STEVE McQUEEN

GRENFELL

7 APRIL–10 MAY

The first time I visited Grenfell Tower was in the early nineties, I went to visit a friend who had just had her first child. She was Italian and her partner was Algerian. We had gone to art school together in Chelsea and I wanted to see this new beginning. I remember the views from the window and thinking I had never been up this high in London before. The viewpoint was amazing.

Reflecting on this moment now, I feel the weight of the present. Ladbroke Grove and Notting Hill, where Grenfell Tower is situated, have been a part of my family since they arrived in the UK. My father was a close friend of a prominent member of the community, Rhodan Gordon. They grew up together in Grenada in a place called Paradise. Rhodan went on to open the Black cultural centre Back-a-Yard in the late sixties, and later the Black People's Information Centre. Both places attracted unwanted police attention.

In the early nineties I ran a second-hand clothes stall on Portobello market nearby. What I loved was the community. All the people with different backgrounds from all over the world. There was a wonderful energy, a familiarity, an exchange which was unlike anywhere else in London. Also, it was cool. There was a buzz. There was proudness. You were in the right place.

When I heard about the fire, I needed to do something. I was in pain like many other people at witnessing a tragedy that simply did not have to happen, yet did due to deliberate neglect. The question for me at the time was, how do I engage with this tragedy? The only thing I could think of was to visit the building again, after nearly 30 years.

I feared once the tower was covered up it would only be a matter of time before it faded from the public's memory. In fact, I imagine there were people who were counting on that being the case. I was determined that it never be forgotten. So, my decision was made for me. Remember.

This film is dedicated to the 72 people who died in the fire, the survivors and the bereaved.

Steve McQueen

NEVER AGAIN GRENFELL

PAUL GILROY

The loss of seventy-two irreplaceable human beings as a result of fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017 was a horrible crime. Those needless deaths have had incalculable consequences for their families and friends, the survivors and the embattled local community, for the emergency workers on duty that night, and for this ailing city.

Grenfell ghosts* haunt the political culture of a bitterly-divided country where the known dangers that produced so much suffering are widespread, though they remain of only marginal interest to government and the complacent political class that serves it. Works of art cannot compensate for or redeem this cruel folly. I hope that this intervention not only bears witness to the sorrow and anger which exceed words, but also that it will amplify sympathy, solidarity, and indeed shame at the fact that this could ever have been allowed to happen.

It was not an accident. The uncontrollable fire that stole those precious lives had been predicted. Warnings were issued, alarming arguments had been comprehensively laid out. The dangers were far from secret but the risks were not acted upon. A money-making machine made those acknowledgements impossible. The familiar pathologies of power, greed, corruption and indifference were augmented by the 'colonial' mentality of the local state and its various proxies, intermediaries and henchpeople.

* This is Lowkey's formulation.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztUamrChczQ

Now, long after the fire was extinguished, the basic details and causal sequence of events that night have been made widely accessible. An unprecedented and imaginative campaign by the survivors, the mourners, their supporters and allies kept the trauma and the tragedy in view. Year upon year of monthly silent marches, simple passionate rhetoric and artful manipulation of potent symbols (especially the colour green) made Grenfell difficult to overlook or just forget. For a time, the survivors' concrete criticisms were rehearsed repeatedly on London's local television news thanks to the tireless work of the reporter Rags Martel. A small contingent of poets, agitators and organic intellectuals kept the outrage simmering on the fringes of the respectable media.

In spite of an apparently interminable official inquiry into how and why the deadly fire had happened, the facts cannot be examined as they should be. Their contestation by those who are likely to be judged culpable is secondary to the way they have been shrouded in mists of calculated misinformation. PR propaganda has arrived from several different directions, and a mesh of duplicity has been precisely calculated to maximise uncertainty in the face of

obvious wrongdoing. These well-known corporate tactics confounded definitive pronouncements and rendered the clarity of firm and final explanations inaccessible because they were constantly deferred. Time itself became a weapon favoured by the powerful, who use it to generate fatigue and hopelessness among their opponents.

As a result, unlike the essential facts, the lines of responsibility for this crime are not well understood. When they do occasionally erupt into view, the corporate screen erected around them filters out their power to shock. The implicit obscenity of the Grenfell fire has been made to look normal, to appear routine. We have been habituated to that blankness and encouraged to imagine that there can be no alternatives to this particular way of organising human life and calculating its minimal, transient value.

