A Personal Response to Steve McQueen’s *Grenfell*

Lana Locke

My experience of going to see Steve McQueen’s *Grenfell* at the Serpentine South Gallery in May 2023 was fuelled with suspense and anxiety.¹ There was the everyday suspense and anxiety provoked in securing an online ticket at an available time for a high-profile show, getting there on schedule, observing the ban on mobile phones, and finding a seat in the crowded rows of the exhibition space. Then there was the deep, morbid anxiety of how it would feel to see on screen the ruins of hundreds of people’s homes, where seventy-two lives had been taken and where I had once lived; the sorry suspense as to whether I would see inside the very flat where I had fleetingly sublet a room as a teenager, number 191 on the twenty-second floor, where, on 14 June 2017, Sirria Choucair, aged 60, died in the fire, along with five other members of her family living on the same floor.

¹ *Steve McQueen’s Grenfell* (colour video, sound, United Kingdom, 2019, 24 minutes 2 seconds), was screened at the Serpentine South Gallery, London, 7 April – 10 May 2023
After several minutes sat in the steep grey pews in the Serpentine space, the room darkens, and Grenfell opens – not, as I had expected, to a sky view of London, but to rolling hills, tens of miles away, framing the film within England’s ‘Green and Pleasant Land’. This land might signal the sanctuary of those responsible at the highest level for the government and corporate failures that contributed to the fire; and it might be a functional, stylistic choice by McQueen to start the film at the earliest point from takeoff, to fuel the sense of drama.

The film’s trajectory takes several minutes to reach London, during which I start to question why we are being prolonged in the sky over the suburbs in this suspenseful journey, waiting for Grenfell to appear. I start to wonder as to the goal of maintaining the continuous cinematic shot, turning filming into a sporting feat, as Andy Warhol extended into eight hours and five minutes of footage of the Empire State Building, and Alfred Hitchcock created the illusion in Rope, circulating the scene of a murder, the body hidden within. Adding to the confusion of the flight period, the sound of the helicopter is mixed with street sounds, which seem to come from ground level in London, presumably in the vicinity of the Tower. I get the uneasy sense of being played with by the director.

Finally, with sorrowful recognition, Grenfell appears. We are approaching from Wood Lane. The morning of the fire, I had traversed Wood Lane with my then toddler and glimpsed Grenfell smoking heavily, as relatives desperately awaited news, putting up photos of inhabitants not yet traced. We were en route to visiting my child’s new nursery in Plumstead, where we were moving, White and mobile, whilst ash from Grenfell rained down on her existing nursery.

As John Preston writes, the instruction on signage within the tower to ‘stay put’, repeated by the Fire Brigade until it was too late, is ‘a policy for those of lower socio-economic status or marginalised on the basis of race or some other social category… Distinctions are made between those who are assumed to be “fixed”, or whose racialised and class status makes the State believe that they would be better off being “fixed”, and those who are assumed to be mobile and agential.’

McQueen’s silencing of sound heightens the anxiety as we get closer. My heart races again, suspense accelerated. And here it is maintained for the rest of the film, fully amped, as the camera swiftly, repeatedly circles around the building, kept in the real time of helicopter motion with no licence for pause, for rewind, for slowness. As Jill Stoner writes: ‘Time is a critical accomplice to every act of escape. In fact, the idea of permanence can be understood as time’s own interior, as time frozen or captured, as time’s primal nature foiled.’ The pace set by McQueen’s helicopter fixes us, like the victims, to ‘stay put’ permanently, unable to stop the pace of the fire that surrounds.

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2 Andy Warhol, John Palmer, Empire, Warhol Films, New York, black and white film, silent, 1965, 485 minutes
3 Alfred Hitchcock, Rope, Warner Bros Pictures, New York, colour film and sound, 1948, 80 minutes
4 John Preston, Grenfell Tower: Preparedness, Race and Disaster Capitalism, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2019, p 41
Yet I do not see what I had prepared myself to see: there is not a close enough view to see the interiors in depth. In the many circuits of the building, what is visible is the flaking, cladded exterior, partially covered by lift shaft scaffold, workers in and around the tower and piled refuse sacks in white and red, which might be assumed to be colour-coded to signal different types of contents. The horror is aesthetic: the piling of sacks visually evoking the genocide of Auschwitz, but some six months after the fire any bodily remains would surely be long gone. Still we are kept in the state of shock here, the loops do not slow down to allow for grief. Instead we gaze on the enormity of the building, where, as Gene Ray says, ‘the sublime offers a “manly” solution to the problem. The pain and disturbance of the sublime functions to jolt would-be aesthetes out of their voluptuous reveries and set them back to work’. We read the exhibition text and Paul Gilroy’s accompanying essay and are told that this shock is intentional, that this shock is political, and that we must make ‘the shock of our painful contact with it instructive’.7

Unlike the Statue of Liberty, which McQueen filmed in 2009 following eight years of it being covered up post-9/11,8 Grenfell was not iconic. I remember walking home from the station, keys in hand, intent on getting in safely, looking up at it at the end of an evening shift waitressing, identifying my bedroom window, second row down from the top, in the centre on the southeast facing side. When I lived there, it was pre-cladding and I always found it modestly pretty compared to other nearby tower blocks. Originally designed by local architect Nigel Whitbread, it was not famous like Ernö Goldfinger’s Trellick Tower. It did not become a monument until it was too late. The morning of the fire there was a brief moment of confusion, in the climate of terror, that this might be a deliberate attack. The truth was much more mundane, no attack came from the sky, but a faulty fridge causing a fire that spread from below; an internally facilitated terror that was enabled to rise up the building through the materials installed to ‘modernise’ it.

