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## **Speaking for Herself: Andrea Dunbar and Bradford on Film**

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### **Biographical Note**

Alison Peirse grew up on a post-war council estate in South Leeds, ten miles from Buttershaw. She now lives in Bradford and is a Lecturer in Writing for Screen and Stage at the University of York.

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### **Abstract**

In October 2010, the radio broadcaster Philip Dodd interviewed Clio Barnard about her new documentary, *The Arbor* (2010), based on the life of the late playwright Andrea Dunbar. As part of the filmmaking process, Barnard recorded audio interviews with Dunbar's family then hired professional actors to lip-synch the responses in the film. Dodd had a major problem with this method: *The Arbor* is rooted in the lives of working class Northern women, yet for Dodd, 'they're not good enough to be seen'. In a passionate defence, Barnard argued 'I wanted people to speak for themselves'. This article examines Barnard's film in conjunction with *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!* (Clarke, 1987), for which Dunbar wrote the screenplay. A paradox is considered, where the 'real' and 'authentic' female voices of Dunbar, her family and neighbours are then mediated by cinematic form; this is placed within a wider argument about how issues around realism and representation in documentary and fiction film contribute to our understanding of the North in popular culture. The analysis then situates this thinking in terms of the representation of Northern writers and spaces, considering how the site-specific locations of writers affect the kind of cultural texts that they are able to produce.

### **Keywords**

Andrea Dunbar, *The Arbor*, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!*, Bradford, Documentary, Social Realism

## **Speaking for Herself: Andrea Dunbar and Bradford on Film**

In October 2010, the broadcaster Philip Dodd interviewed Clio Barnard on BBC Radio 3's 'Night Waves'. He talked about her new documentary, *The Arbor* (2010), based on the life and legacy of the late Bradford playwright Andrea Dunbar. Barnard conceived of the film as a final part in a trilogy of works about the Buttershaw estate in Bradford. Barnard saw the first stage of the trilogy as Dunbar's three plays *The Arbor* (1980), *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1982) and *Shirley* (1986). The second, *A State Affair* (2000), is Robin Soans' verbatim play on Buttershaw following the heroin epidemic of the 1990s. As part of the filmmaking process, Barnard recorded audio interviews with Dunbar's family then hired professional actors to lip-synch the responses in the film. Dodd had a major problem with this approach: *The Arbor* is rooted in the lives of working class Northern women, yet Barnard's method meant 'they're not good enough to be seen' (BBC, 2010b). In a passionate defence, Barnard argued 'Andrea's plays were based on her experience and I wanted this to be based on verbatim testimony and experience; I didn't want to go to people outside the community to comment on the community', concluding 'I wanted people to speak for themselves'.

This article examines Barnard's film in conjunction with the film adaptation of Dunbar's second play, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!* (Clarke, 1987; the exclamation mark added for the film title, henceforth shortened to *Rita*). Examining *The Arbor* and *Rita* (for which Dunbar also wrote the screenplay), this research considers the paradox articulated by Dodd, where the 'real' and 'authentic' female voices of Dunbar, her family and neighbours on the Buttershaw estate in Bradford are mediated by the cinematic form. In turn, I then assess what this might say about the representation of Northern writers and spaces. This approach is influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of a Literary Field*, where he argues 'that understanding the work of art would mean understanding the vision of the world belonging to a social group which has figured either as starting point or as intended recipient for the artist in composing the work' (1996, p.202). Bourdieu's ideas have been developed by Ian MacDonald in his work on screenwriting poetics, where he insists that the 'almost sacrosanct traditions of poetics are (more prosaically) formed by social context (2013, p.25, his emphasis). By examining how film represents Dunbar and Buttershaw, we can think about how site-specific locations of writers affect the kind of cultural texts that they produce, and how audiences then receive these texts.

