

# The Arbor

(2010, Barnard, UK)

## Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

### Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

### Specialist Study Area: Critical Debates Filmmakers' Theories

### Rationale for study

- With its innovative use of sound and its complex approach to memory, time and reality, *The Arbor* offers a fascinating set of debates around what actually constitutes a documentary. It initially tells the story of the working-class playwright Andrea Dunbar, who grew up on Bradford's Buttershaw Estate and it covers her rise to fame as a teenager, her subsequent role as mother to three small children and her early demise at the age of 29. The second half of the film focuses on the troubled life of her eldest daughter Lorraine.

### STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Opening (00.00 – 06.00) - This is a highly stylised piece of exposition which retells through direct address to camera, the time when Lorraine set fire to a mattress to keep her siblings warm. The camera gives a sense of place and its movement adds to the sense of fear and panic felt by Lorraine and her sister Lisa. The image above shows the sisters in a two-shot as the bed burns behind them. The lip synching here is also apparent.
- (59.10-1.03.26) This sequence firstly uses Lorraine's words from the play *A State Affair* and then has the reactions to it by her family. The use of the theatre setting and the ways that the voices/

actors react negatively to what is being said is very interesting. This is then directly juxtaposed with Lorraine's own account of her life.

### CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

#### Cinematography

- By and large the film in the re-enactments follows the standard conventions of most social realist films in terms of the use of the camera, lighting and naturalistic performances. But Barnard tries to subvert these norms by reminding the audience that instead of a gritty, clichéd northern kitchen-sink approach to the material that the audience are always watching a construct. That said, the cinematographer Ole Birkeland shoots in high definition RED photography which uses both deep and shallow focus to good effect.
- There are a number of tracking shots in the film giving a sense of how the estate is at present, which also shows how things seem to have possibly gotten worse since Dunbar's plays back in the 1980s.
- The use of direct address used in the film is very interesting. Barnard largely uses medium close-ups with the protagonists looking directly at camera. This can be seen as a very powerful device as it paradoxically can both accentuate the film's authenticity (in tandem with the lip-synching device) but can also act as a distancing device. As she has said '*these techniques might create closeness, allowing a push pull, so an audience might be aware of the shaping of the story but simultaneously be able to engage emotionally.*'

#### Mise-en-Scène

- The majority of the film takes place on the Buttershaw Estate and this is used to good effect. The re-enactments of Dunbar's original play *The Arbor* are performed on the green in the centre of

the estate with sofas, televisions, armchairs and doorways. These are watched by the residents of the estate and in some cases they also participate.

- The costumes in the modern day re-telling of events are generally ordinary clothes that directly suit the speakers. Lorraine for example wears a navy blue polo shirt that hints at her having been held in some form of institution. Equally the largely domestic settings reflect where the protagonists seem to be now in terms of their lives. Lorraine is largely shot in her cell or working at the prison – although this is only made explicit twice. Lisa, on the whole, is shot in a suburban setting and is pregnant – although this is not mentioned.
- The deprivation and poverty on the Buttershaw seems to be still there and the film gives a real sense of this in the use of *mise-en-scène*. Two of the residents Jimmy Timlin and Gary Whitaker are shown walking through the estate discussing the changes in terms of the slow breakdown of the community and the way that stronger drugs have had an impact on the people living there.

### Editing

- The most obvious editing device used early on is the use of a number of documentaries and news programmes about Andrea Dunbar's life. These come from a variety of sources from an *Arena* special on her in 1980, a piece on her from *BBC Look North* (1987) and an interview from late in her life from *The Great North Show* (1989). The film intercuts to these on occasion.
- Earlier in the film during the main re-enactment Lorraine plays and watches the *Arena* special and she is shown through a number of cuts to reaction shots, reflecting on what she is seeing. This distinctive method further enhances the nature of construction which is followed by the director.
- There are a number of interesting juxtapositions between the use of the play *The Arbor* and the testimony offered by Lorraine, Lisa and the other members of the Dunbar family. Obviously the distinctive use of sound editing has a tremendous impact on the construction of meaning here.

### Sound

- The director spent two years recording interviews with the Dunbars and residents of the Buttershaw and in doing so collected a vast archive on Andrea, her family and certainly her legacy. These recordings in part, form the basis of the film and were used to form the soundtrack with actors lip-

synching to their words. This method has its roots in a technique known as 'verbatim theatre', which Barnard is a specialist in.

- These vocal testimonies capture a number of key elements of speech – the distinctive working-class Bradford accent, emphases, intonation and pauses. The matching of these words to the actors is in many instances in the film obviously lip-synched but it could be argued that this does add a great deal to the realism. The fact that this is not hidden from the audience raises fascinating questions about the nature of the testimony. The use of the actors could be said to add to a strange detachment from what is being said and arguably heightens the film's emotional resonance.
- Music is sparingly used in the film but to good effect and is used mostly around the restaging of the play on the estate. There are snatches of post-punk band The Au Pairs and also The Selector, both groups who directly challenged perceptions of gender in their work.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

