'wishful landscape'. Film in its positive usage is like a 'powerful mirror – and distortion' - in which there are images that are concentrated to display a wish for the fullness of life and as information rich in imagery. It is as though the film can climb into the stalls and make the audience part of the experience. Bloch states that this is why Lenin could declare film 'one of the most important forms of art' (Bloch 1995: 410). So in contrast to, what he sees as, the bad dream factory of Hollywood, Bloch argues for the '*good* dream factory' or a 'camera of dreams', which critically inspires and is based on having a humanistic plan (Bloch 1995: 410). For Bloch, this is why Marxism is not simply 'contemplative but an instruction for action' and hence part of an emancipatory aesthetics in relation to film.

The key themes from Bloch's understanding of film that I want to focus on and relate to *Distant Voices, Still Lives* centre on his appreciation of film through pantomime and its component parts. These are the technical work of the camera, gesture and the 'micrological of

the incidental' and film as a mirror image of painting. All of these aspects will be shown to support Bloch's desire for film to offer us the wish for the fullness of life, employing a humanistic plan that uses what is real to display a different reality and show how another society is circulating in the present one in moments of the 'Not-Yet'. As we shall see, hope is present in the film predominantly in its subjective mode as something which seems to be absent but the possibility of it being concretely grasped emerges as we analyse some key scenes. There is certainly misery in the film but there is a revolting aspect to this misery in the complex relations of the family members in response to the dominance of the father, suggesting that a more emancipatory world may be possible.

We must also remember that the film is deeply autobiographical in its depiction of working class life and operates very much on the micro level. The scenes from the Second World War have no particular political import and the post-war consensus is merely implicit in that there is full employment. Capitalism, as the world of work and the power relations it engenders, remains relatively hidden. Hence, the film is somewhat dislocated from capital, however, larger themes do emerge from these microcosmic examinations of the human condition that can show us that the emancipatory hope for a different society and a greater humanity in our relations with each other is possible.

Pantomime

Bloch praises the early silent films for the ways in which they could express what could not be said in words, and so carried on the greatness of the art of pantomime (ibid.: 405). He considers Asta Nielsen (1881-1972), to be the first great film actress of the silent screen because she could, with the mere flicker of an eyelid or movement of her shoulder, express more than a myriad of average poets put together (Bloch 1995: 405 & 407). Bloch contends

that in the context of silent film gesture was to become incredibly potent in the expression of feeling and meaning (Bloch 1995: 406). In this regard, Bloch endorses the American film director D. W. Griffith's (1875-1948) technique of changing the viewpoints of the spectator, and for his use of close-ups, which revealed in the facial muscles of the actor moments of 'suffering, joy' and 'hope' (Bloch 1995: 406-407).¹ Silent film therefore offers the 'movement of wishful dream' (Bloch 1995: 407).

Bloch then considers sound-film and although it appeared that its arrival would imply the end of pantomime, the latter in fact survives it where the dialogue in a film falls silent (Bloch 1995: 408). The sound-films he approvingly mentions here are René Clair's 'masterpiece' *Un Chapeau de Paille d'Italie (An Italian Straw Hat, 1928)* and George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1943). Mimic expression also continues in that sound-film needs audible pantomime using noises, such as a pair of scissors cutting a canvas, or the drumming of raindrops on a window. All this produces what Bloch calls a 'micrological world of sensory perception and expression' where the sound-film presents 'thing-like gestures'. Photography and microphone reveal the 'whole of real experience in a streamlike mime' and film is like a 'powerful mirror' in which there are images that are concentrated to display a wish for the fullness of life and as information rich in imagery (Bloch 1995: 408).

Bloch also venerates the way silent film deals with the 'micrology of the incidental', which is not incidental at all, that is, it appears incidental but is actually showing something that is significant (Bloch 1995: 407). He offers as an example the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein's work *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) about the mutiny in Odessa during the failed 1905 Russian Revolution. Not only does Eisenstein depict such 'incidental' moments with people, as in the stamping boots sequence on the Odessa steps, but he also does it with things, as in

the cooking pots swaying with the ship, all of which increases the suspense and tension for the audience. Similarly, in his film *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1927) Eisenstein uses the firstly gentle, then violent, shaking of the giant chandelier in the Winter Palace, as a symbol for the wavering of the defenders of the Tsar (Bloch 1995: 407-8). What is interesting for Bloch's utopian Marxism here is that he includes seemingly apolitical films such as *Gaslight* along with more overtly political ones as is the case with Eisenstein's above. Bloch's Marxism is an expansive understanding of the many moments of the 'Not-Yet' in all its various forms that can impact on our consciousness to make us question the world and begin the process of emancipation in creating a better one. I now want to consider these aspects of pantomime in relation to *Distant Voices, Still Lives*.