Representations of the North have become synonymous with social realism and the depiction of working class life in industrial and post-industrial landscapes (Marris, 2001,

p.47). British New Wave films such as *Room at the Top* (Clayton, 1959) and *Billy Liar* (Schlesinger, 1963) defined Bradford as a thriving, industrial playground of the working man. However, John Hill has pointed out that from the 1980s, British cinema began to depict Northern cities such as Liverpool in terms of ‘urban and industrial decline’ (1999, p.167). The two films I’m discussing take their origins from plays written by a young, (non)-working class mother with three young children, living on a post-war council estate in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Dunbar’s *North*, a de-industrialised, broken city, is a world away from the Victorian splendour and soot blackened stone that *Billy Liar* amiably wanders through. As director Alan Clarke notes of *Room at the Top*, ‘they were all about working class angst but at least all the characters had jobs. You couldn’t make films like that now (Hutchinson, 1987, p.20). As such, this article argues that the specificity of Bradford in the 1970s and 1980s is central to Dunbar’s ‘vision of the world’, that when we interrogate the North we need to pay close attention to the temporal, gendered and social contexts of the writer’s world. The article concludes with an examination of the critical backlash to *Rita*, which highlights some of the cultural problems that emerge when a young female writer speaks for herself and her own experiences, distinct from (and uninterested in) the male, middle class voices dominating the landscape of Northern social realism.

### **Remembering Andrea: Lorraine and Lisa**

The first section of analysis now explores the lip-synching and audio interviews in the opening ten minutes of *The Arbor*, during which Dunbar’s daughters Lisa and Lorraine ruminate on their earliest memories of their mother. Lisa and Lorraine are heard in the audio interviews, but actresses play the parts of the girls on screen. The sisters (interviewed separately) talk about their childhood bedroom, and a different house on Brafferton Arbor (not the house they grew up in) is filmed to represent the space of their memories. This opening sequence is startling not only for the formal distancing technique of lip sync, but also for what the memories reveal about Dunbar. Looking out of the bedroom window, Lorraine (Manjinder Virk), Dunbar’s eldest daughter, remembers when she set the bedroom on fire, aged seven. Lorraine’s short, rhythmic sentences are lyrical: ‘being in the house. Mum out in the pub. Or mum comatosed in bed’. She adds with flat resignation ‘and...setting fire to the bedroom. To keep my brother and sisters warm. Cos it was cold’. A match flares, and Lorraine’s younger sister Lisa replaces her on screen. Lisa recounts her version of events in a very broad West Yorkshire accent:

Ah can remember Lorraine settin' the bedroom on't fiy-ah. Err, an' I were only young then, I were prob'ly only abaht five. But still te' this day if yeh talk abaht it to me aunties n stuff n this'll say "we dernt know which one of yers it woh". And ahm like it wohnt me because ah can actually remember it, to this day. She were messin wi err matches n the mattress cart fiy-ah.

Lisa's language is localised and specific, and it changes as she remembers. When she refers to her family, her dialect becomes broader. The words, as she enunciates them, becomes a marker of her place within her Bradford community; her uncle David Dunbar and aunt, Kathy Dunbar, are interviewed later in the film, and also have the same very strong, specific intonation and phrasing. However, Lorraine is different. She is visually marked as different in the film: Dunbar was white, as is Lisa, but Lorraine's father was South Asian, as is Virk, who represents her on screen. However, while Lorraine's vocal patterns clearly mark her as from Yorkshire, her delivery is much clearer and more refined. She drops far less of her vowels than Lisa. It is in the local vernacular that family relationships are made apparent: Lorraine's speech is a big marker of her difference and (to be revealed later) her ostracism from her family.

The film uses lip-synching and audio testimonials to reveal that the sisters' testimonials are often radically different. The memories usually shift and separate in relation to Dunbar's intentions as a mother: Lisa is a loyal and proud supporter of Dunbar, while Lorraine is burned up with bitterness. Through this juxtaposition, Barnard reveals the problems of relying upon verbatim testimony and dramatization of key moments. In so doing, she follows in the footsteps of documentary filmmaker Errol Morris, whose stylized and reflexive model of filmmaking makes similar demands upon its audience. In *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), the crime reconstruction sequences contradict each other, making the audience question the veracity of the characters. Films such as these function as a negotiation between filmmaker and viewer, where we 'attend to the filmmakers engagement with us, speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems and issues of representing it as well' (Nicholls, 2010, p.194). In a similar fashion, Barnard undermines the techniques of verbatim theatre, of using 'taped actuality recording as its primary source material' created through interviewing 'ordinary' people and with a commitment 'to the use of vernacular speech' (Paget, 1987, p.317). Much like documentary, verbatim theatre is capable of presenting itself as actuality, achieved through access to real people. But, as Stephen Bottoms has pointed out in his work on documentary theatre, 'realism and reality are not the same thing, and that

unmediated access to “the real” is not something the theatre can ever honestly provide’ (2006, p.57).

