

'Poverty Porn' and *The Scheme*: Questioning Documentary Realism

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The shock of *The Scheme*

Perhaps no television programme made in Scotland in recent years has had the shock value of BBC Scotland's five part documentary series *The Scheme*. First broadcast in May 2010, *The Scheme* depicted the daily lives of six different families from the Onthank and Knockinlaw council house schemes in Kilmarnock. A cast of characters are seen to battle against a series of material, personal and social disadvantages: drug dependency, petty crime, casual violence, dog soiled carpets, ASBOS, teenage pregnancy and abortion, single parenting, foul language, imprisonment, ill health and bereavement.

Although the degraded conditions of everyday existence in Onthank commanded headlines, a glimpse was also given of local activists led by the indomitable Cree family fighting to keep open a community centre. The series acquired further notoriety when it was postponed after only two episodes while a participant was charged with assault. It was eventually broadcast in full a year later, promoted by week-long coverage in the *Daily Record*. Another wave of hostility descended on the programme when it was nominated for a Scottish BAFTA in October 2011 after being described by the Chairman of the BBC Trust Lord Patten as 'the highest quality documentary making'. A BBC Scotland spokesperson highlighted the renewed public interest in important social problems aroused by the programme: 'This was a significant piece of work that gave rise to an unprecedented level of comment and debate around

important social issues in contemporary Scotland. It is understandable that it has been shortlisted for a prestigious industry award'.¹

Originally promoted by BBC Scotland as 'a snapshot of life in modern day Scotland', the cast of characters and location is hardly representative of Scottish society. The most that a BBC Scotland spokeswoman could claim was that 'it is representative of the six families who took part'.² Onthank was filmed for purely pragmatic reasons rather than any aspiration for wider social accuracy. The producers Friel Kean Films were fortunate to 'find' six families in a suitable area who agreed to be filmed over a period of time. So the first thing to say about how *The Scheme* is promoted as somehow emblematic of 'important social problems' among the most deprived groups is that, on the contrary, it can lay no claim to representing the typical characteristics of even the bottom decile of Scottish society.

As a de-contextualised piece of televisual theatre, commentators and politicians waded into the fray in attempts to divine the social import of the programme. Some used the term 'poverty porn' to deplore its prurient and gratuitous nature. After the programme aired in May 2010 Pat Kane penned a scathing critique of *The Scheme* as 'poverty porn' in *The Herald*.³ By 'poverty porn' he means a new genre of television premised on a 'horrified bourgeois gazing at the undisciplined classes'. In programmes such as *Wife Swap* and *Supernanny*, viewers are invited to adopt an affronted bourgeois gaze in order to arrive at a moral judgement of social inferiority, cultural ignorance and

¹ Phil Miller, 'Dismay as the Scheme is nominated for top award', *The Herald*, 18 October 2011.

² Caroline Wilson, 'Will we learn the truth about Kilmarnock's Onthank estate', *The Herald*, 16 May 2010.

³ Pat Kane, 'It's not about people or poverty. *The Scheme* is quite simply porn', *The Herald*, 23 May 2010

domestic incompetence, and, in the process, claim for themselves the binary qualities of superiority, taste and competence.

But in what sense is 'porn' a useful or accurate label to describe programmes like *The Scheme*? 'The thing about porn is that it's easy to watch, you know what you're getting, and the payoff is instantly satisfying. Poverty porn is no different', Pat Kane argues. Pleasure may be safely taken from watching at a mediated distance bad behaviour and even worse taste of those big, bad Others penned up in council housing schemes. Yet while the term may contain its own shock value, porn conventionally refers to a specific form of objectified and sexualised bodies.

Any pleasure taken from the impoverished bodies of *The Scheme* can only be of a different sort: the mundane spectacle of class dispossession. To nominate this as 'poverty porn' embraces the journalistic temptation of sensationalising the banal and monotonous reality of class-based dispossession that critics of the programme seek to reject. Once the discourse of poverty porn began to circulate among journalists, politicians, commentators, and bloggers the possibilities for rational debate, political significance and sociological analyses of *The Scheme* were submerged by a media-centred sideshow.

Consent and Infamy

As for pornography, the question of participant consent always looms large in the politics of documentary representation. Kane's initial response to the first two shows as poverty porn led to a sharp exchange on BBC2's *Newsnight Scotland* with Stuart Cosgrove, Head of Nations and Regions at Channel 4, followed up later on the blogosphere with other media cognoscenti. Cosgrove argued that as a pop star Kane was double-dealing, denying his own five minutes of fame to ordinary working class people who were after all adults

that knowingly gave legal consent to be filmed. Against facile claims that *The Scheme* is a catalyst for cultural democracy, Kane argued that pop star fame rests on public recognition of the special competence of a charismatic personality. In contrast many figures represented in *The Scheme* were depicted in excruciating images as personally, socially, culturally, and morally incompetent. Crucially, Kane raises questions about who exercises control over the final form that the images take when they are pieced together as 'reality' television. The legal rights, not to mention moral duty, of lower class participants are surrendered to the creative and ideological control of middle class media professionals. From the point of view of television managers like Cosgrove the exercise of unequal social power to represent the lives of others simply reflects the nature of the beast. Get over it.