One aspect of pantomime, for Bloch, is the technical use of camera and Davies' use of tracking is of note here. He describes tracking as being 'incredibly powerful and intimate' because 'it draws you into the film emotionally' and changes the relationship 'between the space and you' (quoted in Farley 2006: 52). This is evident at the start of the film as the camera follows the mother into the hallway and shows her exit right to the kitchen after calling her children to come down for breakfast. The camera stays fixed on the stairs as we hear but do not see the children descend, their shoes clipping the wood and then their greetings as they enter the kitchen and see their mother. The camera then continues its slow movement and makes a 180 degree turn to face the door which it has just entered. In a Blochian sense, the film has climbed into the stalls and pulled us into the house as though we will be part of this family for the next 85 minutes, creating an intense intimacy and intensifying the film's affective power. Moreover, by not showing the children yet we are being confronted with what we now assume is a present and a past, what was and what might be, and thereby an aesthetic representation of the 'Not-Yet' through memory and dreaming,

which the audience will be part of. Such long tracking shots and the 180 degree cutting permeate the film, drawing the audience in and as Bloch says, climbing into the stalls and making us part of the experience. Davies uses this technique to move forward towards the subject to frame it aesthetically and so preserve instances of working class life that we can compare and contrast with our own class identities in contemporary capitalism today.

In the front parlour of the house in the middle of the wall is a photograph of the father standing next to his horse framed on a mirror (INSERT FIGURE 3.1 HERE. CAPTION: The photograph of the father symbolically dominating the family). The positing of this photograph seems incidental on first watching the film but viewing it repeatedly it looms as a symbolic presence of him both in his life and in his death. However, it seems to me that the other members of the family are all reacting to him in different ways, so in the Blochian sense the photograph is incidental but really substantial as a representation of his dominance over their lives. This seems to undermine Paul Farley's contention that as the film does not have a central character there is a 'hole' in the film because although the father is a 'brutal patriarch', he 'doesn't hold' it (Farley 2006: 34). Instead, Farley argues that it is as though the 'whole film shows a family as if caught in a whirlpool'. In contrast, I will show that the whirlpool they are caught in emanates from the centrality of the father's influence.

Wendy Everett in her study of the film, proposes that the photograph of the father 'is not a consolation but a menace' (Everett 2004: 74) but I contend that she misunderstands its role in relation to the moments of hope and aspects of the 'Not-Yet' that occur in the film. There are a number of juxtapositions that display the sweet and tender moments of the father's character against the more dominant narrative of his brutality. So this should alert us to the aspects of objective hope that are present in the film, even in its darkest portrayals of the

misery of family life, and in the memories that are evoked in the mother and children about the father where subjective hope predominates. As such, an emancipatory ethics is possible here because the dialectical contradictions of our interpersonal relations point to the patriarchal power of the father that is symbolic of the patriarchal power of capitalism that has to be overcome for Bloch's utopian Marxism to succeed. I now want to explore this by examining some illustrative scenes.

Tracking is also related to memory because as we read from left to right 'a camera track left to right indicates forward movement', whereas a 'track in the opposite direction suggests a journey back in time' (Quoted in Farley 2006: 52). There is a right to left track that introduces a previous Christmas that begins by panning along a row of houses showing their front parlours with various decorations. Eventually the camera stops on the father who is carefully decorating a small Christmas tree that is on the sideboard. The mother brings the three young children to say goodnight to him before they go to bed and he reciprocates by gently uttering, 'goodnight kids'. The father is certainly not the ogre that he is meant to be here and the incident gains added poignancy when in the next scene he goes into their bedroom and places their Christmas stockings on the end of the bed. The three children are sleeping peacefully and a close-up of the father shows that he is deeply moved and almost in tears as he whispers, 'God bless', before he leaves the room.

In his commentary on the film, Davies explains how people have suggested that this scene makes the father more human and that they feel a certain amount of sympathy for him. Davies' response is dismissive because he contends that like all tyrants, the father shows sentimentality rather than real emotion. Moreover, if he wanted to show this he should have done so while they were awake and not when they were asleep. Davies is also amazed how

people reinterpret this scene as being sympathetic to the father when it was not his original intention. Yet, perhaps as a patriarch it is difficult for the father to express his more caring emotions and whether it was Davies' intention or not the artwork does have an autonomous life of its own in which resides its power. Moreover, Davies is ignoring the reasons why Tony and Eileen have a more ambiguous and nuanced relationship with the father which the film exposes so beautifully. Instead, Davies is aligning himself with the more one-dimensional viewpoint of Maisie, although understandable considering how she seemed to suffer more at her father's hands as we shall see shortly. So there is a moment of objective hope emerging here from within the misery that the father causes within the family and the 'revolting element' takes two forms: outright rejection or a compromise of sorts in the hope that relations can improve. The father, lest we forget, is also a victim of capitalism and we can surmise from his age that he lived through the harshness and brutality of the depression. This, again, is not to excuse his actions but we can at least understand them and hopefully try to change them to create a more emancipated world.