Ideas of documentary or verbatim have particular relevance to Dunbar’s writing, as she has regularly been heralded as an authentic voice of the North. In her work on the Royal Court’s new writing productions, Beswick terms the ‘authentic voice’ as when ‘the playwright’s own experience and history becomes tied up with the perceived authenticity of the story’ noting it is ‘is especially common in socially realist works’ (2014, p.98). Dunbar’s three plays and screenplay were all set in Buttershaw and closely mirror her own experiences. When asked by Max Stafford-Clarke, the artistic director of the Royal Court, why she ended a scene at a particular point, she responded ‘oh they went round a corner. I didn’t hear what they said next’ (Hammond, 2008, p.14). This is reinforced in *The Arbor*, she is depicted in archive footage pushing Lorraine in a buggy around an estate in Keighley. As she walks, her accompanying voiceover reveals, ‘nowadays people want to face up. Wi’ what’s actually happening. Cos it’s what’s actually said’. She reiterates ‘and you write what’s said. You don’t lie. If you’re writing about summat that’s actually happening, you’re not going to lie. And say, oh, it dint happen, when it did all the time’. Similarly, in reviews of *Rita*, ‘real’ is repetitively underscored. The *Sunday Express*’s article on Dunbar was entitled ‘True Story’, and in the first sentence described ‘a film so realistic it astounded the critics’, and ‘a real story filmed on a real estate’ (Williams, 1987). The production team played this up, the executive producer describing *Rita* as ‘a report from the depths’ (Anonymous, 1987d).

But what does this mean for Barnard’s project? On one hand she attempts to disassemble the ‘truth’ of documentary form, yet she then argues on ‘Night Waves’ that ‘I wanted people to speak for themselves?’ Where Barnard views representation as a form totally beguiling yet utterly unable to capture reality, I argue here that truthfulness can emerge in cinema, manifested here in the voices of the Northern women, not in the stories they tell. Their locality is marked in their choices of words and colloquialisms: never more apparent than in *Lisa*. Her deeply localised language, so close to Dunbar’s own character dialogue, includes ‘..any of youse anyway eh?’, ‘Ah were even wearing the clothes me’sen’ and ‘me mum picked some right saddos, I swear down’.

### **The Arbor on Brafferton Arbor**

While the first section of this article explored individual recollection and interior spaces, the second section explores exterior spaces and communal experience. I examine Barnard’s staging of *The Arbor*, Dunbar’s first full-length play, as a promenade performance on

Brafferton Arbor, from which excerpts were included in the film. Here, I examine how Buttershaw residents respond to the performance, and consider what issues of authenticity are brought with their representation and inclusion in the film.

In 1971 Dunbar, her parents and her seven brothers and sisters moved to the Arbor as part of Bradford's on-going post war slum clearance strategy. In 1974, the Buttershaw Project community workers strongly criticised the Departments of Social Services, Housing, and Health and Social Security regarding conditions on the estate. The workers revealed that Buttershaw has 'all the hallmarks of material deprivation – the smashed windows and broken doors, litter, broken bottles, rubbish and large unwanted items in the front garden'. They pinpointed Brafferton Arbor 'with its four bedroom houses and consequently large families' and the Boulevard (a street of maisonettes and medium rise flats) as the two worst streets (Anonymous, 1974). Schoolgirl Dunbar wrote the first act of a play about life on her street for her CSE English project. This was an autobiographical piece, about getting pregnant at fifteen, being in a car crash, and having stillborn baby at six months. Later, with encouragement from a teacher, Dunbar submitted it for the Royal Court's Young Writer's Festival, whereupon it was staged in the Theatre Upstairs, before being expanded and transferred to the Main Stage in 1980 (Peacock, 1999, p.188). For Barnard's performance there is no stage, no wings, merely a few props – a tattered sofa and an old television on the grass. Local residents stand around and watch. Behind the actors are the old post-war houses that Dunbar grew up in during the 1970s. At the opposite side of the road are newer houses, built in the early 2000s after the council demolished much of the old estate. As befits Barnard's wider interest in Buttershaw, the film visually plays upon past and present, between old and new estate life: the Father character swigs from a can of lager, the grey old houses behind him, opposite him stands a local teenage boy, holding a bottle of water, flanked by the orange new build houses.

