The Body that "Melted into the Carpet": Mortal Stains and Domestic Dissolution in Carol Morley's *Dreams of a Life*

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How can we tell the story of a life when what remains are unnervingly ''messy'' fragments – dust, rot, a smell, a stain? This question lies at the heart of *Dreams of a Life* (2011), a recent ''poetic documentary'' from British director Carol Morley. Inspired by newspaper headlines relating the shocking discovery of Joyce Vincent's body in her London flat three years after her death, *Dreams of a Life* traces an unwieldy pathway into Joyce's life to make sense of the sensationalised yet vague media reports that announced the story. Responding to an overwhelming bewilderment at a person simply disappearing under the bright lights of the London metropolis, the incredulous, ever-present question of ''how could this have happened?'', the film weaves together threads of testimony drawn from friends, former lovers, and colleagues of Joyce, as well as archival footage and dramatic reconstruction. This impressionistic stream of cinematic memorialisation in part rescues Joyce from the assumption that she must have been the victim of indifference for her death to be conceivable, perhaps even an example of a wasted or worthless life. Instead, the memories of those who knew Joyce reconstruct her as a figure of glamour and promise, an upwardly mobile young woman brimming with vitality and beauty.

While *Dreams of a Life* is a poignant tribute to an apparently forgotten life, this is a film that never fully loses sight of that difficult question: the materiality of what actually remains. In keeping with the traditions of poetic documentary, *Dreams of a Life* is attentive to the challenges of resurrecting one's subject on the cinema screen. Although the film is littered with the very ''stuff'' of memory – old tapes, records, video footage, clothes – in a literal sense, *Dreams of a Life* suggests that what endures can often be very little. In this case, as a friend of Joyce states at the beginning of the film, ''flies and a smell'', and the lingering stain of a rotting corpse: hardly the materials with which one might expect to build tender homage. Nevertheless, it is the documentary's recurring references to a corpse so disintegrated that it was ''melting into the carpet'' – the body-as-stain – that form the focus of this article. The stubborn residual persistence of matter that is the stain stands as

testament to the past and its continued, obstinate intrusion upon the present. At the same time, as the trace of disintegration and decay, the stain underscores the disappearance, elusiveness and loss that haunts this documentary. This article examines how the image of the body-become-stain through anxiety-inducing processes of death and rot both provokes, and yet also frustrates the desire to recover a life seemingly lived between the cracks of vision.

''Flies and a smell and nobody noticed''

To introduce the ''riddle'' of Joyce Vincent (Bradshaw 44), a 38-year old British woman born to an Indo-Caribbean mother and a Grenadian father, whose body was discovered in her London flat in 2006 three years after her death, *Dreams of a Life* thrusts us into a *mise-en-scene*, or perhaps more aptly, a *mess-en-scene* that blends the suspense of cinematic horror with kitchen-sink realism.[1] After newspaper headlines announcing the discovery of a ''badly decomposed'' body stream across the screen, the camera pans over a series of objects: a shroud of dust on a kitchen table; mouldy, disintegrating fruit; a kitchen plug streaked with grime; an abandoned milk bottle left out of the fridge. A hand pushing frantically through the letterbox of a doorway flooded with mail disturbs this unnervingly suspended moment in the landscape of the everyday. Barbara Creed suggests that what we consider the quotidian – that which is ''personal, ordinary, routine and unremarkable'' (484) – contains within it the potential seeds of the extra-quotidian – those moments that strike us as out of the ordinary, or in some sense exceptional. In *Dreams of a Life*, the premature stillness of the everyday, set amidst the exterior hustle and bustle of contemporary London, provokes a creeping dread, the intuition of something, somehow, gone terribly amiss. The frozen spectacle of domesticity silently rotting at the seams suggests the uncanny slippage of the everyday into something unusual, even sinister: the realisation that this flat has become a death scene.