Participants themselves appeared divided over consenting to how they were portrayed. Leading community activist Ann Cree was reported as having no regrets about taking part since public attention might help the area, while her niece Mel was quoted as saying: 'After I saw the first episode I asked my man if we could get married so I didn't have to admit my last name was Cree and people wouldn't know I live here'.⁴ And while some participants became minor celebrities they exercised little or no control over how they were represented. Neither did they appear to understand that as minor celebrities, largely confined to localities disparaged before the world with their collusion, they would attract unwanted abuse, including violence, and complained of police harassment. Two of the show's 'stars', Marvin Baird and Chris Cunningham, felt betrayed by how they were depicted as utterly ridiculous and contemptuous figures. As Marvin said, 'The BBC were only interested in showing me make a fool of myself. They wanted a circus and we were the

⁴ Georgina Reid, 'Think it's bad now? The Scheme used to be even WORSE', *The Sun*, 25 May 2010.

clowns'.⁵ In one episode, when Marvin finally knuckles down to cleaning the floor with a mop, the whole sorry scene is accompanied by music from *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, in ironic mocking reference to the Disney animation *Fantasia*. As Pat Kane noted at the time, 'Look at the Mickey Mouse junkie in his domestic *Fantasia*!'

A document of reality?

If *The Scheme* does not purport to be socially representative then perhaps the value of the programme lies in its realism. Well, this all depends on what we take 'realism' to mean of course. Realism is a term often bandied about in discourses about literature, art and media but is notoriously difficult to pin down. It is often confused with naturalism, the idea that what counts as 'real' is defined in terms of the physical surfaces of reality. Documentary naturalism commands a validity beyond the conventions of fictionalised narratives since it purports to be a transparent window on the indisputable truth of the social world. What naturalism supposedly lacks in artifice it makes up for in sincerity, deploying its own conventions of letting the camera show the unvarnished truth against which other narratives can be validated or refuted.

By emphasising that it is merely a snapshot' captured by means of 'observed documentary' conventions *The Scheme* positions the camera as a mere instrument, on hand to neutrally record a slice of 'life' as it is lived in the natural habitat of a deprived working class housing scheme. It suggests that a record has been made of the purely contingent and accidental events that happen to disrupt the coherence and stability of damaged lives and spaces.

⁵ Derek Alexander, 'Furious stars of hit reality series *The Scheme* blast BBC for making them 'a laughing stock'', *Sunday Mail*, 6 June 2010.

Conversely, other decisions and actions equally might have occurred, but didn't. A different narrative would have been constructed had the subjects behaved otherwise. Naturalism is reinforced by narratives that define reality in terms of psychological attitudes, decisions and personality traits.

Part of the construction of documentary reality also depends on the use of mood music throughout the programme to elicit the preferred emotional response, just in case the editing of degraded scenes proves too subtle for viewers. Such heavy-handed manipulation is a reminder, were any needed, that documentary naturalism always involves decision-making about how to represent what is depicted. It is never simply a 'snapshot of life' as the programme-makers claim when they appeal to the naturalistic immediacy of the image.

A naturalistic defence of *The Scheme* proves disingenuous since the indexical quality of documentary naturalism always risks putting the resemblance of brute physical presence in the way of understanding the location of social suffering. More critical approaches to realism include as social reality, things and processes that are ordinarily unseen or invisible to the spectator's eye. Bertolt Brecht, for instance, argued for such a critical realism:

'Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasising the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it'.⁶

⁶ Bertolt Brecht, 'Popularity and realism', in Theodor Adorno, et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London, 1977), p. 82.

On these grounds at least *The Scheme* is not at all 'realistic'. It fails to uncover the causal roots of social suffering and, we argue, contributes to, rather than confronts, pejorative representations of the dispossessed. Grasped this way, the appearance of 'pressing difficulties' in *The Scheme* reveals little about underlying social relations or historical context.

