



Estate: a Reverie

A conversation with Andrea Luka Zimmerman
(15 April 2018)

by Caterina Sartori

ANDREA LUKA ZIMMERMAN is an artist, cultural activist and filmmaker. Andrea's films include *Erase and Forget* (2017, 88 mins) an inquiry into the nature of human conscience and the limits of deniability; *Estate, a Reverie* (2015, 83mins), and *Taskafa, Stories of the Street* (2013, 66 mins).

The drive to regenerate and privatise housing estates, and the displacement of the working-class communities that reside on them, is an endemic phenomenon in contemporary London, and one that is profoundly affecting the social composition of the city. The public discourse that underpins such 'urban regeneration' programmes is couched in narratives that demonise and stigmatise housing estates as sites of urban decay, crime and social exclusion, and that sing the benefits of social mixing. A powerful and widespread counter-discourse, rooted largely in self-organised activism aimed at stopping housing estate demolitions and 'regeneration programmes', has developed and grown in strength in recent years. Film and video play an important role in the



articulation of these counter-narratives, with a growing number of works emerging every year. Within this landscape that encompasses social activism and filmmaking, *Estate: a Reverie* by Andrea Zimmerman is a central work. Shot over the course of 7 years, the film depicts the life of a social housing estate in East London in the period just prior to its demolition: it stays rooted in the particularities of Haggerston Estate's history, whilst also asking wider questions about the meaning of home in a cosmopolitan metropolis, the organisation of urban collective life and the violence of austerity, displacement and the commodification of housing.

Estate: a Reverie opens with a wide shot of a building: the architecture – the red bricks, the external walkways – marks it as a public housing estate. A thin layer of snow covers the ground, creating a suspended and rarefied atmosphere. In the foreground is a young boy cradling a hen, while two sheep graze underneath a nearby tree, and a goat lingers in the entrance of the building, anachronistic bleating presences that hint at the history of land ownership and at the country estates that would have occupied the territory in previous centuries. Cut to the second shot: the camera tracks down a canal in a covered dark tunnel, towards a bright opening, while the filmmaker delivers a voice-over commentary that switches between singular and plural first person, evocatively explaining that “So you know what they said? It's time to go, and they emptied us out one by one (...); and only because it was time to go, we had that kind of time”. And a scene is set. These two opening shots, in their formal rigour and otherworldly atmosphere, place us outside the frame of the social realist documentary, and instead point to a performative mode, an engagement with history, and a first person involvement, all elements that return throughout the film, weaved in skilfully by Zimmerman.

The first person voice-over does not reappear until the last scene, but the author's presence within the film is firmly established. During her conversation with me she reiterates, as she has done often in other interviews and in her own writing, that the film emerged from her life on the Haggerston Estate, where she lived for 18 years and which she considered a place of refuge, having fled from a “sub-working class” upbringing in Germany, and where she found “real freedoms” and a sense of home amongst other residents who also came from their own elsewheres. She explains that “One of the beautiful things about the estate and all the people in the film is that this was their home, but they also had different ideas of home”, maintaining strong emotional links to their places of origin.

For example for some people home was Jamaica, for other people home was wherever their heart would take them; for example Eric was from the West Indies, but his home was here, because here he met Mary, who was from Ireland, and here is where she died, so this was his home: it was devastating for him to leave this place. Mathilda was born in the East End, she was a local East Ender from Hoxton.

Zimmerman describes a social composition common to estates in London and in



other British metropolitan centres, a cosmopolitan working-class that reflects the patterns of migration from ex-colonies and beyond. The film is very much about their creation of a sense of home, and housing is part of that, but it is also very much about the creation of a shared public spaces where people collectively and neutrally meet, such as pubs and courtyards, and where communities are made and remade in everyday interactions and negotiations. Andrea explains that unlike communes, which tend to be made up of people with a shared vision, the estate residents shared a space around which an experiment in shared living had to be created. "It felt like an island within London, and the tolerance level towards each other was massive"; she speaks of her neighbour Lorna, who insisted that the police should never be called to resolve problems, and that much of the work of living together in close proximity has to do with negotiating expectations and spaces: "So these are much bigger questions around co-existence in life". And while she is clear about the difficulties that this entails, she is also clear that her ambition for the film was to "Show the richness of lives that are way richer than any of these narratives that exist within this much more financialised corporate driven environment", and for it to be a

counter-offer to that narrative, especially that narrative of the decrepit and sink estate which politicians often use to justify gentrification. They say that this is regeneration, but actually they are selling the flats abroad to companies that use them purely for speculative purposes, not to live in.

The film manages to skilfully navigate its status of 'reverie' for the utopian dream wrapped within the idea of municipal housing, without falling into a naïve romanticism. Part of the film is made up of observational scenes featuring Zimmerman's more elderly neighbours, some of them very ill, living alone and in poverty, and suffering greatly from the cuts in social and medical services, a result of years of austerity measures. The closeness with which she films these scenes can make them uncomfortable in their unflinching directness, and it helps that Andrea carefully explains how "There's a lot of stuff that went on behind the scenes in the film. I went with people to the doctor to get the right medication many times, and did advocacy work". Although the film does not directly address any campaigning or advocacy work, Zimmerman's involvement in getting the estate repaired, in fighting for rehousing and in supporting vulnerable neighbours, is the real backbone to the relationship with her large cast of characters.

