



**NORTHERN VOICES**

# Of Time and the City

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 flunkys' – 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)**

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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

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## NORTHERN VOICES

### In Celebration

Mon 27 Mar 20:30; Sun 23 Apr 18:10

### Northern Soul

Thu 30 Mar 18:15; Sat 15 Apr 20:40

### The Wednesday Play: No Trams to Lime Street

+ **Armchair Theatre: The Hard Knock**

Fri 31 Mar 18:20

### Of Time and the City

Sat 1 Apr 20:40; Tue 18 Apr 18:20

### Saturday Night Theatre: Roll On Four O’Clock

+ **Play for Today: Kisses at 50**

Tue 4 Apr 18:10

### Billy Liar

Thu 6 Apr 20:30; Fri 14 Apr 18:15; Thu 27 Apr 20:50

### Letter to Breznev

Fri 7 Apr 18:20; Thu 20 Apr 20:50

### Priest

Sat 8 Apr 20:40

### The Arbor

Tue 11 Apr 20:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:30

### Play for Today: Comedians

Sat 15 Apr 15:15

### Play for Today: The Land of Green Ginger

+ **Armchair Theatre: The Pity of it All**

Sun 16 Apr 15:20

### Rita, Sue and Bob Too

Sun 16 Apr 18:30; Sun 30 Apr 12:10

### Northern Voices Forum

Sun 23 Apr 15:00

### Laughter from Liverpool + intro

Sat 29 Apr 14:50

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

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