### Representations

- The most definite area of representation is social-class and the way that the Dunbar family and the Buttershaw Estate is portrayed. Andrea Dunbar's own work spoke of the truth of her upbringing and her family's circumstances. In many respects this film does that as well by seeing the estate itself as fundamental to understanding the film's meaning and by using the tragic story of Lorraine to show that the cycle of deprivation continues.
- The film doesn't dwell on Andrea's decision not to move away from the Buttershaw as her reputation as a respected playwright grew. The first half of the film attempts to capture the feckless nature of these years as her dependency on alcohol grew and she was seen to neglect her children. It is also worth stating that the children's recounting of these years all offer different responses – Lorraine's bitterness, Lisa's denial and Andrew stating that he was too young to really know what was going on. This in itself raises issues about the selective nature of memory, the gap between fact and fiction. These viewpoints alongside some of the other protagonists do however offer a chaotic picture of those times.
- Lorraine's narrative runs right through the

entire timeline of the film and in many respects raises a number of important points about representation. She was Andrea's oldest child and her father was Pakistani. As a result her early years were impacted upon by racism and by her feeling that her mother didn't want her. Her actions in the film seem to have a clear echo of what happened to her mother – sexual abuse, domestic violence and addiction. Lorraine's descent into prostitution and having her first two children taken off her is seen as, in her own words, 'a result of her terrible childhood'. Her imprisonment because of the death of her third child is the climax of the film. How we view her life is central to understanding this film as she represents a wasted life, the culmination of the influence of place and the destructive nature of poverty and racism.

### **Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)**

- The way that the re-enactments are placed next to the staging of the play and the original archive documentary material does create a far broader picture of Andrea Dunbar than a conventional documentary or biopic would do. The confessional nature of some of the testimonies does add a real sense of invention to the film that goes beyond mere novelty. The film goes further here as it looks beyond Dunbar's art and at the impact that her actions as a mother and her own alcohol addiction had on her children, particularly her eldest daughter.
- It could be argued that Barnard's own time spent with the participants in recording the audio soundtrack may have rendered her own point of view to be impartial. In her own words she 'formed strong bonds with the people interviewed for the film'. That said, while the film is framed through Lorraine's own troubled life and is unsparing in its detail – the film also achieves the effect of a metafiction which constantly reminds the audience that they are observing a filmed narrative.
- Barnard is from Bradford herself and was drawn to the subject matter when *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* was about to be reprinted with Robin Soan's verbatim play, *A State Affair* which revisits Dunbar's world. She has previously worked on this method on stage with *Random Acts of Intimacy* (2002) and *Dark Glass* (2006). The film she made after *The Arbor* was the fictional *The Selfish Giant* (2013), where again her focus

was on the effects of poverty on children.

## **CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts**

### **Social**

- Andrea Dunbar's success as a playwright couldn't lift her out of her background, arguably because her work was so deep-rooted in where she came from and who she was. The representations offered here are of an underclass where detrimental social problems cannot be solved. Lorraine's foster parents Ann and Steve do offer some sense of responsibility in an otherwise fractured world and the way that Lisa and Andrew are shown also offer some balance.

### **Historical**

- The film captures some of the desperation of living on these 'sink' estates in the 1980s under the Thatcher government and Andrea Dunbar's story is universal – that it is trying to find a way out of this. The film's focus on cross-generational misery shows that the problems faced by the protagonists in this film are not easily solved. The linking of the tracking shots from the archive documentary footage and Barnard's own similar use of camera movement suggests a present haunted by the past, in the sense that the film might be viewed as a ghost story with voices recounting memories, but eerily detached from the present.

### **Political**

- This film came out in the first few months after the election of the 2010 coalition government. This government led by David Cameron started a series of cuts, largely to those people struggling at the bottom of the pile. This new austerity Britain is captured in the lives shown here, harking back to the Thatcher years when Dunbar was writing. As stated before the Buttershaw has, if anything got worse since then as the hard drug use has become more entrenched.

### **Technological**

- The use of the sound matching device in terms of 'verbatim cinema' suggests a degree of innovation. The RED cameras offer a hyper-real effect for the spectator which again reminds them of the documentary as a construct.

### **Institutional**

- Barnard's background was primarily involved in academia and the art world before the film

was made. The film was made by Artangel and the UK Film Council. She wanted to have the authentic voices central to the film and avoid just straight forward appraisal of Andrea Dunbar's life. The production design was also directly influenced by some aspects of the original sound recordings and Barnard incorporated these into the film – for example Lisa cooked her a roast dinner and she is shown washing up in the re-enactment. Jim is seen stroking a kitten and as he is interested in cars he is shown under the bonnet of one.

### **SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - STARTING POINTS - Filmmakers theories**

- Certainly Peter Watkins ideas around documenting the past by using actors and reconstruction is pursued here and at a number of points, Barnard's film does ask questions about the nature of documentary. That said, she does take this a considerable
- step further with her use of the real voices and the lip-synching device she employs here.
- It could be argued that while Barnard is not on camera unlike say a performative documentary maker like Nick Broomfield, the results of her interviews could be said to be similar. Somehow she elicits much like Broomfield, information which has an open and at times unbearably honest, confessional effect.
- Certainly the work of Kim Longinotto can be paralleled here. The film places the spectator directly with the characters, much like a fiction film and in particular the focus is on Lorraine. That said she isn't a person that many would directly identify with, but by privileging her voice above all others the spectator is not offered conclusions. What the film does is perhaps to raise more questions than it answers.