Nevertheless, the following scene has him again at his worst as he drags a tablecloth laden with Christmas food off the table in a rage of fury with the three children in terrified attendance and shouts, 'Nellie, clean it up!'. This is followed by him banishing Tony from the house and when he knocks at the door and asks why he cannot come in, is told there is no place for him there and that he should, 'frigg off'. The camera pans up to the front bedroom window to show that the mother has witnessed the awful scene and is in tears but totally helpless because of the prevailing power of her husband. Such juxtapositions, displaying sweet and tender moments of the father's character against the more dominant narrative of his brutality should alert us to the aspects of objective hope that are present in the film. This is

based on a subjective hope that is being denied, even in its darkest portrayals of family life, and in the memories that are evoked in the mother and children about the father.

The micrological of the incidental is present in the use of shadow as in the scene when the mother is falling asleep in an armchair by the fire and lighting shows her illuminated in a radiant glow but behind her is a dark shadow to suggest the lingering and ghostly presence of her husband. Similarly, a shot of the light penetrating an open window with the wind gently caressing the net curtain, has a voice-over by the mother who expresses delight at the light nights only for one of the daughters to say that they are drawing in now. Thunder is then heard along with the voice of the father aggressively shouting their names. Nonetheless, another memorable shot is more positive and indicative of objective hope as it depicts the mother sitting in a white, hazy frame with the photograph of the father to the right showing him in a more positive light and perhaps a reflection of why she married him in the first place.

Similarly, the implicit continuity with one shot leading to another is used imaginatively even when it appears to be in juxtaposition. For example, there is the eerie scene when the children are with the grandmother in the dark illuminated only by candles as they are looking into a mirror. She tells them that if you look in the mirror after midnight then you will see the devil. The next shot is of the father singing 'when Irish eyes are smiling' as he brushes the horse in a moment of care and affection while also doing a professional job. The implication from the previous scene is that he is the devil and it also links back to the photograph on the parlour wall as a symbol of his patriarchy but the contradictory nature of his character is to challenge this by showing him doing such a caring act. Moreover, unbeknown to him, the children have sneaked up into the loft to observe him from above and are no doubt also surprised to see their normally tyrannical father in this benign light. One possibility is that he cares more

about the horse than his family but we see enough instances of his kind moments to problematise that.

At the end of the film the mother is the one who has the last song after her son's wedding and she sings, 'thanks for everything', while Tony stands outside the house crying his heart out. There has been disagreement among commentators on why he does so (see Everett 2004: 77-8) but I want to suggest that this links back to the micrological incidental moment of the dominance of the photograph that framed the beginning of his wedding day because Tony is thinking about his father. Indeed, the trumpet song that is played while he is sobbing is Eddie Calvert's 'Oh Mein Papa'. The lyrics, unsung here, are instructive on further understanding Tony's relationship with his father because they say how wonderful he is and how much he is missed today which strengthens my interpretation. In his commentary, Davies says there is an 'unintended irony there', but unintended or not it captures perfectly Tony's real love for his father despite the way he and the family suffered at his hands. Tony's subjective hope that his father could be different manifests itself objectively in his own consciousness and the possibility that such a moment of emancipation will translate positively if and when he becomes a father.

To support this further, I want to refer to two pivotal scenes that the micrologically incidental moment of the photograph forces Tony back to remember and also contains Bloch's emphasis on gesture. In an early scene, Tony goes to the hospital to see his dying father who can barely speak. The scene prior to this has Tony at home with his mother who thanks him for coming to see his ill father but Tony tells her that he got compassionate leave from the army, which implies that he would not be there otherwise. He then looks at her, sees how upset she is and lowers his head almost shamefully for making such an admission. This

gesture is then repeated when the film cuts to the hospital and shows the father lying in bed and having difficulty breathing. The camera portrays Tony staring down at his father, now in a state of power over him at last. To his surprise, the father then says, 'I was wrong lad'. There is a slight tension because Tony pauses, apparently in a state of shock at the confession and he is trying to keep his emotions in check, and then he gulps before softly and soothingly replying: 'OK, dad. OK'. The shot lingers on Tony as he bows his head in a similar manner to the previous scene with his mother and is close to tears. The gesture of the bowing head is important here and shows a more complex attitude to the father from Tony than one of just 'menace' as Everett suggests. It is also moment of reconciliation between Tony and his father and a further instance of the 'Not-Yet' that Tony can relate to his own children should he have any. In his commentary on the film, Davies says this admission was a bit late in the day given all the damage the father inflicted. Tony, though, is more magnanimous than Davies.