Her rootedness therefore helps in creating a complex portrait of a multi-ethnic working-class community that is threatened in its very existence and that is resisting its own erasure, and the polyphonic style she employs allows her range in doing so. We speak about class; Zimmerman wishes to work against the narratives that deny its existence and its effects, and to acknowledge its import fully, whilst at the same time also exploring its limitations. There is a strong sense that notions of class, through which traditionally discourses on social housing have been framed in the UK, are alone not sufficient to articulate the social landscape of the Haggerston Estate, and of other



housing estates and working-class London neighbourhoods. Trajectories of migration and the downward mobility that often accompanies them are examples she brings to illustrate this point:

many people who as migrants often come from much more privileged positions in their home countries, and they come here and become taxi drivers and the like, and we never really acknowledge that incredible wealth of knowledge that we have in this country, because we only ever look at the structures of a certain type of class through the jobs that people do.

She continues: "Often I tell myself that class is important to talk about but we should also talk about the power structures, and vulnerabilities and the needs we have within them, even around ecology". *Estate: a Reverie* is particularly effective in addressing vulnerabilities related to bodily fragility, old age and trauma, and the inability or lack of desire to fit in a productive system:

When our imagination is so financialised, so much so that if you are no longer productive, or if you don't contribute to society in the way that society markets itself to be, then you fall out. So if you're older, especially if you are an older woman, if you have different abilities, or if reality prevents you from working a normal job, or a highly paid job, then you don't count, you are seen as someone who scrounges off the system.

Estate: a Reverie is an attempt at finding a new language, a "shape and form" to hold together these tensions and thoughts. Through its strategy of creating meaning through juxtaposition and accretion, the film holds together the minutiae of everyday life with a broader sense of history, which enters the film via text panels, maps and archival film which are interspersed throughout the edit, and through the use of fictionalised scenes. Andrea explains that these emerged from collaborative work with others, who researched local history, and brought suggestions then developed in workshops and meetings; the final 'roof top scene', a sword fight between two women in period costume taking place on top of a building site, set against a backdrop of cranes, the Haggerston Estate and the wider city, brings together characters from Samuel Richardson's novels – Clarissa and Pamela, after which the blocks on Haggerston Estate were named – with stories of women fighting each other for money on Hackney Marshes, in an extravagant tableau ripe with symbolic and historical references. Some of these are not immediately legible to the viewer, but they would be to the large group of people who contributed to the shaping of the film.

While this and the other performative scenes (such as the procession and the opening farm yard scene described above) might come across as contrived and slightly opaque, Zimmerman successfully utilises yet another register in another set of scenes, where she depicts meetings and workshops taking place in the confines of a kitchen and



living room and on the estate's stairwells and landings. The frame is filled with people, discussing and sharing information, squeezed in together in narrow spaces, and the effect achieved is one of transcendence of the single events, which become metaphorical references that encapsulate a sense of a collective social history in the making. It is these scenes that most strongly achieve Zimmerman's desire to refuse erasure for the estate's history and its inhabitants.

In a 2015 editorial in *Film Quarterly*, feminist film critic B. Ruby Rich writes that she had recently

called for a new school of documentary: the Extreme Wide Angle (EWA). I prize the kind of documentary that takes care to be legible to its subjects, that has an ethics of representation, that opens up the frame, steps back, and takes the context of social history into account. The EWA could contribute so much to national and transnational discourses, with a newly engaged emphasis on context, process, and intention (Ruby Rich 2016).

I would like to suggest that *Estate: a Reverie* can be included into this newly defined documentary mode – a film that emerges from a process of dwelling and relation, and that is an attempt at navigating the fine line between social engagement, art production and collaboration. In a context where art's role in driving and facilitating 'regeneration' and real estate development is a matter of great contention, and where the artists' role all too often is that of co-opting and channeling the dissent to gentrification, through the film Zimmerman instead argues for the importance of creativity as a “a space of possibility”, something she indirectly references often by depicting residents involved in painting the estate, gardening, sewing.

What art allows one to do is the critical thinking [...]. It's not just about the creativity that happens, but it is what it then allows to happen alongside it, which is almost unquantifiable because it's an organic process, it can't be put upon. It's not about artists going into estates and saying “let's make it beautiful and let's grow flowers”: it's about the possibility of growing flowers and the possibility of people joining in and then saying, what is it that I want to do? Maybe, even if I just rearrange something in a certain way, that possibility means everything, it's about the potential of it being possible.

The campaigning that took place just outside the frame of the film lead to some victories: a number of residents, including Andrea, were rehoused in the new development that replaced the Haggerston Estate. A bittersweet victory, as many of the older residents died shortly after moving,

because it's so stressful, but also the loneliness creeps up, because ultimately, London is a city where it is hard to get to know people, because it's so transient, so estate like this one where people have lived for decades, were really important.



The social, political and economic significance of housing estates is reflected in the number of films that deal with their demolition, 'regeneration' and the struggles against them, and which range in form, style and ambition; from campaigning docs such as Paul Sng's *Dispossession* to experimental *Concrete Heart Land* (Steven Ball and Rastko Novakovic), to character-lead documentary *Home Sweet Home* (Enrica Colusso) to Ayo Akingbade's *Street 66*, a profile of housing activist Dora Boatemah, to name just the most notorious. None of them exhausts their subject matter and alone provide the definitive comment on social housing in London – *Estate: a Reverie* gifts the audience with a glimpse of a utopian dream that was never fully realised, a swan song to an idea that is not afforded in the contemporary capitalist regime. We await the films and directors that will reflect and shape the utopias of tomorrow.

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