As the camera glides over grimy surfaces and collecting dust, the tangibility of these fragments resonates with the work of Laura Marks and Jennifer Barker, who have both spoken of a filmic haptic visuality in which the skin of the spectator is brought into intimate relation with the cinematic image. Following this tactile journey through rotting domesticity, dread is further heightened in this dramatic re-imagining as the reactions of the entering authorities are also shown. While their faces indicate shocked revulsion, it is the recoil of the onlookers – indeed, one woman actively retches – that implicates the body not only in the act of spectatorship, but more particularly in the experience of disgust. Crucially, however, the film cuts away from actually

showing the woman vomiting, and in so doing, foreshadows the eventual non-reveal that ends the scene. Despite building a palpable sense of anticipatory disgust by focusing on the corporeal responses of these intruders to the flat, the assumed object of revulsion, the corpse, remains potently unseen. The non-revelation of the corpse is consistent with traditions of documentary film in which, as Anita Bressi and Heather Nunn observe, death is frequently negotiated via allusion and concealment. However, *Dreams of a Life* goes further in stressing the sheer *impossibility* of completing the reveal. The failure to show the corpse is presented as an inevitability; this is, after all, a body so disintegrated that it was literally ''melting into the carpet''. Uttered by one journalist early in the film, this description is shocking in its macabre vividness; yet the documentary itself shows only a living-room floor bearing a vaguely body-shaped stain.

No body, just a stain. As the residue of the disintegrated corpse, the very paradigm of the abject,[2] the mark on the carpet carries a certain *frisson*. At the same time, as the culmination of a scene that slowly moves through the eerie haptic entropy of the everyday, there is something anti-climactic to the body-stain, an absence that arises from the realisation that ''there's no body.'' In her discussion of rot as form in the film *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Greenaway 1989) Eugenie Brinkema describes how the decaying body repulses due to its excessive, eruptive materiality. As she explains, ''in death, more than elsewhere… the body is furiously *too much*'' (Brinkema, Rot's Progress 86 (emphasis in original). In contrast, *Dreams of a Life* provokes the sense that this stain is *too little*. This impression is heightened as a journalist and friends of Joyce acknowledge that no post-mortem could be carried out on Joyce's remains; correspondingly, no cause of death could be ascertained.[3] The inability to give a forensic resolution to Joyce's demise suggests that this stain is somehow deficient. Rather than offer a substantive clue to the perturbing death scene, the stain is waste; debris; just a ''bit of a mark on the carpet''.

The sense of deficiency to the stain, including its failure to yield the revelatory knowledge typically attached to the post-mortem, undermines its capacity to offer a ''solution'' to the revulsion communicated by the disturbed faces and bodily comportment of the witnesses to the death scene. In her discussion of vomit and its privileged position in theorisations of disgust, Brinkema is critical of how revulsion is often contained within ''narratives of provocation that bind it to the always-comforting logic of ordered causality'' (Laura Dern's Vomit 52). This logic ensures that the experience of disgust is pinned down to a specific object – ''*that* corpse; *this* rot; *these* maggots''

(Laura Dern's Vomit 61) _and, in so doing, rendered less disturbing through the ability to identify the cause of revulsion. These early scenes in *Dreams of a Life* initially seem to offer such a sense of comforting confirmation as the mark on the carpet is the lingering remnant of the corpse, thereby allowing the documentary to forego the visualisation of the dead body in a state of excessive putrefaction. Yet the simultaneous sense of impoverishment attached to the stain, its implied status as both a diminished residue of the lived body and of the abject fluidity of the corpse, concurrently resists this cause-and-effect logic by gesturing towards the unthinkable, the self that has become nothing more than a mark that antagonises all notion of ''shape, coherence and substance'' (Laura Dern's Vomit 60).[4] Offering the stain as the scrap or remnant so utterly at odds with the imagined totality of the liveable body, *Dreams of a Life* challenges understandings of disgust that posit it as the result of physical proximity with a definable, legible object. Yet, in light of the theme of this special issue of *InterAlia*, the necessary visualisation of the stain in place of the corpse in the film is, crucially, less an encounter with bodily fluids, than with the solidified *trace* of the leaky body.

The body-become-stain evades the desire to give a reassuring structure of ''ordered causality'' to disgust in which one can link revulsion to a provocative concrete object, instead offering an encounter with the illegible trace of the fluid. Yet *Dreams of a Life* does still gesture towards the enduring allure of this cause-and-effect logic when confronting scenes of such disturbing horror. Seeping into the intimate realm of quotidian filth, the stain and its connotations of dissolution powerfully convey the most perplexing and distressing detail regarding Joyce's death: the fact she was only discovered after three years. In their work on entropy, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss argue that ''melting means falling into indifference'' (181). Bois and Krauss here associate ''indifference'' with dissolution into amorphous homogeneity, the ''flaccid leaking away of substance'' that characterises entropic processes (181). In *Dreams of a Life*, visualising Joyce's body as nothing more than a mark on a carpet also potently suggests public indifference, a death that ''nobody noticed'', rather brutally collapsing bodily waste, the discharges and leakages of the body, into social refuse, those deemed to be worthless or discardable subjects. Yet, the impression that the stain must be the residue of a person forgotten in the shadowy margins of society is challenged as the film cuts between the imagined discovery of the flat and the ruminations of friends, former lovers, and colleagues of Joyce, whose testimonies provide the oral history that flows throughout *Dreams of a Life*. [5] The visible distress and shock as they describe learning of Joyce's death counters the assumption that Joyce was a victim of simple indifference. The evident