A reciprocal scene that contains this gesture occurs with his mother when she is cleaning the hall floor. She shouts to Tony to tell him that his tea is in the oven. The camera frames him looking down at her as he had been looking down on his father in the hospital bed. He asks her if she is coming to have her tea as well and she says she will do but in a minute, that is, once she has finished her cleaning. The camera stays on him and he is almost in tears as he recognises the courageous and caring nature of this woman on her hands and knees before him and utters, 'OK mam', completing the symmetry of this gesture with his response to his less than courageous father but whose apology he accepted. Tony's figure then dissolves as the screen turns white and in the next scene he is in the pub alongside his fiancée singing, 'I want a girl, just like the girl that married dear old dad', to reinforce the appreciation and love he has for his mother but also his father.

Further support for this interpretation of the father occurs in a scene before Tony goes off in the car to get married. Eileen walks towards him in the parlour and the two of them are framed looking at each other in a single shot. However, in the centre of the frame is the micrological incidental photograph of their father with the horse. He holds centre stage even in death and part of their faces are reflected in the area of mirror outside the photograph suggesting, as if it could be denied, that part of their identity is shared with him and the powerful influence he has had on their lives, for good or bad. They both move out of shot to go into the hall but the camera stays still with the father's photograph now dominating the frame for about a further eight seconds before cutting back to the stairs to show a coat hanging on the newel-post and again, perhaps symbolic of the father who is not there in body but certainly in spirit.

So the micrologically incidental presence of the photograph and the gesture of understanding and forgiveness encapsulated in the bowing of Tony's head and the phrase 'OK, dad' and 'OK, mam', reinforce a more enlightened appreciation of the role of the father within the family. This is a moment of objective hope even in the most painful moments that we can experience within a family as an institution but which also show us that things do not need to be that way and can inform the choices and actions we make as we constitute our own identities. Bloch's utopian Marxism encourages us to do this with its focus on the everyday and the seemingly incidental for moments of the 'Not-Yet' on the path to a more emancipatory world.

Eileen also has a contradictory attitude towards her father as he produces both positive and negative emotions in her. After the initial scene where we have been shown the father's coffin in the hearse, the next scene is her wedding day. They are all framed in the shot with

the father's photograph behind them but central. Then the camera zooms in slowly for a close-up of Tony and Eileen with the photograph still prominent behind but between them. Eileen is contemplative and then says suddenly, 'I wish my dad was here'. It is at this point that the differing responses to the father come to the fore because the camera pans right on to Maisie who, with a slight grimace, says to herself, 'I don't. He was a bastard and I bleedin' hated him!' The subsequent scene of her cleaning the cellar floor to get money from him for the dance shows why, as he beats her repeatedly with a broom even as she screams out in pain. Maisie sees no redemptive qualities in her father and this is expressed in the shot after the hearse has pulled up outside the front door. Maisie is the furthest away from the photograph. The mother, Tony and Eileen are in far greater proximity indicating their own closeness to their father. When they are viewing their father's body, the photograph is positioned close to Maisie's head but she suddenly moves forward and puts a comforting arm around her mother. Tony and Eileen are now on the outskirts of the shot suggesting that they are the ones who have lost something and Maisie is claiming her mum for herself.

The next scene has Eileen say again that she wishes her dad was here as she looks at Tony who then has his more contradictory memories of his relationship with him as we have seen above. Davies then cleverly juxtaposes the next scene where the family go to the hospital to see the father, who is lying in bed and barely able to breathe. There is then a voice-over of Micky saying to Eileen, 'he was all right your dad'. Eileen responds by telling Micky that she was the only one that could get round him and we then see her charm the father to get money so her and Eileen can go to the dance. The more human side of the father as an expression of objective hope is presented here as he smiles at the way he is being coaxed and utters affectionately that they are 'bleedin dance mad'. His darker side expressing the subjective absence of hope is never far away though, and as they return from the dance and are having a

last cigarette outside before going to bed, the father warns Eileen to hurry up and come in. He agrees to her having a few more minutes but within a few seconds he screams, 'Eileen, what bleedin' time do you call this! and has her scurrying inside as quickly as she can to appease him. Yet the counterpoint to this is a few scenes later on her wedding night, when we see Eileen outside the pub, sobbing hysterically as she is comforted by Tony. She cries out twice, 'I want my dad!' so there is a real longing that she has for him even after he is dead.