The play could have been filmed inside one of the houses on the Arbor, just as Lisa and Lorraine's testimonies were. But the insides of houses hold far less clues to a location; they could be inside any post war council estate in the country. However, by staging on the street, the pavements, the bricks and mortar, the residents all become living embodiments of Dunbar's life. About twenty locals watch when the play begins. Children are everywhere: a boy in a yellow t-shirt runs around, ignoring the acting, playing and shouting; there are kids in school uniform, on bikes, wearing roller boots. One lad sways atop his dad's shoulders. Barnard emphasises the importance of the audience in her depth of field: the actors and audience are equally sharply defined in foreground and background, no one party is

highlighted at the expense of the other. But it is the general lack of movement in the crowd that is the most interesting. They are (bar yellow t-shirt boy) watching very closely. They don't really talk. They stand still and watch. In the first scene shown in the film, the Girl (based on Dunbar) and Father are arguing. Occasionally, the dialogue (subject matter and choice of words) makes the locals to turn to each other, a glance to confirm a feeling. The language doesn't shock them. When the Father says to the Girl, 'fuck off out of my sight before I kill you', the Girl snarls 'you hit me and I'll hit you back', and there are merely a few raised eyebrows and smiles in the audience.

In a later scene, (Act 2, Scene 2 in the play), the family are arguing with the Father again. His eleven-year old son has just been killed and yet he shows no grief. There are more people in the estate audience now, almost circling the performers and becoming part of the set itself. Barnard explains 'what you don't see in the film really because there wasn't room to put it in was that whenever we cut there would be kids riding horses through the set, and bikes, and kids sitting on the sofas' (BBC, 2010a). It's noticeably livelier, teens larking around behind the sofas, and a constant chattering on the soundtrack. Residents on Brafferton Arbor itself stand on their doorsteps, observing the story of their street. These residents include Dunbar's own family, and in a deliberate move of distancing, Dunbar's sister Pamela is shown standing in her garden, side by side with actor Kathryn Pogson, who plays her in the film. Pamela discussed her feelings with the local newspaper, *Telegraph & Argus*, revealing that her sister's work was very 'autobiographical. This is very raw for me because it's how I remember it' (Clayton, 2009). Pamela watches scenes, composed of characters, intent and dialogue closely adhering to her own, personal memories; she watches this tale place on the street where her late sister wrote the play, where her and her family grew up. By juxtaposing play, filming, actors and family members in this fashion, Barnard has made the gap between reality and representation very small indeed, yet retains its problematic relationship.

The audience then uses physical response to integrate itself further into the performance. The Mother storms off and the Father yells after her that their son is dead, 'Dead, you hear that? Can't you get that through your bastard head of yours?'. David (the named, elder brother) stands over Father, shouting 'shut up', and kicking him hard and menacingly. The frailty of the alcoholic elder man is suddenly exposed. The eruption of violence in turn tempers the lairy crowd; they are stilled. 'Oohs' float on the soundtrack, some people bend in sympathy, and two women grab each other. More than a few start to grin after a few seconds. The more contemplative, sombre mood remains until the Girl and David leave

the set and only the mother and father are left in their own misery. The local people in the audience can be seen as ‘social actors’: real people, in their usual environments, behaving (more or less) as they would do without the presence of cameras. For Nicholls, ‘their value to the filmmaker consists... in what their own lives embody. Their value resides in... the ways in which their everyday behaviour and personality serve the needs of the filmmaker’ (2010, p.46).