On a practical level, approaching Grenfell from the sky may have been McQueen’s only option in December 2017. Coming from above may also be read as evoking the capitalist patriarchy that operated top-down in a conspiracy of neglectful disaster and devaluation of life. As Preston says, ‘For Capital, the real tragedy of Grenfell might be the destruction of living labour (as the only commodity, labour power, that can produce value) in the fire’ and hovering around the tower, we see how labour marches forward in the workers operating around the site.9 Yet treating Grenfell as a monument, with no resident voice, repeats this dehumanisation as it

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7 Paul Gilroy, Never again Grenfell, in Steve McQueen: Grenfell, Serpentine Galleries, London, 2023
8 Steve McQueen, Static, 35mm film transferred to high-definition video (colour, sound), United States, 2009, 7:03 min
9 John Preston, Grenfell Tower: Preparedness, Race and Disaster Capitalism, op cit, p 60
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Andrew Griffin, ‘Grenfell Tower cladding that may have led to fire was chosen to improve appearance of Kensington block of flats’, The Independent, 14 June 2017 https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/grenfell-tower-cladding-fire-cause-improve-kensington-block-flats-appearance-blaze-24-storey-west-london-a7789951.html

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confronts it. As Yasmin Ibrahim writes: ‘When something emerges as iconographic and is intimately linked to the staging of power and biopolitics, the iconographic becomes part of its materiality and governmentality, equally in staging the wounded as expendable.’

In the days after the fire, amidst firsthand witness reports in relation to the entrapping of residents within their burning homes, one of the most disturbing aspects were the reports that the insulating cladding strapped to the formerly fire retardant 1970s block ‘that might have led to the horrifying blaze at Grenfell Tower’ was ‘added partly to improve its appearance...’ so it ‘would look better when seen from the conservation areas and luxury flats that surround north Kensington, according to planning documents’.

My daughter’s nursery was evacuated to another location as cladding debris was being blown onto it from the tower. A street away, in one of those conservation areas, was the MP David Cameron’s house – we would know he was home when we saw loitering armed police – and my anger is heightened by the appearance of his name on a list of seventy-one MPs who are also landlords and who had voted against a Labour Party amendment to the Housing and Planning Bill to force landlords to make sure their properties are ‘fit for human habitation’.

Following extensive analysis of human geography in the UK, Professor Danny Dorling stated that ‘Increasingly, Britain is segregated by inequality, poverty, wealth and opportunity, not by race and area’ but that tower blocks like Grenfell proved to be an exception to this rule, whereby ‘the only racial ghettos in Britain are those in the sky in neighbourhoods which are, at ground level, among the most racially mixed in Britain, but where the children of the poorest are most often black’.

The Grenfell Inquiry examined the flammability and toxicity of various materials used in the cladding of the block, the remnants of which remained charred and flaking on the tower when McQueen filmed. The humans who had lived there were entirely removed by this point. Yet exposure to toxicity had begun long ago, merely by being allocated social housing.

Reflecting on the use of lead paint in both public housing and children’s toys in the United States, Mel Y Chen states that ‘black children are assumed to be toxic; and lead’s threat to white children is not only that they risk becoming dull and cognitively defective, but precisely that they...
lose their class-elaborated white racial cerebrality, and that they become suited racially to living in ghettos’.

I felt keenly the precarious sense of my own privilege at having long exited as the reality of Grenfell as a death trap became uncovered. As Dawn Foster reported: ‘Black and South Asian survivors... felt the implicit message from everyone they contacted before the fire for help with the building was “you are a guest in this borough, and a guest in this country, you have no right to complain”’. Horrifying racist abuse was directed at Grenfell survivors on social media, characterising them as unemployed migrants and freeloaders.

As McQueen’s helicopter continues its relentless loops of the Tower, I start to feel angry that we are being made to continue to look at it. I feel angry that we are not looking inside other people’s homes in the surrounding area, that no one else was subjected to this intrusion. Gene Ray states:

The urgent need for artistic practices to resist currently unfolding injustice through autonomous cultural interventions must come before valid injunctions to respect the memory of the dead – especially and most clearly when that memory is being officially exploited as a moral alibi for brutal policies of state. This is not to deny the claims of spectrality. But it is to insist that the dead should not dominate the living or block any possible straight gate to the future.

