



**NFTS AT 50**

# Of Time and the City

+ Q&A with director Terence Davies

There is something mysterious about Terence Davies' Liverpool from the outset: at the heart of this meditation on the city lies a tension, between urban change as a process that is brutal and unremitting, and the persistence of memory as something that is delicate and filamentary. We weave our memories into a palimpsest of dreams where time and place melt into each other. Memories become maps through places to which we can never return in a world that is changing all about us.

In *Of Time and the City* Davies presents us with a wondrously idiosyncratic and elegiac journey that is filled with anger, joy and despair. He becomes the 'angel of history' hovering over Liverpool, alternately caressing his troubled city or pouring scorn on the forces that have brought it to its knees. The film is punctuated by quotes from poetry, literature and philosophy that are narrated to us by Davies with a sense of staccato urgency: poignant lines chosen from Chekhov, Engels, Joyce and others inform us that this is a serious film from the outset. This is not a film that panders to an existing audience but one that seeks to create a new one, and Davies is not making a pitch to our touristic curiosity, nor is he using the city in a narrowly didactic sense. This is a deeply personal mode of documentary filmmaking that is imbued with a profound sense of emotional intimacy.

Like Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Il vangelo secondo Matteo*, released to general amazement in 1964, Davies uses music to sublime effect. Both Pasolini and Davies select music that, through its apparent incongruity, generates a powerful sense of authenticity and immediacy: faces, images and landscapes are dramatically transformed into far more than their mere physical presence as stones, bricks or flesh. In *Of Time and the City* Davies furiously juxtaposes music with place to transcend the petty cruelties of organised religion or the grinding toil of working-class life. Decaying housing estates are set to Bacarisse; cranes and industrial architecture to Mahler.

Davies reserves his real scorn for the British establishment in all their ineptitude and mean-spirited mediocrity. He exposes the flummery and sexual hypocrisy of organised religion with relish. He excoriates the monarchy and other archaic forms of gluttony that feast on the goodwill of ordinary folk. As we see newsreel footage of the royal marriage – 'Betty and Phil with a thousand flunkies' – and the gilded carriage passes through cheering crowds Davies reminds us that at the time, Britain was home to some of the worst slums in Europe. His droll disdain for the establishment is also extended to its would-be cultural assassins such as The Beatles who are rendered little more than a ghostly and ironic presence. Just as Joe Strummer rejected 'phoney Beatlemania' back in 1977 Davies derides the 'fab four' as looking like 'a firm of provincial solicitors' – 'yeah, yeah, yeah' indeed.

As for post-war architecture Davies notes with acerbic understatement that 'Municipal architecture, dispiriting at the best of times, but when combined with the British genius for creating the dismal, makes for a cityscape that is anything but Elysian.' These would-be utopias had by the early 1970s become spaces of decline and emptiness scattered with broken glass and

overlooked by boarded-up windows. 'We hoped for paradise; we got the *anus mundi*: a city in a state of retraction and disorder. Liverpool had become a testing ground where urban experiments had been forcibly grafted onto the damaged city. These new architectural forms were often poorly constructed and maintained, displaying but a faint echo of their exemplary prototypes in European cities, and containing their own versions of built-in senescence to match the social and political neglect of their new occupants.

The archival footage is superbly collated, ranging from the smallest details of family life – such as struggles to keep warm through the dank winter months – to the impact of immense historical events including troops leaving for the Korean War in the 1950s or the large-scale demolition of the city in the 1960s. The grandeur of the past – smartly-dressed crowds waving hats, football before its decent into greed and venality, and above all a sense of dynamism and industriousness – is counterpoised with the bleak emptiness of the post-industrial city.

Liverpool has been the traumatised epicentre of Britain's full-scale industrial decline since the 1960s with a greater population loss than almost any other British city. Unlike former industrial cities in Europe such as Hamburg or Milan, which have successfully rebuilt themselves, it is apparent that Liverpool's contemporary renaissance is slender indeed: not a replenished civil society or newfound industrial acumen but a retail desert populated by gaggles of drunken figures tottering around beneath the glare of streetlights and security cameras.

The final tracking shots of gentrified docks and warehouses evoke a sense of placelessness: these waterside developments with their familiar 'brandsapes' could be any one of a number re-fashioned industrial waterfronts from Baltimore to Buenos Aires. 'As we grow older,' observes Davies, 'the world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated... and now I'm an alien in my own land.' We float with Davies across neon-lit landscapes or hover over boutiques and wine bars that were once factories or churches. 'We are being gathered in at gloaming,' intones Davies, as the city becomes a myriad of strange illuminations in the failing light. What has Liverpool been? What have we been?

Beautiful and scathing in equal measure, *Of Time and the City* must surely rank as one of the best films about a British city that has ever been made. But the film is not simply about Liverpool: it is also a mordant response to the failures and disappointments of post-war Britain and a bittersweet exploration of the delicate connections between memory and place that anchor our sense of individual and collective identity amidst the tumult of historical change.

