

Neil Gray on *Palimpsest* (plus script)



Gray's film *Palimpsest* (2010) is included in the multidisciplinary *Artists' Moving Image* learning resource. This resource is located at: www.artistsmovingimage.org.

Palimpsest is a film that reflects my ongoing concerns with uneven urban (under) development. Drawing on the theoretical insights of radical urban geography, this film attempts to understand the 'regeneration' process in Sandwell, West Bromwich as part of a wider process of neo-liberal urbanism. Speculating on the fatal similarities between urban development processes in the Black Country and elsewhere in the UK, I imagined myself as a narrator newly arrived in the Black Country, attempting to understand the essential aspects of the local urban fabric through a film essay: a visual form of 'sci-fi materialism'.

Despite what the political theorist Frederic Jameson has termed a 'taboo on totality' within much post-modern discourse, and remaining attentive to the historical and geographical specificity of the Black Country region, I wanted to try and grasp the processes I have witnessed in this area as part of a wider process of urban valorisation at regional, national and global scales. At a time when capitalism is hegemonic - and as it fails on a monumental scale to satisfy even the most basic reproductive needs - it seems to me more necessary than ever to attempt to generalise about the underlying systemic conditions which foster urban development as a global urban strategy.

Gray's script for *Palimpsest* (structured as ten short theses)

1.

On this strange planet, the commodity reigns.

A queer and mysterious thing. In the commodity, the social character of human labour appears as a fetish, and a definite social relation between people, assumes the mystified form of a relation between things.

Separated from the control of the producer, the commodity ceases to be ruled over by human beings, acquiring a ghostly objectivity and leading a life of its own: a social heiroglyphic masking the uneven character of labour.

In exchange, the commodity aligns itself in a mysterious hierarchy, and, in accordance with its own peculiar laws performs as an actor on a phantom stage.

2.

The shameless commodification of *everything* is the essential hallmark of this rented world.

Urban development is the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism, which, true to its inner logic of domination, attempts to refashion the totality of space *into its own peculiar décor*.

An un/economy of appearances. Will Alsop's design for *The Public*, furnishes the infantile intoxication required for the disavowal of material reality. Meanwhile the world of the human is ever more circumscribed, and the real fall of public man is replaced with pseudo-public eventology.

In the 'big society' a host of extras are drafted in on a wave of voluntarism for work without wages and the spectacle of participation in a choice already made.

3.

Despite a narrative of blight and decay - as if the social and political had been removed from an entirely natural matter - the economic depression of inner cities is a logical, rational outcome of land and housing markets.

Devaluation is designed to produce economic surplus value - regardless of negative social impacts. Buildings are not abandoned or left to deteriorate because they cannot be used meaningfully, but because they cannot be used profitably.

Low prices in land and rents are central to a developer's ambitions. Capital's restless search for profits requires constant renewal through cycles of destruction, devaluing the old, and making way for the new. Exchange value must always trump use value.

4.

From disinvestment to profitable opportunity. The rent gap is the gap between actual ground rent and the ground rent possible under conditions of reinvestment. Devaluation, with all its negative social effects, makes revaluation both possible and profitable. Disinvestment and urban decay are a strictly logical, rational outcome of land and housing markets - the result of identifiable private and public decisions.

The role of the Public – beyond boosterist imagineering - is to pump-prime the local area for reinvestment: a massively subsidized creativity fix for an ailing property market. But West Bromwich is neither Shoreditch nor Manhattan. Affluent hipsters are notable by their absence. Here, the arts-led property strategy leads in another direction - Tescopoly.

5.

On site, we discovered children's artwork marking the erasure of their primary school and the impending arrival of Tesco superstore. The naïve drawings service the fantasy of communitarianism in the regeneration project, projecting the cultural capital of pre-pubescent's as substitute for urban erasure and displacement.

Children don't know much about capitalism.

A euphemism for gentrification, regeneration hides the class content of property development behind a rhetoric of renewal. But behind the PR projects, the developers have teeth. In Linwood, near Glasgow, Tesco hired a property firm to deliberately run down a shopping precinct, before 'rescuing' the town from the urban blight it helped to produce.

I'd always wondered why Linwood had fallen apart, a local inhabitant said to me. Now I know - Tesco did it.

6.

Slowly, slowly, production gives way to circulation, and the crisis of regional development is replaced by a fictive economy of appearances built on debt and disavowal.

The drive for profits circulates a never-ending glut of products on the marketplace, the workers share of national wealth slowly dwindles, and an ever-expanding empire of debt drives the worker back into the workplace. More work. More intense work. Less pay.

Accumulated labour power, 'dead labour' stored in machines, devours living labour in a drive for production and consumption that never ceases. And where the workers personality isn't turned into their CV, their labour...is hidden from sight.

7.

If Autogeddon were ever to occur it might be here in the heart of England, where the M5 meets the M6. Under the cruel dominion of tarmacaddam, West Bromwich is produced as a 'non-place' to be circumvented by the rational irrationalism of circulation demands.

JG Ballard's dystopian imagination is no longer required in order to understand the obscene underside of Jeremy Clarkson's infantile auto fetishism. These black rivers carry corporate harm like a virus into the veins of quotidian life.

8.

Space is a privileged instrument of Capital. The "survival of capitalism" no longer depends on production *in* space, but instead on the production of space itself, in and through the process of capitalist development.

The political economy of *place* upgrades the *image* of the city, just as disappearing central budgets degrade its reality. City branding, place marketing, and the privatisation of space trump universal social provision.

But the potency of inter-urban competition merely operates as an external coercive power bringing cities closer into line with the discipline and logic of capitalist development: the provision of a good business climate.

9.

'Erase the traces' said the militant modernists, building working-class utopias from bourgeois ruins, but the cry has been superseded of late by the capitalist drive for creative destruction.

The link between speculative finance and an urban *rentier economy*, is now more explicit than ever, and demolition provides the necessary, if not sufficient condition, for a capitalist appropriation of the city.

The tyranny of rent requires the destruction of all collective social means, and the reification of private property as a new moral order.

Regeneration, masking displacement, class bias and the transfer of assets to private concerns, represents the destroyers as saviours, and erases the past for a fictive 'public' under market command.

10.

In this neo-liberal urban terrain, a receptive audience has been effectively engineered for the kinds of market-reinforcing, property-based, gentrification-friendly policies that have been repackaged as the creativity fix.

But the Public's cultural regeneration project only disavows the obvious. The phantom creative class of the phantom creative economy can't exist without an expanding and insecure service class to service their needs.

The Public marks the weak emulation of losing formulas. An index of collapsing social relations reified as arch urban commodity, but this time as empty, pure space. A loss leader in a zero-sum game.