Thus the true horror of these killings is that they present in capsule form a deeply disturbing illustration of the morbidity of institutions in contemporary Britain. Corruption, cruelty, complicity, disdain and disregard feature here as both causes and effects. All have been harnessed to the machinery of rapacious, unregulated capitalism and then projected through

the frames of xenophobia and racist common sense. This mixture has produced unwelcome and unsettling echoes of the indifference and loathing that defined official (non)responses to the deadly fire at 439 New Cross Road in 1981.

The resulting violence is both fast and slow. It culminates not in the culture of corporate and governmental impunity, but in a multilayered process which can perceive authentic humanity only in the lives and needs of the wealthiest inhabitants of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Ordinary working people, considered superfluous or unwanted, are exiled to a grey zone where justice cannot enter and their less-than-worthy lives count for next to nothing. Those denizens do not belong in this area. The lives of the lowly are inconsequential. From on high, they may even appear as waste in human shape. It is unsurprising that when the victims fought back, their elemental dignity was not only unanticipated by the authorities, but perceived by them to have been threatening and hostile. By being asserted, that common humanity was perplexing, unthinkable.

One basic question: ‘Who can be killed without any consequences?’ is therefore pending in the memory of

Grenfell Tower just as it was in the long, multi-layered struggle over the 97 people who died on the terraces at Hillsborough. That question inclines us towards further inquires which promise to reveal the heart of the matter: Whose lives matter? Which deaths will be mourned? How can these acts of gratuitous killing be marked and remembered? We need to know whether art can play a role in the difficult pursuit of reparation and restoration. The grieving process cannot unfold or progress because other battles have urgently arisen to block the routes towards repair. That possibility is further obscured by the anger, frustration and stress of having constantly to fight officialdom and juridical obstacles in order simply to be heard and understood.

Steve McQueen's partisan intervention into all of this begins with fragments of birdsong heard in darkness. Viewers are asked initially to consider London, contoured beneath us, and to think about how the sprawling shapes that compose it should be regarded when seen panoramically from a totalising height. Our divided city is a living system arrayed against its polluted horizon. The camera skims the bare trees of winter in the light of a low sun, swooping

over Wembley stadium to the western quarter bounded by the Westway that swept out the mess of Notting Dale's old 'Napoli' and the riots of 1958, ushering in a new arrangement. Rich and poor would live cheek by jowl until the poor could be driven elsewhere.

The charred obscenity of the earthbound tower then arrives abruptly at the centre of the screen. In the same respectful, solidary silence that defined the monthly marches organised to demand justice, mourn the victims and affirm their humanity, a soundless camera wheels around the damaged structure. The vertiginous movement of orbiting that fixed point induces nausea as viewers are pulled into the gyre. We move in closer still and the animated geometry of the broken building disorders perception. The rotary motion becomes hypnotic and, as this monument to loss begins to transmit its own traumatising rhythm, we start to see the interior of the scaffolded structure. Rose-coloured plastic sacks have been filled with debris and piled up. Forensic workers in PPE are framed by the array of exposed metal windows that sparkle with reflected sunlight as the day comes to an end. Once the viewer has been thoroughly disoriented, the movement ceases and the city's soundscape

returns to communicate the ordinary nature of this troubling, exceptional object.

From the start, TfL staff at Latimer Road station were fervent in discouraging what they took to be 'disaster tourism'. When paying our respects to the dead during the first days after the fire, it seemed as though the act of staring up at the tower had been expressly forbidden. Some will doubtless still dispute the right to look at the damaged building at all. Others, who have dwelled in the shadow of its steel and concrete carcass and inhaled the toxic residues of the blaze, may even be glad it was wrapped up, hidden from sight and effectively placed in storage prior to removal. Those reactions are understandable but they refuse the central difficulty of deciding exactly what we have been looking at? The building's shell is simultaneously a history lesson, a ruined house, a grave, and a memorial. How are we to evaluate this disturbing galleried encounter with all its divergent aspects?

To me, Steve McQueen's work suggests that there is much to gain in confronting the meanings of the damaged structure and making the shock of our painful contact with it instructive. Opening ourselves

humbly to that possibility can be accomplished without betraying the tower's plural traumas or the political complexity of this moment in which closure is not an option. We cannot understand Grenfell unless we keep the reality of this building firmly in mind.