Beswick has pointed out that in theatrical representations of estate life, the resident is marginalised, ‘not least because they often (at least while living on estates) have no platform to participate in the media, academic and popular discourse surrounding their home space’ (2014, p.100). Here, something else is happening: by filming on and in the residents homes, surrounded by neighbours and friends, with no expectation from the filmmaker that they have to do something, the Buttershaw residents remain themselves. Their reactions to Dunbar’s play provide not only guidance for the audience watching at home, but also offer a wider social context for Dunbar’s life and writing. In her analysis of female ‘coming of age’ stories set on British council estates, Emily Cuming argues ‘the estate is more than just a canvas against which these stories of development are cast’, and that they ‘inform the representative modes through which these female protagonists emerge: their gait, their ways of seeing, their sense of a place of the world (in all senses of that term)’ (2013, p.343). Cuming’s declaration ‘more than just a canvas’ is central for understanding Dunbar. When Dunbar’s play is performed in the middle of the street, the social and architectural space of the Arbor – the bricks and mortar, the people, and their behavior in relation to their surroundings – all become living embodiments of her life. Dodd claims that the working class women of Bradford are unable to speak for themselves in Barnard’s film. However, in this film, an easy sense of community, and regional specificity emanates from the screen as history is re-presented and repeated.

### **Black Lace at The Beacon**

In 1987, Bradford Council launched its ‘Bradford Bouncing Back’ campaign, intend to rebrand and improve tourism to the city. The city had suffered badly with the recession of the late 1970s, and the deindustrialisation of the North was a huge blow for the city’s textile manufacturing economy. The city also became notorious for its association with two murderers, the Black Panther Donald Neilson, and Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper (Russell, 2003, p.52). By the 1980s, ‘Bradford was to become a byword in Britain for planning blight, urban deprivation, and racial tension’ (Gunn, 2010, p.849). The city was

weathering the fall out from teacher Ray Honeyford's comments on assimilation and immigration, and attempting to recover from the Bradford City Fire at Valley Parade in 1985, the latter adding to the sense of Bradford being 'unlucky, a site where tragic events unfolded' (Russell, 2003, p.56). Meanwhile, Dunbar's play, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* was first performed at the Royal Court on 14 October 1982. She was then asked to write a screenplay for the film and drew material from her first two plays. Filming began on location in September 1986, on Buttershaw, Baildon Moor and in Haworth. At the same time, planning its morale-boosting campaign, the Council launched the Bradford Arts Festival, and opened the 1853 Gallery in Saltaire. However, *Rita's* release in May 1987 disrupted the rebranding. With its explicit content, sexual themes and tagline 'Thatcher's Britain with Its Knickers Down', *Rita* was not the kind of marketing the Council planned for, and the film spawned extensive regional and national media coverage of the city. *The Arbor* includes clips from *Rita*, including its most infamous: filmed in the Boulevard on Buttershaw, *Rita, Sue, Bob* and his wife Michelle row about Bob's infidelities. An old man heckles them from the balcony of his first floor flat, shouting 'take them up Manningham Lane!' However, in the following analysis, I want to examine a less well-known scene, a club night at the Beacon pub on the estate. In so doing, I situate Dunbar's writing and representation of young working class women within a specific Northern community, then explore the furore in Bradford following the film's premiere.

The scene begins in the function room with local Leeds / Wakefield novelty band Black Lace performing their song 'Gang Bang' on stage. *Rita, Sue and Bob* gyrate in the middle of a busy dance floor. The demographic of the dancers is diverse: young and old, all dressed up in bright primary colours, young mothers to grandmothers. While it is fair to assume many, if not all, of the dancers are extras employed by the filmmakers, it is clear that there are a number of the Beacon's regular customers in as well. The majority are sat at the yellow melamine tables cluttered with pints and bottles of lager that line the edges of the dance floor. The room is packed to capacity and social actors sit cheek by jowl with performers, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, and clapping along. As with the promenade performance of 'The Arbor', the people of Buttershaw are once more employed to add verisimilitude to proceedings while functioning as the diegetic audience for Dunbar's writing. *Rita, Sue and Bob's* bodies are wound around each other; they revolve in time to the music. The girls throw their arms everywhere, laughing; they scream the lyrics at each other. While *Rita* kisses *Bob*, *Sue* dances around, and vice versa; the girls jump up and down, arms aloft, happy in their own world. As the song finishes, a grey-haired elderly lady picks her way off the dance floor. Flushed and smiling, she wipes the sweat off the back of her neck.