**Matthew Gandy (Professor of Cultural and Historical Geography and Fellow of King's College, University of Cambridge), *Of Time and the City* DVD booklet essay (BFI, 2009)**

## **Madonna and Child**

The centrepiece of Davies' Liverpool-set Trilogy focuses on his fictional alter-ego in middle age.

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## OF TIME AND THE CITY

*Directed by:* Terence Davies  
*©:* Hurricane City Limited, Digital Departures  
Northwest Vision and Media & Digital Departures *presented in association with the* Liverpool Culture Company *and* BBC Films  
*Made with the support of* Northwest Vision + Media *through the* Merseyside Film and Television Fund *a project part-funded by the* European Regional Development Fund, Northwest Regional Development Agency *through* The Regional Attraction Fund, the UK Film Council, the Liverpool Culture Company  
*Executive Producers:* Christopher Moll, Lisa-Marie Russo  
*Produced by:* Solon Papadopoulos, Roy Boulter  
*For Digital Departures: Production Executive:* Tracy O’Riordan;  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Barbara Kirby; *Pre-production Co-ordinator:* Sian Hilton-Parry; *Production Accountants:* Joanne Bendon, Jason Potter; *Post-production Supervisor:* Shuna Frood  
*For Northwest Vision and Media: Head of Development/Production:* Helen Bingham; *Finance Manager:* Colin Phillips  
*For The Liverpool Culture Company: Executive Producer:* Fiona Gasper  
*For BBC Films: Head of Programme Acquisition:* Steve Jenkins  
*Production Manager:* Karen Radford  
*Archive Producer:* Jim Anderson  
*Archive Researchers:* Mike McKibbin, Angela Byrne  
*Written by:* Terence Davies  
*Director of Photography:* Tim Pollard  
*Camera Assistant:* Dominic O’Keeffe  
*Lighting Gaffer:* Colin Sage  
*Editor:* Liza Ryan-Carter  
*Colourist:* Jamie Parry  
*Camera Hire:* Fact Media Services  
*Track/Dolly:* Panavision Manchester  
*Lighting Hire:* Pro-Vision Manchester  
*Music Supervisor (for DNA Music/Quantum Noise):* Ian Neil  
*Dubbing Mixer:* Adam Ryan-Carter  
*Sound Engineers:* David Coyle, Steven Guy  
*EPK:* Krishna Stott, Philip Shotton  
*Unit Publicity:* Keeley Naylor, Zoe Flower, emfoundation

UK 2008©  
74 mins

## MADONNA AND CHILD

*Directed by:* Terence Davies  
*©/Production Company:* National Film School  
*Production:* Mike Maloney  
*Assistant Director:* Kees Ryninks  
*Continuity:* Victoria McBain  
*Written by:* Terence Davies  
*Cameraman:* William Diver  
*Assistant Cameraman:* Sergio Leon  
*Grip:* Tim Rolt  
*Editor:* Mick Audsley  
*Sound Recordist:* Antoinette de Bromhead  
*Dubbing Editor:* Geoff Hogg  
*With special thanks to:* Sacred Heart Parish Church, H.A. Harben & Co., The Harold Ackerley Studio, Canon Kennedy Primary School

## Cast

Terry O’Sullivan (*Robert Tucker*)  
Sheila Raynor (*Robert’s mother*)  
Paul Barber  
John Meynell  
Brian Ward  
Dave Cooper  
Mark Walton  
Mal Jefferson  
Lovette Edwards  
Rita Thatchery  
Eddie Ross

UK 1980  
30 mins

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## NFTS AT 50

### Saint Maud + Q&A with director Rose Glass

Thu 2 Sep 17:45

### The Last Tree + Q&A with director Shola Amoo

Sat 11 Sep 17:00

### Il Postino (The Postman) + Q&A with director Michael Radford

Sun 12 Sep 17:00

### An Evening with Roger and James Deakins

Sun 12 Sep 20:30

### Absolute Beginners + Q&A with director Julian Temple and cinematographer Oliver Stapleton BSC

Wed 15 Sep 20:25

### The Souvenir + Q&A with director Joanna Hogg

Fri 17 Sep 17:45

### The Selfish Giant + Q&A with director Clio Barnard

Mon 20 Sep 20:50

### Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit + Q&A with director Beeban Kidron

Thu 23 Sep 18:00

### Kurt & Courtney + Q&A with director Nick Broomfield

Sat 25 Sep 14:30

### Theatre Girls + Q&A with director Kim Longinotto

Sun 26 Sep 15:40

### Surge + Q&A with director Aneil Karia

Tue 28 Sep 17:40

### Of Time and the City + Q&A with director Terence Davies

Sat 2 Oct 14:15

### Rocks + Q&A with director Sarah Gavron

Sat 2 Oct 17:30



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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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