In this *The Scheme* came from an older tradition of documenting poor areas in urban Scotland. In 1977 BBC Scotland produced *Lilybank: The Fourth World*, a documentary made by reporter Magnus Magnusson and director Michael Tosh about a housing scheme in the east of Glasgow. It focussed on bored teenagers, gang fights, casual violence, glue sniffing and vandalism, as well as fractious neighbours and a tempestuous public meeting. Some compared the stigmatisation effect that *The Scheme* had on Onthank with that of *The Fourth World's* Lilybank in the 1970s.⁷ But the earlier documentary was a more earnest exercise in serious social documentary analysis, centred around the participant observation of social policy academic and activist Kay Carmichael's harrowing attempt to adjust to 'the hostile and ugly' world during a three month stay in Lilybank.

Some critics thought Carmichael naïve to say the least about the social conditions of working class Glasgow, with the Marxist sociologist Sean Damer vehemently denouncing the series as 'the most prurient and matronizing attack on the working class of Glasgow that I have ever seen in the media'.⁸ In the series itself, Carmichael recounts feeling self-consciously middle class in the presence of children marked from the age of three with

⁷ Derek Alexander, 'Decades before *The Scheme* another Scots community suffered the TV treatment', Sunday Mail, 27 June 2010.

⁸ Sean Damer, *From Moorepark to Wine Alley: The Rise and Fall of a Glasgow Housing Scheme* (Edinburgh, 1989, p. 2).

what she called 'the stigmata of deprivation'. A comparison is instructive between the difference approaches. Carmichael's academic authority lends *The Fourth World* a sense of political mission and social analysis, however limited, that is entirely missing from *The Scheme*, a symptom of the lost appetite of broadcast media for visual socio-analysis.

The politics of representation

Many see the value of documentary as a transparent form of enlightenment through its ability to naturalistically piece together unadulterated facts about the empirical world that need urgent attention. Among its earliest proponents, John Grierson saw documentary film as applying a medical type solution to social problems. Documentary makers were 'doctors in cinema' who would exercise public influence by making 'drama from our daily events and poetry from our problems'.⁹

From Grierson's perspective documentary advanced an enlightened form of social reformism on the premise that once social suffering is put before the sensibilities of an audience demands for political action to alleviate social distress will surely follow. For Grierson the illuminating function of documentary lay in making a persuasive case through expository argument not neutral narrative. In contrast, *The Scheme* flatters a morbid fascination for abject social suffering, even as it continues to aspire to document an objective reality that some intellectuals like to doubt even exists.

Until quite recently, it was fashionable to revel in the supposed lack of distance between image and reality, a view promoted with typically exaggerated abandon by the philosopher wild card Jean Baudrillard. As we

⁹ John Grierson, 'Preface', Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London, 1936, p. 5).

become lost in the callous pleasure of disconnected spectacles, Baudrillard asserted that the image was no longer encumbered by any extrinsic moral, political or aesthetic criteria. Even so, the damaged lives of *The Scheme* are no simulation or hyper-reality but the degraded construction of actually-existing social reality, the same ground on which even the most obtuse post-modern games are played out to self-applause.

For better or worse, television programmes form part of the struggle to define, interpret and understand social reality. It was already recognised in the 1920s by Dziewo Vertov that documentary film-making plays an active part in the construction of social reality. Documentary is productive of meaning, even where *The Scheme* eschews an overtly didactic standpoint. But whereas Vertov experimented with montage as part of a self-consciously dialectical act of image construction, *The Scheme* imposes a narrative argument that feigns direct knowledge that it is a construction at all rather than a series of accidental incidents, mere reflections of reality that just happened to be captured by the presence of the film crew. Clearly, the presence of the camera crew affects the space where the images are contained, even where documentary attempts to make the apparatus of image production disappear.

Pat Kane thought that the series was rescued, just about, when the camera was forced out of the shadows into the action after a euphoric drug user smeared the lens with a watery kiss. 'In one blissful act of boundary-less excess, breaking every "documentary" or fly-on-the-wall convention, he reminded us that this is only one narrative construction of poverty in

Scotland, among many possible others'.¹⁰ This reading is a bit too sanguine. In an age saturated with visual styles, this apparent moment of disruption to documentary naturalism is now routine and familiar to viewers from a thousand and one 'to camera' documentaries. True, it (briefly) enlivens *The Scheme* and appears to break down the invisible camera boundary separating the viewer from the action. But this rare disruptive moment fails to correct the mounting horror induced by the weight of naturalistic subterfuge.

From Angry Young Men to Barbarous Beasts

The upshot of our argument is that truth, history and political responsibility is evacuated from the index of camera-ready reality. Little sense is provided by *The Scheme* of the wider forces of neoliberal political economy that have over the past thirty years restructured the socio-economic conditions of life for ex-industrial working class communities in Britain, not least in Kilmarnock and Ayrshire. And this is the nub of the matter.