Here, the spectrality is observing the brutal reality, silently, repeatedly, for the duration. I want to reach out and hold on to the building, as if it were a children’s roundabout, and make the movement stop. However, there is no licence for pausing, slowing or rewinding in McQueen’s film. I reach for Elizabeth Freeman’s tactics to disrupt the motion of ‘linear time and the cyclical time that buttresses it but also… the illusion that time can be suspended. Pauses or interruptions in the routinized rhythms of everyday life … the material for a peoplehood experienced as pre- or a-political, as merely human.’ If I made a film of Grenfell, I think it would be a loop of early found footage of the fire that would reverse its trajectory, that would stop it spreading, that would recall the fire brigade to take a different route, and bring the residents down to safety.

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17 Gene Ray, Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11, op cit, p 151
McQueen’s concern that ‘once the tower was covered up it would only be a matter of time before it faded from the public’s memory’ resonates with how I felt living in its vicinity at the time, and a performance protest I undertook in view of the Tower a few weeks after the event.\(^\text{19}\) After an early, strong response from protestors storming the Royal Borough of Kensington Town Hall two days after the fire,\(^\text{20}\) the strength of the anger seemed to dissipate as grief and mourning took over. The confrontation posed by the Tower in itself at least served to refute the desire to disappear its residents, either into ‘attractive’ cladding or into silence, whilst the call for answers remained unanswered. At the time of writing, nearly six years later, the Inquiry’s final report is still being written.

As a closing statement on behalf of the victims for the Grenfell Inquiry pointed out, ‘for many of those working in those long, complex chains of subcontracting, the question of whether they were at fault was not even considered’.\(^\text{21}\) To record and screen the building’s charred skeleton as a statement to the Government, the Council, and to all the corporations who profited from Grenfell, demands not only that they actually watch it, but that they accept their share of fault. Unless this film impacts those responsible parties, then the question becomes: who is the aggressive spectrality for? Indeed, McQueen spoke out to the press that of the dozens of MPs invited to see the film, the vast majority failed to even reply.\(^\text{22}\)

Preston states that, ‘[t]he State is interested in the citizen as an abstract notion in disasters and emergencies and is more concerned with maintaining capitalism, social control and cohesion and ultimately in its own continued existence’.\(^\text{23}\) Showing the shell of the building in this monumental state risks the fate of the victims becoming even more abstract. Moreover, as the press release for Grenfell makes clear, the motivation to continue to view the uncovered building is not shared by the bereaved and survived, to the point that the press are instructed only to use a selected still from the early part of the film in which Grenfell is not yet fully visible.\(^\text{24}\) Grenfell is already removed from its community and the context of one of the poorest parts of Kensington in being transported only two miles to Kensington Gardens and its housing, as it does, of the sheer wealth and entitlement of Kensington Palace and its Royal inhabitants. Moreover, in the white cube of the Serpentine South Gallery, incased within the cultural insularity of the art world, with its invisible but tangible barriers and booking systems, residents

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\(^{20}\) Nicola Slawson et al, ‘Protesters March as Anger Mounts over Grenfell Tower Response – as It Happened’, op cit

\(^{21}\) Imran Khan & Partners, ‘The Magic Pencil’, Grenfell Tower Fire Public Inquiry Closing Overarching Submissions on behalf of Core Participants, 10 October 2022


\(^{23}\) John Preston, *Grenfell Tower: Preparedness, Race and Disaster Capitalism*, op cit, p 2

\(^{24}\) See [Steve McQueen: Grenfell](https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/about/press/grenfellbystevemcqueen/), Serpentine Galleries, 2023
would need to feel confident enough to cross that threshold in order to take the step to see it.

Francis Frascina points out the risk that, “[a]rtists become gallery-based activists, sustained by art-world cultural and economic provisions, and their activated audience, absolved from responsibility, return to passivity beyond the confines of the exhibition space’. As such, given McQueen’s connections to the North Kensington community and his skill for social commentary, I would question whether his attention might have been better placed with the people than with the building.

In fact, the strength of the survivors has kept the movement going – from silent marches, to articulate interviews, Inquiry evidence and resolute campaigning to the Government. As McQueen’s film gives a harrowing external tour of a site of mass manslaughter so that no one would forget, it is a testament to the collective defiance of the survivors that in the six long, hard years since the fire no one has.

Lana Locke is an artist working across a range of media, including installation, painting, sculpture, video and performance. She is Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Camberwell College of Arts. She undertook her practice-based PhD (2017) on ‘The Feral, the Social and the Art Object’ at Chelsea College of Arts, where she also studied for her MA in Fine Art (2012). She has had solo exhibitions at Lungley Gallery (2019, 2020 and 2023), Liddicoat & Goldhill project space (2018), DOLPH Projects (2016) and Schwartz Gallery (2014), and has exhibited in group exhibitions at Shtager & Sshch (2023), Hales Gallery (2022), National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts, Taiwan (2021), Kingston Museum (2019), MOCA Taipei, Taiwan (2018), the Nunnery Gallery (2018), Block 336 (2015) and Bloomberg New Contemporaries (2013 and 2016). www.lanalocke.com