The scene concludes as Mavis, a friend of Bob's wife Michelle, spots him with the girls. This scene was written for the screenplay and is the structural midpoint: everything changes from here once Bob is caught. However, what is more significant here is the scene's sense of space and place: Bradford, and specifically the residents of Buttershaw are represented in a glorious technicolour, illuminated by flashing disco lights. The Beacon is represented as a place of community, where young and old come together to enjoy themselves. The bright colours, the uproarious behaviour of Rita and Sue, and the easy amusement of the locals demonstrates an alternative view of estate life, where pubs like the Beacon or working mens clubs, become places of solidarity and community for those living in the area. It reminds one of George Orwell's comment that 'a working-class population [uses] the pub as a kind of club', and where a pub does not exist 'it is a serious blow at communal life' (1981, p.156). There's a danger of romanticizing the social relations of the club here, as a haven of camaraderie and solidarity alien to the middle classes; indeed in a discussion of working class attitudes Hoggart prefers 'group-sense' over 'community', as the latter's 'overtones seem too simply favourable; they may lead to an under-estimation of the harsher tensions and sanctions of working class groups' (1957, p.80). The dark undercurrent of community is further confirmed by Lorraine's monologue in Soans' *A State Affair* about her childhood: 'everyone was in for alcohol... and there was a lot of domestic violence. So it was horrible before, but there was a sense of community' (Dunbar & Soans, 2000, p.133). Despite this, Dunbar remained loyal to her locality. In an interview with a local newspaper, Dunbar discusses being interviewed by national journalists, that 'they all seem to think I should go down to London and be a bit of a pratt. I don't mind visiting London, but I don't like living there. I am happy in Buttershaw' (Holdsworth, 1990). Dunbar's mindset is made evident in this scene: surrounded by Black Lace, pints of lager and gyrating pensioners, Rita and Sue enjoy themselves, lost in the dancing. The Beacon, and by extension, the estate, is where Rita and Sue are most at home.

When *Rita* premiered at the Brighton '87 Film Festival, Bradford Council was very disappointed at the image of the city. The *Yorkshire Evening Post* commented 'leading councilors fear the film will do some damage to Bradford, and other opinion leaders deplore the image presented' (1987b). Councillors had serious concerns about the damage it could inflict upon the 'Bradford Bouncing Back' campaign, particularly when Dunbar's screenplay showed that the people of Buttershaw were (economically) doing anything but that. The *Telegraph & Argus* quoted the chairman of Bradford's employment and environment committee: 'there are a lot of wonderful things in the city and it doesn't help its image,

especially when we are trying to move away from being a “cloth cap” city’ (Anonymous, 1987c). Here, the old image of the North as an industrial city, built on the manufacture of wool, peopled by cloth cap men comes up against the stark Thatcherite reality of Dunbar’s writing. Rita’s reception was not helped by the film’s co-producer Patsy Pollock, who at the festival press conference, proclaimed that the people of Buttershaw ‘live below the bread line. I think their lives are appalling, sterile, loveless and hard. Drinking and sex are the only luxuries in a community where unemployment has bred a level of poverty I have never seen. Yet this is England, not the Third World’ (Anonymous, 1987d). Pollock attempts an Orwellian commentary on the cheapness and popularity of very small luxuries during times of depression (here, sex and alcohol, but for Orwell, sugar, gambling and sweets). In fact, there is much in Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) that speaks to the plight of Buttershaw, when he writes ‘whole sections of the working class who have been plundered of all they really need are being compensated, in part, by cheap luxuries which mitigate the surface of life’ (1981, p.165). Yet Pollock’s comments come across as inflammatory and hyperbolic, and more importantly they fail to capture any of the tone or humour of the film, nor the theme of teenage female friendship that binds the text together.

Oppositional rhetoric did not speak to, or for, Dunbar. A month after the film’s premiere she published a response in the *Yorkshire Post*, vehemently denying a political context to her work:

My film was not an invention. It was written with ‘real’ people in mind, it was not primarily about a council estate, nor was it strictly about sex... Bradford City Council is wrong in thinking that I wrote my film with the have and have-nots of the North East in mind... The fact is the deprivation is there whether they like it or not... The film is purely and simply a comedy on everyday life. It is not a social comment!’ (Dunbar, 1987).