Let us hope that this exercise in destabilising, commemorative perception can be restorative. It asks nothing less than that its viewers re-think the terms of our own relation with Grenfell Tower and face up to the discomfort that emerges with all attempts to make art respond to histories of suffering or orchestrate the refuse of reality so that it becomes capable of summoning and transmitting precious glimpses of a different way of life. The mutual aid and empathic, convivial concern that emerged spontaneously to support the victims of this disaster – who had been let down by incompetent, insensitive and indifferent government – pointed to that very possibility. This testing road leads towards a more profound justice than Britain currently affords its citizens. Perhaps it also signposts the making of a better democracy in which a grotesque episode such as this could never again arise.

In memory of those who lost their lives in the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017

FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS

Abdeslam Sebbar
Ali Yawar Jafari
Denis Murphy
Mohammed Al-Haj Ali
Jeremiah Deen
Zainab Deen
Steven Power
Sheila
Joe (Joseph) Daniels
Husna Begum
Kamru Miah
Mohammed Hamid
Mohammed Hanif
Rabeya Begum
Khadija Khaloufi
Vincent Chiejina
Fatemeh Afrasehabi
Sakineh Afrasehabi
Isaac Paulos
Hamid Kani
Berkti Haftom
Biruk Haftom
Gary Maunders
Deborah (Debbie) Lamprell
Ernie Vital
Marjorie Vital
Maria Del-Pilar Burton
Amal Ahmedin
Amaya Tuccu-Ahmedin
Amna Mahmud Idris
Mohamednur Tuccu
Victoria King
Jessica Urbano
Farah Hamdan Belkadi
Leena Belkadi
Malak Belkadi
Omar Belkadi
Abdulaziz El Wahabi
Faouzia El-Wahabi
Mehdi El-Wahabi
Nur Huda El Wahabi
Yasin El Wahabi
Logan Gomes
Firdaws Hashim
Hashim Kedir
Nura Jemal
Yahya Hashim
Yaqub Hashim
Fatima Choucair
Mierna Choucair
Nadia Choucair
Sirria Choucair
Zainab Choucair
Bassem Choucair
Anthony (Tony) Disson
Mariem Elgwahry
Eslah Elgwahry
Raymond (Moses) Bernard
Gloria Trevisan
Marco Gottardi
Fethia Hassan
Hania Hassan
Rania Ibrahim
Hesham Rahman
Mohamed (Saber) Amied Neda
Abufras Ibrahim
Isra Ibrahim
Fathia Ali Ahmed Elsanosi
Alexandra Atala
Mary Mendy
Khadija Saye
Ligaya Moore

In December 2017, artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen (b. 1969, London, UK) made an artwork in response to the fire that took place earlier that year on 14 June at Grenfell Tower, North Kensington, West London. 72 people died in the tragedy. Filming the tower before it was covered with hoarding, McQueen sought to make a record.

Following the fire, a Government Inquiry was launched that was conducted in two phases. Four years since the publication of the Phase One report, the recommendations are yet to be implemented, meaning a similar tragedy could happen again. The findings of the second and final phase of the Inquiry are due to be reported in late 2023. There is an ongoing criminal investigation.

Grenfell is presented at Serpentine South following a period of private viewings, prioritising bereaved families and survivors. After its presentation at Serpentine, the work will be placed in the care of Tate and the Museum of London's collections.

Steve McQueen
***Grenfell*, 2019**
Colour video, sound
24 minutes, 2 seconds

The film contains close-up imagery of the tower six months after the fire. There is a space to pause, rest and reflect inside the galleries.

With thanks to the Grenfell Community

14 June 2023 marks 72 months since 72 people lost their lives. Join Grenfell United and walk together to show those responsible that Grenfell is not forgotten.

For further information on Grenfell United's fight for justice and other post Grenfell campaigns visit **https://grenfellunited.org.uk**

Consultation around the future memorial is handled by the Memorial Commission. You can visit this website for more information: **https://www.grenfelltowermemorial.co.uk**

BIOGRAPHIES

Steve McQueen is an artist and film-maker born in West London in 1969. He lives and works in London and Amsterdam.

Paul Gilroy teaches at UCL where he is Professor of the Humanities. He is the author of *Small Acts* and *Darker Than Blue* among other books.

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Filming or photography is not permitted in the gallery space

Design by Philip Lewis
Print by Colt Press

“ It was not an accident. The uncontrollable fire that stole those precious lives had been predicted. Warnings were issued, alarming arguments had been comprehensively laid out. The dangers were far from secret but the risks were not acted upon.”

Paul Gilroy, *Never Again Grenfell*

Download the free arts and culture app, Bloomberg Connects, to access a digital guide. Here, you can listen to Colin Salmon read an essay by Paul Gilroy that can accompany Steve McQueen’s *Grenfell*.

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