A few scenes later, bad memories are evoked for Eileen. During the war, the children have been pulling a cart laden with wood and the air raid siren goes off. They have become separated from their parents and at Eileen's initiative they hide under the cart and eventually take the chance to run to the shelter. As she goes towards her father he slaps her across the face and angrily asks her where she has been. She stands there, her face covered in soot, and seemingly in a state of shock staring at the camera as her father puts his arms around her. The noise of the bombs landing can be heard and the father looks frightened and asks Eileen to sing, which she does while looking vacant and lost straight at the camera. The scene perfectly captures the contradictory nature of the father from aggression to touching concern within an instant and the almost helpless look from Eileen as she stares into the camera seems to be saying to us, look at how difficult this man is to deal with. Hostility one minute and concern the next.

In another scene, Eileen is waiting for her date and there is a knock at the door. She expects it to be him and is smiling as she opens the door but her smile disappears and the camera cuts to show her dishevelled father crumpled and sweating, standing outside almost on the point of passing out. He tells her he has signed himself out of hospital and that he has walked home. He then slumps sideways exhausted on to the door frame. The following scene shows his

dead body which is then followed by Eileen tenderly asking him to say goodbye to her as she is going away to work. The photograph is posited above and to the left of her head in the corner of the shot as though she is between the dead and the living father, which in memory she will of course always be. She remonstrates with him saying she is only going for the season but he sits there staring into space uttering nothing. There is then a close-up of Eileen as she stares down at him and says, 'Do you know what? If I ever get a gun, I'll blow your bleedin' brains out'. She is angry but her face reveals that she is also upset which is confirmed a few scenes later when she is on the train.

Jingles tells her to have a cigarette which she smokes and despite Micky's attempts at song to cheer her up, her hands shake, she begins to cry as she stares out of the window and into space just like her father had. The screeching sound of the train wheels also captures the inner emotional turmoil of Eileen. We then see shots of her working frantically as a waitress in a seaside hotel in Pwllheli and the mother's voice-over tells her to come home as her father is seriously ill so she cuts short her work and he gets his own way as she returns to the house. So why does the father not want Eileen to go? In his commentary on the film, **Davies** explains that it is because the father was very possessive, a trait present in all tyrants who want to keep their subjects close at hand. However, it might also be that the father does have real affection for her. It is worth mentioning the power of the actor, Pete Postlethwaite, here to suggest some ambiguity and how this relates to Bloch's appreciation of the pantomimic actions of actors. The father says nothing but he sighs deeply and turns his head to one side to look away from her. Why the sigh? A sigh can be an expression of many things and a sense of loss can certainly be one of them. Again this is not to deny the overriding negative understanding of his character but to appreciate that we are complex beings that can be open

to acts of kindness as well as evil and which Postlethwaite's acting exposes so potently in its subtlety.

On a more macro level, the father's dialectical movement between despotic and more enlightened rule seems to mirror the harshness of pre-Second-World-War capitalism and its more caring face after 1945 with the post-war consensus. Both, of course, are still forms of capitalist control that have emerged out of class struggle just as the father's domination has taken these two forms in relation to his children. Bloch's Marxism as a critique of both forms of oppression means that his utopian solution is to transcend them on the emancipatory path to affirm objective hope in a better world.

Yet Eileen also has to face an admittedly milder but still a powerful form of patriarchy and possessiveness with her own husband, Dave, who also seems to replicate these forms of capitalist rule. She often expresses her own unhappiness by perceiving what she interprets as the unhappiness of others but is a reflection of her own sense of misery in her marriage. This is highlighted in a scene after her wedding where she is sitting back to camera with the fire glowing before her framed in the right side of the shot. What should be a comforting feeling of warmth from the fire is instead its opposite as a fire that can burn and Dave's voice, off camera, shouts, 'You're married now. I'm your husband. Your duty's to me, frigg everyone else. Monica, Jingles, that's all ancient history now'. Eileen begins to shake and sob inconsolably as the fire burns away in front of her but the way the shot is composed it is as if the fire is very close to her face, indicating that she may be about to be consumed by it as a symbol of Dave's patriarchal control.

On the way back from the pub, Dave urinates outside the house before entering and begins singing while the grandmother is also shouting at Eileen to get in, as her father had done when she was younger when having a final cigarette with Micky outside. Eileen says after he has finished urinating, 'I'm sure I was put on this earth to be tormented'. Similarly, when Eileen and Dave are eating their tea while listening to the radio, Eileen is annoyed and disgusted with the noise Dave makes while he eats, which he is oblivious to when she points it out to him. The confining nature of her life is expressed by her exasperated plea as she asks is this what she has got to endure for the next twenty-five years?

