
It has to be a sign of a good introduction to any film or book that it makes you want to go back and re-watch or re-read the text: and that is precisely what Paul Farley’s elegant analysis of Terence Davies’ 1988 film *Distant Voices, Still Lives* achieves. Every BFI Classics publication has an individual voice and succeeds in providing an almost intimate entry to a text whether or not it has been experienced before. Most of the time this has to do with the quality of the author, and in this case the poet Farley becomes intertwined with his examination of the film, weaving his memories in and out of the stories told in *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. The picture painted of the past is so rich in both the film and the book that even those born since the 1950s cannot think of the past as another country, but as firmly situated in one we recognise in the anachronisms of the modern. Farley and Davis create the past as something so detailed that the reader can almost smell it; but as Farley notes, ‘we should go in fear of writing about things we admire. It’s a dangerous business’ (7).

Given Farley’s background as a poet, I have no doubt that some readers might find his prose style too atmospheric rather than explicitly analytical, but the way in which he approaches what should really be regarded as a pair of films (the comma in the title indicates a split between the narratives that is sometimes forgotten) is deeply reflective and detailed in the perspective he brings to the examination. The past, he notes, accounting for the attractions of *Distance Voices, Still Lives* for the spectator, ‘stands there in the distance, still poorly mapped, a place of family stories and discrete silences, half-remembered things; lit by a few photographs with pinked edging, but essentially formless’ (9). This process of mapping is an apt way of describing the way in which Farley structures his analysis of Davies’ work, as he maps Davies within the context of his own ‘family stories and discrete silences’.

In recent years, the television films of Stephen Poliakoff have become better known, especially since the wonderful *Shooting the Past* (1999), which still spellbinds me as Lindsay Duncan tells the story of Liam Cunningham’s character’s grandmother through the images found within the archive. Poliakoff’s work shares much with the tone and subject matter of Davies’ films with their reminders that dialogue and tone are more important than action and that the past has to be re-envisioned to be understood. For both, Farley’s observations upon representing the past hold true: ‘It’s as if memories heard second-hand as family stories, and childhood memories themselves,
are malleable, and can be edited together and organised formally. Reality is rearranged to achieve a formal truth’ (17).

Yet the ‘formal truth’ of Distant Voices, Still Lives is one which seems to have more solidity than the once remove of Poliakoff’s films. For Davies’ characters, unlike Poliakoff’s Lizzie in Friends and Crocodiles (2005), the memory of the ‘garden’ is not ‘always so beautiful’: the formal truth of spaces for Davies, as Farley explains so clearly, is one of power, or regimes and status. The way the house is ‘told’ in Distant Voices, Still Lives, for example, ‘constructs a strong sense of verticality’, with characters ‘belonging’ to particular areas within the house, controlling and taking ownership of the different spaces at different points in either film (21). However, while the house creates that formal space for a kind of vérité, Farley argues that it is the language of the film that is responsible for the text’s stylistic realism: ‘The triangulation of banter… is one of the absolute delights of the film. It’s all there: the cadences, the rhythms, the mad demotic and dialect words and catchphrases from popular song or the movies. It all sounds so much more real than earnest voice-coaching’ (47–8).

This eye for detail in Davies’ work, the acknowledged influence of his childhood environments on the mise-en-scène and sound of his films, is, of course, one of the reasons why Davies should be measured alongside Mike Leigh and Ken Loach as exponents of late British realism: there are echoes of the social realism of the 1960s but the past the spectator sees in Davies also has something in common with the 1940s and 1950s that Dennis Potter ‘rearranged’ in The Singing Detective and Lipstick on Your Collar – it challenges the viewer to re-engage with his or her own past. This challenge is best epitomised in Distant Voices, Still Lives in the photographic poses to which Farley also draws the readers’ attention, photographs which recall sorrow and joy for those involved: ‘There’s a beautiful play between the strict sense of a single pictorial pose and sense of depth and texture within it’ (52). Yet, as Farley notes, having interviewed Davies for this book: ‘Davies is sceptical about any deliberate aim to produce an aesthetic of the photo album on his past… “Because we didn’t have a camera”’ (55).

In conclusion, if you enjoyed Distant Voices, Still Lives but know little about Davies and his other films, you will find this book quite revelatory. If, in contrast, you’ve never watched it, this will make you want to rush order the DVD. The BFI series never fails to enlighten its readership and Farley in particular has put so much of himself into this book that it truly complements any viewing of Davies’ work.

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