

the free development of individualities and indexes the overcoming of alienation by rediscovering subjectivity as life's absolute. From this sprouts the free development of individualities instead of the reduction of necessary 'labour time' so as to posit (relative) surplus value, setting free the artistic, scientific and cultural development of individualities. Hence, activity is no longer determined by, or confounded with, the union between individual and production; socialism allows for *private* labour to blossom as it overcomes the abstract universal of the market economy's 'transcendental genesis'. The solution that socialism posits is that use value takes the form of the community, which is characterised by the transparency of social relations in accordance to participatory common activity while, simultaneously, also understood

as private (in its production).

Henry recovers from Marx the notion that the pure substance of the labour process is, in itself, neither material nor economical but rooted in the development of productive faculties, i.e., in living. Ontologically dissolving these productive forces into capacities, dispositions and activities of individuals, Henry identifies the development of productive forces as signifying the identical and indefinite development of individual activities. *Marx: An Introduction* reveals Henry's singular and rigorous close reading of Marx himself, a reading that is often muddled or lost in the deluge of Marxist and post-Marxist critical thought.

Ekin Erkan

## Cleaning artefacts

Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury, eds., *Nightcleaners and '36 to '77* (London: Raven Row, LUX and Koenig Books, 2018). Box-set containing two books (214pp.) and two DVDs/Blu-Rays. £24.00, 978 3 96098 381 1

From campaign film to experiment in documentary representation, and from exemplary instance of anti-realist and self-reflexive 'Brechtian' counter cinema (according to some film theorists of the 1970s) to a semi-mythical and almost impossible to view work of leftist filmmaking: the history of Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners* (begun in 1970, released in 1975) is characterised by continual transformations and conflicting understandings. In the twenty-first century, the film has returned to wider visibility, circulating particularly in the context of contemporary art. Its latest instantiation is as a pared-down, tasteful object: a neat box-set comprising two books of essays and archival materials, alongside the two films by the collective arising from the night-cleaners campaign – *Nightcleaners* itself and the later, lesser-known *'36 to '77* (1978), initially billed as 'Nightcleaners part 2'. Few comparable moving-image works receive such reverential treatment, and it seems that *Nightcleaners* is now a canonical work of radical cultural production in Britain, although academic film studies continues to show practically zero interest in the film. Why has this work resurfaced to claim such talismanic status? And what does this publication contribute to the process?

Recent interest in *Nightcleaners* and *'36 to '77* should be tracked in terms of a wider reinvestigation in the last decade of post-1968 British radical and experimental film manifested in exhibitions, publications and retrospectives. The two editors, Dan Kidner and Alex Sainsbury, have been influential figures here. Kidner organised a retrospective of the work of Marc Karlin, one of the members of Berwick Street Film Collective, at Picture This in Bristol in 2012, and presented *'36 to '77* as part of 'The Inoperative Community' in 2016 at Raven Row in London, of which Sainsbury is the director. This is itself part of a more general process in which historic figures of radical cinema such as Chantal Akerman, Harun Farocki, Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker increasingly have their work displayed in art galleries as much as in cinemas. Moreover, this has occurred alongside a positive re-evaluation of documentary practices discernible in contemporary art over the last few years, as well as this field's fascination with collaborative artistic production, both of which are enacted in the Berwick Street Film Collective's work. (The group that made *Nightcleaners* was composed of Karlin, Mary Kelly, James Scott and Humphry Trevelyan, with Kelly being replaced by Jon Sanders for *'36 to '77*.) There are parallels here with an-

other of Kelly's projects from the 1970s, *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-75*, made with Margaret Harrison and Kay Hunt, which approaches similar subject matter and mobilises related artistic forms; *Women and Work* too has been recovered in recent years, with its display at Tate Modern in 2016 and an archival exhibition related to it at South London Gallery in 2018-19.