Eileen also reveals her unhappiness with her interactions with her friends. She is often asking them if something is wrong in their relationship or expressing her own anger and frustrations vicariously. At one point she asks Micky if her husband Red ever hits her and Micky laughs such a suggestion off. Yet it is even more risible because the love that Micky and Red display is clear for everyone to see. They do so by mocking and making fun of each other but this is a couple that are so affirmed in their love that they can afford to do that. Indeed, it is the way that they show their love by denying it through humour. For Eileen, Dave is anything but funny and that something darker is taking place within their relationship is intimated further when Micky says she will pop round to visit Eileen as they do not see enough of each other. Eileen recoils and tells her that Dave would not like that. Micky senses something is wrong but knows not to interfere and makes her excuses and leaves. Of course, one other reason why they have not seen enough of each other is because we know that Dave has already said her friends are 'ancient history' and her loyalty must be to him first. This tension is further exposed in the scene when Jingles and her aggressive husband Les come to the pub after the christening of Maisie's baby.

Jingles is first seen outside the pub with her husband belligerently telling her that they are not staying long. He is an obvious brute and Jingles is evidently scared of him. She joins Eileen and Micky and sings along with one of their songs until she cannot bear the pressure any longer and begins to cry. Her husband is in the doorway shouting at her and Eileen is becoming increasingly furious and suggests she might go up and tell him how awful he is behaving. Jingles can see the danger and what would await her if Eileen did so and quickly decides to obey him and leaves. Eileen cannot help commenting on what has happened and attempts to show a sisterly solidarity with Jingles' plight but Dave intervenes and tells her it is none of her business. At first it seems that Eileen is again showing her unhappiness vicariously through Jingles but she is also defiant in relation to Dave here. She points out that Jingles is her friend, calls Dave a 'callous bleeder' and says like all men you only think of yourselves. Dave starts to get angry and tells Eileen not to tell him what he should think and adds that no one knows what is going on in his mind. Eileen wittily, but still angrily, retorts, 'including you'. Dave tries to justify himself by stating that women are different from men and that it is impossible to have an argument with Eileen because she 'flies off the handle at the least thing'. Eileen will not relent and denies this saying that given what has happened to Jingles she has 'good cause to'. They are near to having a full argument and the tension between them is palpable when the mother intercedes, tells them not to fall out with each other and asks Micky to sing to divert matters. After this, there is then a close-up of Eileen as she sings a song on her own called, 'I Want to be Around', about having your heart broken and is clearly linked to her increasing dissatisfaction with her husband. She is close to tears when she finishes and the poignancy of shattered dreams and hope lost is clearly evident as an example of subjective hope. Nevertheless, that she is attempting to stand up to Dave and assert the rights of women against male dominance and aggression suggests a moment of the

‘Not-Yet’ and an objective hope that perhaps is a portent of the liberation that awaits such women with the second wave of feminism that was to develop from the 1960s.

Again, Davies approaches these issues very much on the micro level but if we follow Bloch’s Marxism through we must venture beyond to the macro level and how the patriarchy present is symbolic of the nature of the power relations in capitalism. The repetition of the patriarchy from the father and then on to Dave in Eileen’s life almost reflects the structural constraints of capital on subjects seeking their emancipation. Yet for Bloch, it is ‘precisely in the Nothing of this point zero’ that ‘Marx teaches us to find our All’ and ‘struggle against the dehumanisation which culminates in capitalism until it is completely cancelled out’ (Bloch 1995: 1358). In this way, Marxism’s ‘goal-content is, can be, will be nothing but the promotion of humanity’.

These pantomimic moments at the micrological level have put us in touch with major themes that give instances of a ‘Not-Yet’ when patriarchy and capitalist domination can be overcome and women and men can treat each other fairly and equally and so achieve objective hope. The affective power of the film in showing how patriarchy operates can fulfil Bloch’s Marxist edict to fire the imagination and consciousness of millions of people, an addressed humanity that comprehends itself to overcome such oppression and achieve the ‘hope-contents of the world’.