disparity between the Joyce known in life and the imagined squalor of her death floods these early interviews with a sense of utter bewilderment. This prevailing confusion is heightened by the stain and its incapacity to provide the forensic answers desired, yet it simultaneously elevates the mark on the carpet from a piece of incidental detritus in a landscape of domestic squalor into the privileged sign of an *epistemological mess*.

So who was Joyce, and how could she have suffered such a death? The stain that indicates dissolution from three-dimensional ''fleshy'' life into a flattened mark means that the enigma of Joyce's passing not only disturbs the logic of cause-and-effect that often frames disgust (the certainty of being able to claim that it is *this* object that causes *my* revulsion), but also troubles the desire for visual evidence on the cinema screen. The anonymous trace of decay, the opaque stain, confounds the pursuit of immediate answers. Yet as Mary Ann Doane argues, challenges to the limits of cinematic vision can stimulate the desire for narrative. One journalist in the film states that Joyce's death is ''this mystery that's suddenly thrown up and you just want to know more.'' The locution ''thrown up'' here describes the unanticipated emergence of an enigma, but also inadvertently carries connotations of vomiting. As a result, this summation of the drive to make sense of the opening milieu of *Dreams of a Life* implicitly merges the experience of disgust with the desire to know. This, in turn, transforms the stain from the ostensibly impotent refuse of the body into an epistemological quandary, a visual obstacle that concurrently provokes the hopeful drive to restore the logic of cause-and-effect to the riddle posed by Joyce's disintegrated body.

Recovering the traces

Dreams of a Life's ensuing attempt to make sense of this puzzling death scene resonates with the ''pervasive documentary impulse'' to organise the documentary film around a journey or quest (Bruzzi 101). A detective tenor to *Dreams of a Life* is correspondingly signalled through shots of investigative materials strewn over a single white wall. Towards the beginning of the film, the status of the investigation mirrors the squalor of the death scene as there is little more than a haphazard mess of post-it notes, photographs and scrawls of writing. However, as the documentary intermittently returns to this wall, it indicates the ''taking shape'' of its project to slowly piece together Joyce's life. The gradual cohesion and ordering of the information into a linear trajectory suggests that the film's ultimate desire is to clear up the physical and epistemological mess established at the start of *Dreams of a Life*. Multiple question marks on the wall highlight the

enduring difficulty of pinning down the film's subject in keeping with the tone of uncertainty seen to more generally pervade contemporary documentaries,[6] yet the presence of this investigative wall continually helps to visualise the reconstruction of Joyce's story into a temporally linear narrative.

The teleological detective thrust to the documentary is, however, complicated by the interweaving of oral history and dramatisation throughout *Dreams of a Life*. Bressi and Nunn utilise the term ''poetic documentary'' to describe examples of the genre that imaginatively merge oral testimony, reconstruction and documentation; such documentaries have been characterised as ''poetic'' due to their supple transitions between fantasy, illusion, oral history and archival material. The combination of a linear quest-like structure and the impressionistic streams of testimony, footage and re-enactment that move between past and present found in *Dreams of a Life* also defined Morley's earlier documentary, *The Alcohol Years* (2000), in which she offers a ''poetic retrieval'' of her younger self through the memories of friends and acquaintances also living in Manchester in the 1980s. Just as *The Alcohol Years* utilises its form to conjure a vivid if partial impression of Morley, so too does *Dreams of a Life* use the different registers of the poetic documentary to reconstruct Joyce as a living, breathing entity on the cinema screen.[7] Strikingly, this entwinement of testimony and dramatisation particularly focuses on the beauty, glamour and promise of Joyce. In stark contrast to the scenes of disarray that commence the film, talking heads repeatedly refer to Joyce's ''immaculate'' appearance, her ''well-spoken'' voice, her successful job working for the treasury department of a London company, and her expensive clothes. Recollected as a charismatic, confident and stunning woman, these descriptions are enlivened, and thereby reinforced, by evocative re-imaginings of Joyce as a child and as an adult (played in the film by Alix Luka-Cain and Zawe Ashton respectively). Softly lit scenes of the young Joyce singing to her sisters and mother in the family home are accompanied by re-enactments of Joyce dancing and laughing at office parties, confirming her as a figure of vitality. As the vividness of Joyce is constituted through these transitions between imagined reconstruction and the oral history given by friends, this helps to further ''clean up'' Joyce's story by presenting her as someone shimmering with promise and beauty.