The Scheme also needs to be situated within significant changes to media representations of working class people in Britain since the 1990s. From the late 1950s until fairly recently it is at least arguable that the working class was represented in diverse, if not always flattering ways, reflecting a range of characters, situations, practices and attitudes. It might be an exaggeration to say that the working class wrestled self-representation away from the middle class in British cinema for a time. But at least the social realism films and documentary tradition showed an understanding of some of the predicaments confronting working class lives and their active responses. For instance, in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960), a lathe operator

¹⁰ Pat Kane, 'After *The Scheme*, it's time for people power in Scottish broadcasting', 2 June 2011.

in a Nottingham factory, Arthur Seaton bristles at the limits of male working class existence and categorisation by class position, famously quipping, 'whatever they say I am, that's what I'm not' (title of the 2006 debut album by Sheffield pop group, Arctic Monkeys). Of course, the social realist tradition represented class often in clunky ways, sometimes mixed with gender and race messages.

Clearly, *The Scheme* does not belong to this lost world of working class resistance and resilience. Instead, it fits a more recent pattern of ideological venom about the working class as a cultural marker of personal failure. Working class is no longer a badge of authenticity, solidity and respectability but something base, superficial, backward and ridiculous. Lacking middle class aspirations, a discourse of class hatred helps justify record levels of social inequality in Britain today. From Harry Enfield's creation of Wayne and Waynetta Slob in 1990 to *Little Britain's* Vicky Pollard and Catherine Tate's Lauren Cooper, a new breed of loathsome, inarticulate, lazy 'chav' stereotypes abound. Special malice is reserved for young working class women.¹¹ A supporting cast of real-life damaged caricatures appear on a raft of reality television programmes like *Big Brother* and *Jeremy Kyle*. In Scotland the content is different but the class spite is much the same. Here bad taste is wedded to bestial gangs, knife crime and territorial violence in disdainful discourses about neds and urban working class areas.¹²

¹¹ Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London, 2011) is essential reading about the rising fury of middle class hatred of the English working class in the period of the defeat of organised labour since the 1980s.

¹² Alex Law, 'It noh funny': 'Ned' Humour on the Web', *Media Education Journal*, (2006, 39) pp. 18-21; Gerry Mooney and Neil Gray 'Glasgow's New Urban Frontier: 'Civilising' the Population of 'Glasgow East'', *City*, (2011, 15.1) pp. 4-24.

Documentaries like *The Scheme* fail to give political expression to social conscience. Instead a more insidious stance is adopted: a standpoint of moral and political indifference, one that domesticates social suffering as individualised psycho-drama. In its portrayal of de-contextualised suspect subjects, *The Scheme* stands closer to wildlife documentaries where animals in trouble are observed with studied detachment from a distance. As 'flawed consumers' lacking cultural taste, *The Scheme's* camera fixes on yet another disreputable object of consumption (plasma TVs, alcohol, tobacco, etc), indolent. Wildlife consumers are framed by *The Scheme* in terms of personality defects and deviance from behavioural standards implicitly subscribed to by 'us' the ideal cultural and moral arbiter. Much contemporary discourse similarly reduces the poor to animalistic imagery, wallowing in deprived conditions and governed by biological instincts, consuming and procreating for immediate gratification without social responsibility or cultural elevation. This is exemplified by recent fears and fascination about 'feral' youth out of control, with all the worst nightmares coming to life on the streets of London to riot in August 2011.

Part of the problem with classical documentary was always the suggestion that it could provide ready-made knowledge about and solutions for social suffering. By appealing to the objectifying gaze of naïve realism *The Scheme* side-steps the problem of the relationship between social classes and the image. Naïve realism adopts a reflectionist or correspondence view of knowledge, one which discovers, rather constructs arguments about, the palpable facts of an immutable world. As such *The Scheme* claims an alibi for moral and political indifference because it purports not to be an argument but a mere copy of reality, a slice of life, a 'snapshot' accurately reflecting surface appearances.

Here the sociology of documentary asks questions about the social preconditions of image-making and argumentative technique – in what sense does *The Scheme* correspond to a reality that the documentary makers themselves articulate and define and, furthermore, how are the unequal social positions of representation allocated?

Documentary makers inhabit a social world where the language and technique of image construction is filled with cultural meaning and market opportunities. This interpretive universe comprises commissions, locations, camera technology, post-production, voice-overs, marketing campaigns and so on. Despite claims about the self-knowing performative culture of today's media-saturated society, where everybody instinctively knows how to perform in front of a camera, the social world of documentary professionals is completely alien to the one occupied by the subjects of *The Scheme*.

If *The Scheme* uses documentary to represent reality it must first be part of that reality and, therefore, it helps to construct, not 'discover', that reality. What any visual image signifies depends not only on the text itself but also its context. The necessary context for understanding *The Scheme* includes both the direct commentaries about the content and style of the programme and the wider politics of representations of poverty and class.