The films' subject matter is also significant for their contemporary appeal: the campaign in the early 1970s to unionise (female) night-cleaners in London by women's movement activists and by the cleaners themselves, in the case of *Nightcleaners*, and the focus on the memories and experiences of one cleaner involved in this struggle, Myrtle Wardally, in *'36 to '77*. This coincides with important areas of theoretical research of the last decade or so, which themselves have flowed into the discourses of art: labour, social reproduction, care and maintenance, the racialisation and gendering of work. Notably, in the last decade a number of collections of Marxist-feminist writings from the same era as *Nightcleaners* have been republished, by figures such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici and Selma James. These texts, associated with the International Wages for Housework Campaign, speak to many of the issues also apparent in *Nightcleaners*, while sitting in a somewhat critical relation to the version of socialist-feminism legible in the film. Without suggesting a simple opposition, the film's concern with the orienting framework of socialism and the cleaners primarily as waged workers, as well as the critical engagement with the trade union movement of those involved in the night-cleaners campaign such as Sheila Rowbotham, Sally Alexander, and cleaners' activist May Hobbs, is thrown into relief by a text like James's 1972 article 'Women, the Unions, and Work, Or What is Not to Be Done', which is much more severe in its stance regarding most existing left organisations and their tendency to privilege waged work as the central site of political struggle. (In this optic, *'36 to '77* – where the filmmakers descend into the hidden abode behind production, in the form of the domestic space of Wardally's kitchen – becomes the more interesting work.)

In addition, the films clearly resonate with cleaners' activism in the UK in the present, for instance across the University of London, with many issues familiar from the latter struggles finding earlier analogues in the films:

outsourcing and the direct market-mediation of social-reproductive work, battles with the conservatism of the larger unions, the precarious position of a workforce that has a high number of migrant workers, and so on. This is unfortunately not brought out in the commissioned essays here, although it is suggested towards the end of Sheila Rowbotham's piece, and an event to launch the book at Raven Row included a conversation with people involved in contemporary cleaners' organising.



These two films, then, cut across the field of 1970s independent cinema, from activist documentary to structural film to so-called 'Screen theory', modelling this field's 'contradictions and antagonisms' as Kidner says in his essay here, while also providing extraordinarily rich objects for thinking questions of social reproduction, work, postcolonialism, solidarity and political strategy.

The first of the two books contains four short, newly commissioned essays, along with statements by each of the four filmmakers who worked on the first film. Overall, the new essays are disappointing. Kidner provides a competent, if fairly predictable, contextualisation of the film in relation to 1970s British independent film culture. Rowbotham contributes an interesting, but unfortunately brief, account of her involvement with the campaign and relation to the filmmakers. Kodwo Eshun and Sukhdev Sandhu explore *'36 to '77* and the use of sound across both films respectively, but never seem to quite grasp their elusive objects, particularly their political implications. There is nothing here that equals the best existing writing on *Nightcleaners* – *'36 to '77* has received little attention – by Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, Griselda Pollock, Siona Wilson and Rowbotham herself.

Moreover, the book tends to replay a tension evid-

ent in the films themselves. *Nightcleaners* was begun by Karlin, Scott and Trevelyan. Kelly joined later, nominated by women's movement activists so that at least one woman was involved in the film's production. (When Kelly didn't participate in '36 to '77, her place was taken by a man.) A majority of essays here are by men, and it is noticeable that there is no black feminist presence. In general, the complexities of the relationship between the mostly male, white, in some cases privately-educated filmmakers, and the working-class, white and black, female cleaners – as well as the mainly middle-class, white women's movement activists, the white, male union leaders, and so on – are not really investigated head on, although they have been interrogated in some writing on the first film published elsewhere. This is not to say, of course, that because of these representational complications *Nightcleaners* and '36 to '77 could not be exemplary works of political cinema. But surely the ramifications of gender, race and class are worth teasing out more?

The second book, or, perhaps more accurately, booklet-zine, enables a more productive examination of the issues. It pulls together facsimiles of writings on the campaign and film from a number of sources, many of them obscure and difficult to access. These texts from *Spare Rib*, *Red Rag*, *Shrew*, *The Cleaner's Voice* and the *1977-1978 British Film Institute Production Catalogue*, as well as previously unpublished material, add up to a very valuable resource. It re-embeds the films and the collective historically in a wider left activist culture of argument and action, discouraging a perception of the films as unmoored constellations of visual and aural signifiers.