A few weeks later, in interview Clarke concurred ‘no there isn’t an overt political message in Rita. For the girls, Labour means having a baby’ (Hutchinson, 1987, p.20). Dunbar’s lack (and lack of interest in) explicit political commentary was puzzling to many of the critics, who brought their own cultural expectations to their film. Rita was filmed on location, on an estate in contemporary Bradford, about teenage girls with ordinary lives, played by unknown actors: on paper it conforms to what John Corner describes as ‘the realist film aesthetic’, which has ‘developed the portrayal of working class storylines within contemporary... settings, catching at the reorganisation of relations and class and gender, of work and leisure and yet the continuation... of radical inequalities’ (1996, p.91). Social realism has frequently

depicted the (often Northern) working classes from the perspective of middle class outsider, where the subject is 'in a rather passive role – either as a victim or as a self-sacrificing heroic figure' (Creeber, 2009, p.424). Andrew Higson has also explored how social realism often includes 'a moral commitment to a particular set of social problems and solutions... films should show the dignity of the working man' (1984, p.4, his emphasis). When faced with the North, poverty and estates, framed within a social realist aesthetic, the critics knew what to expect, having witnessed the politically fiery, engaged work of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, or the bleak desperation of Alan Bleasdale's *Boys From the Blackstuff* (1982). Yet Rita rejected much of the moralizing, dignity and commentary on inequality (the 'have and have-nots' as Dunbar puts it) usually found in these dramas. This particularly annoyed Hilary Mantel, writing for *The Spectator*:

It ought to be funny but it isn't.... perhaps its because comedy depends on dissonance and distance – and this film is entirely accepting of the world it observes... the film asks us to like them and pity them... but in fact the girls appear desperate and pathetic: a hopeless pair of greasy-faced witches, with no virtue in their shrieking camaraderie... sadly even Miss Dunbar's vaunted super-realistic dialogue fails. There's too much of it: in the girl's households, they communicate more in one scene than such families do in a year (1987, p.53, my emphasis).

To suggest that the families over-communicate is to not look behind the meaning of the words (surprising in a writer of Mantel's calibre). A family who constantly scream and shout at each other are not communicating, there is no emotional truth in telling each other 'fuck off or I'll beat you'. Sue's family runs on these empty words, flung idly, no-one meaning what they say until it is too late, everyone already bored. Rita and Sue are neither desperate nor pathetic; the issue here is that their choices baffle Mantel. Their absence of expectations is unrecognisable to her. This chimes with the response to Dunbar's first play *The Arbor* at the Royal Court: according to Rob Ritchie, the Court's literary manager, the play was 'as remote as a piece of anthropology' to Southern theatre-going audiences (Jones, 2004, p.454). Mantel's main displeasure seems to be that the girls lack interest in changing their situation, they do not dream of escaping the estate for a 'better' life elsewhere. Similarly, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* criticises the film for its 'lack of distance' (Wootton, 1987, p.282), while the *New Statesman* argues the film 'cheerfully reproduces dominant ideologies, especially racism and sexism. There is no irony at work here, and not a progressive ideal in sight' (Cunliffe, 1987, p.21). Unless the characters actively agitate for change, the critics appear nonplussed. Arguably, they have been spoiled by articulate and angry Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's *Look Back*

in *Anger* (1956), writing poems at his market stand and reading out broadsheets' indictment of the working classes. Yet the absence of progressive ideals chimes with attitudes of many Northerners with similar backgrounds. Hoggart has famously written about his upbringing in the poor and working class environs of South Leeds (which abuts the Bradford South constituency, including Buttershaw), and he manages to find the words to articulate the mindset of many of its people. When people feel that cannot change much about their situation, when they 'feel it not necessarily with despair or disappointment or resentment, but simply as a fact of life, they adopt attitudes towards that situation which allow them to have a liveable life under its shadow', that these attitudes accept 'life as hard, with nothing to be done about it: put up with it and don't aggravate the situation' (1957, p.92). This form of ideology, the 'put up and shut up', is woven Dunbar's plays; Rita, Sue and 'the Girl' do not question their situations for this is simply how life is.