Painting

Bloch also compares film’s images to being like a painting (Bloch 1995: 411-12). He admits that the ‘art of film-illusion’ is not painting or poetry even in its most potent forms but maintains that it ‘still gives an *image* which allows *movement*, and a *narration*’ that can

demand the ‘descriptive *standstill* of a close-up’ (Bloch 1995: 411). Bloch argues that cinema cannot become a ‘mixed creation’ in the way that ‘Lessing’s “Laocoon” defined narrative painting, descriptive poetry’ (Bloch 1995: 411). Bloch is referring to Lessing’s 1776 work on philosophical aesthetics (Lessing 2005) that took its title from the famous marble statue depicting the Trojan priest Laocoon (Osborne 1993: 641). Both he and his two sons are being squeezed to death by snakes as punishment for alerting the Trojans not to trust the wooden horse being offered by the Greeks. For Bloch, Lessing denoted that painting illustrates ‘only actions **through** bodies’ whereas poetry represents ‘only bodies through actions’. Film ‘shows actions...through moved, not stationary bodies; so that the borders between descriptive space-form, narrative time-form disappear’ according to Bloch (Bloch 1995: 411-12). Bloch suggests that because film can represent every object it ‘has at least become as broad as a painting, and the image is always the primary thing even in the sound-film’ (Bloch 1995: 412). Film is a ‘soi-disant painting’ that has ‘become a succession of actions, a soi-disant poetry itself a juxtaposition of bodies: and the Laocoon of the film, in contrast to that of the statue, screams’. What Bloch is alluding to here, although he does not explain so himself, is Lessing’s thesis that the statue does not depict Laocoon in a fully realistic light. He is meant to be suffering extreme pain but this is not completely expressed as it would negate the beauty of the artwork. For Bloch, Laocoon has a ‘rigid grimace’ whereas in a film, even in the standstill of a close-up, this grimace would be only transient rather than rigid, so ‘every background turns towards the foreground here, and the wishful action or wishful landscape so essential to the film climbs, although only photographed, into the stalls’.

Interestingly, Bloch also has a discussion of painting as a ‘wishful landscape’ of utopian moments (Bloch 1995: 794-820). In a short section entitled, ‘*Still Life composed of human beings*’, he focuses on the Dutch artists Johannes Vermeer (1632-75), Gabriel Metsu (1629-

67) and Pieter de Hooch (1629-83) (Bloch 1995: 796-7), generally referred to as the Delft school of painters. He notes how in their paintings of interiors ‘everything becomes a parlour here, even in the street, a stove is always burning, even outside in the spring’ (Bloch 1995: 796). For Bloch, all three painters ‘portrayed such cosy living, a home sweet home still without any mustiness’ as ‘sunbeams pour through the small silent scene’ and the interior is ‘structured by light falling in at various angles’. As Bloch explains further, ‘nothing but domestic everyday life is painted in the Dutch genre picture, but for all its nearness it is also presented in just the same way as a sailor may see it from a distance when he thinks of home: as the small, sharp painting which bears homesickness within it’. Bloch explains how within these paintings there are maps of the world hanging on the walls to indicate a larger theme of what surrounds this ‘domestic comfort’ and how the ‘rooms and windows looking out on to the street are painted as if there were no disruption in the world’ and where ‘nothing is in a hurry’ (Bloch 1995: 797).

Paul Farley relates how Davies has repeatedly referred to Vermeer as an ‘inspiration and exemplar’ in his work (Farley 2006: 58). Farley identifies the framing of the mother when she is cleaning the windows and the hall as examples of this and there are a number of other incidences that also fall into Bloch’s appreciation of the Dutch painters of this period in general.

Bloch mentions the use of the stove that is always burning and within the *Distant Voices* part of the film this is evident with the open fire. It is used on a number of occasions to portray the cosiness of living at home through the numerous shots of the mother sitting beside it to the final camera track into it as we move from *Distant Voices* into *Still Lives*. Yet, as a depiction of the reality of a complex ordinary life the fire also has negative connotations as when

Eileen is berated by Dave as we saw earlier. Tony also throws the last few pennies he has into the fire rather than give them to his father, who then belligerently pokes them further into the flames to melt. Even these negative scenes are framed like paintings, and so they should be, as even the horrors and miseries of life deserve to be depicted aesthetically as a pictorial rendition of the reality of our complex existence and are the ‘screams’ that the Laocoon of the film allows.