Most important, though, is the way the box-set makes the films themselves (relatively) widely available for the first time in decades. *Nightcleaners* and '36 to '77 may now be analysed at length. In 1975, Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen combatively declared in *Screen* that *Nightcleaners* was 'undoubtedly the most important political film to have been made in this country'. Although Johnston and Willemen's enlisting of the film to their own anti-documentary polemic foreclosed other readings of the film for a long time, their analysis of it as structured around a series of disparate and sometimes conflicting discourses (of the unions, the women's movement, the filmmakers, the cleaners, the cleaners' spokespeople, and so on) draws attention to the way the film takes difficulty, *blockage*, as one of its central struc-

turing principles. Famously, sequences of the film are punctuated with silence and black leader, offering a time and space for thought, but also gaps in the fabric of representation itself, intervals in which nothing is said or done. Action is interrupted. What to say? What to do? It is a film that lingers on the obstacles to political organising, while remaining steadfast in its utopian demand that such struggles are necessary, possible and inseparable from the desire for a far-reaching transformation of society. Hence its deeply intertwined productivities and frustrations.

In fact, *Nightcleaners* is emblematic for its acute staging of dilemmas that have been identified in formally experimental political film ever since Eisenstein accused Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* of 'formalist jackstraws'. *Nightcleaners* raises this tension to an especially high pitch. The subject matter of an active political campaign of workers (removed from the niceties of debates in film culture) and the implicit objective to make something useful and readily comprehensible to those involved, sits alongside a profound investigation into the nature of images (of workers, of politics, in general) and the act of representation. Yet one thing that comes through in these materials is that the filmmakers understood the film from early on as primarily reflective rather than utilitarian. The move of the film into the art institution neutralises this tension to some extent – few would now demand the tangible political utility that seemed to be expected by some in the 1970s. But an ambivalence remains. It is tempting to see this crystallised in the box-set itself as artefact: while the materials are simply presented in a cardboard box that has an appropriately provisional feel, there is a latent high-design vibe that co-exists a little uncomfortably with the articles in, say, *The Cleaner's Voice*.

Where *Nightcleaners* retained a fraught relationship to activist filmmaking as traditionally conceived, '36 to '77 steps much further into a meditative mode. The moments of *photogénie* in the previous film become full-scale reverie. As Eshun's essay describes, it is a portrait of Myrtle Wardally, in which the viewer comes to inhabit her memories of the night-cleaners' campaign and of her childhood in Grenada. The film is moving in its affirmation of the value of the experience of a working-class mother and migrant from the Caribbean. Shot in colour, unlike *Nightcleaners*, it smears and distends the im-



age through replay, re-filming and extreme slow-motion, sometimes reducing the frame rate to once every few seconds, doing a lot with seemingly little footage, while snatches of Wardally's voice, calypso and trade union songs are audible. It is beautiful in a way that *Nightcleaners* isn't. Which is not to say that it is less 'political', although it is striking that the film is credited to a list of individual names rather than the collective subject 'Berwick Street Film Collective'. It would be a significant gain if one result of this publication is that it is no longer overshadowed by its predecessor.

Marc Karlin died in 1999. After Berwick Street Film Collective ceased to exist following '36 to '77, and the members went on to their own separate projects, Karlin

charted a path of socialist filmmaking that refused – in its production methods and critical analysis – conciliation with neoliberalism, while taking in the major political landmarks of the era: the Nicaraguan revolution, the miner's strike, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the election of Blair. There is a need now for his later films to be made widely available, in order to draw some lines out of the moment of *Nightcleaners* and '36 to '77 and connect them to the present.

*Image courtesy of Berwick Street Film Collective: Humphry Trevelyan, Mary Kelly, James Scott, Marc Karlin and LUX, London.*

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