Clarke's decision, as director, to avoid the usual moralising of Northern social realism is neither simple-minded nor politically precarious. He had already proved himself capable of presenting work with a finely attuned awareness: a few months prior to filming *Rita*, Clarke made the highly stylised television film *Road* (1987). This was an adaptation of Jim Cartwright's 1986 play performed for the Royal Court's 'The North' season in conjunction with Dunbar's third play, *Shirley*. Made for the BBC's Screenplay series, *Road* is set on a poverty-stricken street in Lancashire and depicts people occupying terraces on the verge of falling down. They stagnate in rooms without furniture, and live without love. The play addresses 'the underclass', 'those in the so-called "poverty trap"', for whom the dominant class fraction in society no longer wished to take responsibility for in the Thatcherite 1980s' (Paget, 1998, p.108). This concept was developed in the film, which 'powerfully depicts the human cost of Thatcherite economics' (Rolinson, 2005, p.114). In startling, disjointed monologues the ensemble cast reveal their desperation for change. The film culminates in Louise's (Jane Horrocks) disquieting monologue, delivered through tears, 'I have big wishes, you know. I want my life to be all shinied-up. But its so dulled...it's so hard... I want magic and miracles... I want the surface up and off, and all the gold and jewels and light out on the pavement'. So, Mantel and Cunliffe may well argue that it is a weakness of the film to accept the world of *Rita* as is, but it is not a weakness of the writing, nor directorial oversight. Clarke knew to leave Dunbar's world intact, even at the cost of a critical backlash. He commented that the film came 'right out of Andrea's own life' shot 'not 200 yards from where she lived', that 'those girls are what they are. That's good enough for me. I don't give a shit about what

people think is my impact on the film as long as I feel I have done right by them' (Malcolm, 1987, p.15).

While Bradford Council may have despaired of the film, Dunbar and Clarke's film certainly pleased some of the Buttershaw residents. Rita started a week long run in Bradford, premiering at the Cannon cinema on 17 September 1987, but the producers invited people from the estate to a special preview screening on the 10<sup>th</sup> September. A local reporter noted 'there were no sign of criticism... only laughter and lots of it', explaining that 'even Buttershaw residents who protested about the film before its release have changed their minds', one resident commenting 'I didn't expect to enjoy it but I found it very funny' (Spencer, 1987). Another baffled reporter revealed 'when I saw Rita, Sue and Bob Too!, I was startled by the reaction of the women in the audience: they loved it. There I was wrestling with my conscience about whether what I was watching was art or pornography while they were killing themselves with laughter' (Holdsworth, 1990). This is revealing of perhaps the most important element of Dunbar's work, her rare ability to observe the life of her community, her family and herself, to consider them without judgement, and to weave these threads into compelling stories. Her works reveals a section of society that exists beyond the experiential understanding of many middle-class cultural commentators. Indeed, Stafford-Clarke described her first play as 'the most remarkable and important work' that the Royal Court has done, 'because it gives voice to a section of society which is culturally disinherited, and written about almost exclusively by outsiders' (Lane, 2012, p.147). By writing from the inside, Dunbar created Girl, Rita and Sue, none of whom are passive victims, self-sacrificing or fighting to get away. From the perspective of the critics, it seems that when people are allowed to speak for themselves, they (unfortunately) don't always say what you want them to.

## **Conclusion**

Dunbar's plays chart the deterioration of the Buttershaw estate, a deterioration that mirrors the difficulties experienced by the city as a whole. One could argue that the de-industrialisation of Bradford's textile industry (and ensuing decline of Buttershaw) is not special or unique, that it is a story reflected across many Northern cities. There are certainly parallels with Bradford's South Yorkshire neighbour Sheffield, with the collapse of the steel industry and the Manor 'sink' estate, described in 1983 as a 'community overwhelmed and demoralised' by the scale and speed of job losses (Fletcher, 2010, p.328). However, in the same way that the seeming aim of documentary is the impossible desire to capture the 'real', I still contend that the

representation of one, true North is an impossible project. As Clarke has argued, Dunbar's work is about 'her and her mates, not about everyone who lives on council estates, and its certainly not about all Northerners. But I shouldn't really have to say that, should I?' (Malcolm, 1987, p.15). It is the specificity of Dunbar's social, geographical and temporal upbringing that offers the best route into understanding the power of her work. We should be researching and celebrating the diversity of Northern production, finding creative practitioners who 'speak for themselves'; through this we can perhaps uncover a more profitable way of understanding the intricacy and contradiction inherent in Northern representation. By examining the multifaceted ways that *The Arbor* and *Rita* represent Dunbar and Bradford, it is hoped that this article provides a model for exposing the complexities in approaching studies of the North, while also celebrating how these films gave a voice to those mouthy, young and exuberant Northern women whom have long languished at the edges of the film frame.

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