The use of light by these painters, ‘sunbeams’ pouring through ‘the small scene’ is another feature that Bloch draws attention to and in the scenes with the mother the analogies are lucid. Additionally, these painters captured servants in their everyday activities and similarities persist as the mother and children in a patriarchal household also acted as servants. Maisie in particular is singled out for domestic chores as in the scene in the cellar and when she is shovelling coal. She stands under the coalhole with the shaft of light illuminating her in the darkness as she looks upwards and declares that she will kill her father if anything happens to her mother. The servant theme is also continued when Eileen and her friends go to Pwllheli to work as waitresses in a hotel; a shot frames the three of them side by side in their black and white uniforms nervously anticipating the work they will do (INSERT FIGURE 3.2 HERE. CAPTION: Ready for work?). Similarly, the real world of work enters in the scene where George and Tony fall from the scaffolding and crash into the glass windows beneath them. These are the few scenes that present the world of work but they do indicate certain aspects of labour within capitalism at that time. Work in the house is assumed to be done by women rather than men. The work in the hotel is indicative of the impending increase in the tertiary sector of the economy as the century progresses. The accident at work evokes dangerous conditions within which such labour is performed. That Davies can depict

such scenes so aesthetically illustrates how the Laocoon of the film can act as a painting and so preserve moments of the labours of everyday life just as the Dutch painters accomplished.

The framing of women throughout the film also draws strong links with the Delft Dutch style with the compositional shots of Eileen and Micky as they stand outside the open front door having one last cigarette before bed. Or there is the shot of them and Jingles at the kitchen table composed around a bottle of perfume that an admirer has bought for Eileen. Kitchen utensils sit on the mantelpiece behind them and stockings hang from a rail above their heads to relay the 'domestic everyday life of the scene' but indicate a larger world outside as the perfume is Chanel No. 5. The three of them are wide-eyed, staring in awe at the bottle, which we can see is symbolic of the development of consumer capitalism, the increase in living standards for the working class that will occur in the decade ahead and their subsequent absorption into the capitalist system. Yet from a Blochian perspective, there is also a longing for the 'Not-Yet' in such moments as well in terms of 'wishful images in the mirror' where we want ourselves to look and feel nice and is evidence of our genuine needs and desires (Bloch 1995: 340). The problem is when such wishing occurs within an ideological world and so becomes passive and unthreatening, with the end placed on increasing social mobility rather than enacting social revolution. The key, then, is to turn subjective hope into objective hope and make these moments of the 'Not-Yet', these wishful images, into a reality and live a more authentic existence within but eventually beyond the confines of capitalism.

There is also a scene after Eileen, Tony and Maisie are standing outside after Eileen's wedding. The shot dissolves and they have now gone but the camera stays on the door but now also includes part of the front parlour window in the frame. A shaft of light emanates from the parlour onto the inside of the hall so structuring the interior at various angles and

outlines of the wedding guests and family are barely visible through the vibrant whiteness of the light reflected on the net curtains. We are outside looking in but the power of the picture presented using light gives its nearness and also its distance just as Bloch specifies it does for a sailor who sees the image from far away. The shot is so extraordinary in its ordinariness and this is enhanced further as another dissolve now shows us that the door is shut and the lights are off as though the inner lives are hermetically sealed in their everyday domesticity until the camera pans up to the top window and a dissolve takes us through it bathed in the morning light.

These aesthetic portraits of everyday life fulfil Bloch's Marxist desire for film to be like painting and so create an affective power in the consciousness of the audience. What we see here are encapsulations of working class life at a particular period in history that future generations can look back at and imaginatively share in. These are pictorial moments of subjective and objective hope that show how working class life was and how it might be in different world once emancipation from capitalism has been achieved.

Conclusion

Bloch's utopian Marxism that begins with the needs and desires of people translates into a movement from subjective to objective hope through moments of the 'Not-Yet' and offers an emancipatory political project to defeat oppression and ultimately transcend capitalism. Film is one important part of such an aim and it is through his focus on pantomime with the technical work of the camera, gesture and the 'micrological of the incidental' and film as a mirror image of painting that he illustrates this. Bloch's is an expansive Marxism that marauds across cultural forms in the search for instances of the 'Not-Yet' wherever they may be. As applied to *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, across the above themes, the film shows us on a

micro level the interpersonal relations of working class life in a particular historical period in all its misery but also in moments of hope. Although largely dislocated from capital, Bloch's Marxism allows us to draw the wider implications of the patriarchal power relations that operate in the film, particularly with the father, and the attempts by people to develop a 'revolting element' against these relations in various ways. We, as viewers, have through the sheer aesthetic power of the film, been pulled out of the stalls and entered its world with the Blochian hope being that we too can create a better society and so act as a *'humanity actively comprehending itself'*.

Notes

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¹ Griffith's major film was *Birth of a Nation* (1914) which, controversially, was about the American Civil War and the rise of the Klu Klux Klan based on Thomas Dixon's novel and play, *The Clansman*. The film was interpreted as being sympathetic to the Klan. Bloch doesn't mention the film or its subject matter, but does explicitly attack the Klan for being fascists (pp. 347-349).

List of Figures

Figure 3.1. The photograph of the father symbolically dominating the family

Figure 3.2. Ready for work?

Both from, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988).

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