This admiring testimony is therefore crucial to the quest to resolve the ''mystery thrown up'' by Joyce's death, countering the abject connotations of that phrase. Rather than remain the site of

absolute horror, Joyce is restored as ''somebody that I would like to be'', in the words of one colleague. There are, however, momentary revelations that stand out amidst the overarching effusiveness of the recalled memories. Notably, as co-workers discuss Joyce's evident intelligence, mild shock is expressed when they learn that she had no qualifications despite her well-paid city career. That one friend responds by commenting that ''I always put her in the same class as the rest of us… middle class'' implicates Joyce in a process of masking: in this particular instance, of her class background, bolstered by a re-enactment of a young Joyce balancing books on her head and practising her elocution. The resulting sense of Joyce ''coming from somewhere trying to get somewhere'' establishes her as a figure in pursuit of what Lauren Berlant has referred to in *Cruel Optimism* as ''the good life''. For Berlant, this is a fantasy rooted in the social, the promise of ''upward mobility, job security, political and social equality and lively, durable intimacy'', which mobilises and sustains the enduring faith that individual lives can ''add up to something'' (2). Joyce's drive to get ''something more out of life'' implicates her in a narrative of class aspiration and the pursuit of ''respectability.'' The flattering testimonies of friends and colleagues paying testament to Joyce's sophistication therefore create an initial impression of Joyce as somewhat akin to a ''can-do girl'', the contemporary figure identified by Angela McRobbie as ''the pleasingly lively, capable and becoming young woman, black, white or Asian… the attractive harbinger of social change'' (58). Presented as an upwardly mobile, beautiful and smart woman navigating the market-driven spaces of metropolitan London, Joyce appears to have overcome structural class inequalities and expectations to achieve respectability and belonging.

In identifying the ''luminous'' figure of the ''can-do girl'', McRobbie is critical of the degree to which this contemporary ideal has been depicted as not only able to neutralise enduring class divisions, but moreover transcend racial inequalities by ''subsuming ethnicity into normative white femininity'' (71). McRobbie's argument that contemporary ideals of femininity are still determined by white, middle-class norms does to some extent resonate with the documentary's depiction of Joyce's ambivalence regarding her racial identity. While Joyce's particular embodiment of sophistication and good manners are attributed by her friend, Kirk Thorne, to the Caribbean traditions that shaped her upbringing, others intimate her discomfort at other aspects of her familial background. A sense of embarrassment is particularly associated with her father, whom Joyce disparagingly referred to as ''pork-pie'' – a style of hat particularly popular amongst West Indian men in 1960s London. A former female flat-mate suggests that Joyce was sometimes

perceived as ''stuck-up'' amongst their friends, as someone who ''didn't want to be black''; while evidently disagreeing with this characterisation of Joyce, she does describe trying to persuade her to find ''a good black man'' in contrast to the white ''office types, English guys'' that Kirk describes her as typically dating. That Joyce's subsequent immersion in a circle of black and mixed-race musicians not only brings her into contact with stars such as Issac Hayes, Betty Wright and Gil Scott-Heron, but moreover allows her to pursue her suggested love – singing – gives a sense of promise and excitement to her later move away from ''office types''. However, discussion of Joyce meeting Nelson Mandela during this time remains loaded with ambivalence. Acquaintance Elton Edwards suggests that the allure of Mandela for Joyce was due to his position as a global figure of importance; speculating that Princess Diana would have had a similar significance, he states of Joyce's meeting of Mandela, "it wouldn't have been that blackness… I don't think she was into the race thing. Black, white… I think she just wanted to get places''. The suggestion that it is social mobility – the desire to ''keep up'' with others and ''get places'' - that fuels Joyce over and above explicit consideration of a politicised black identity is reinforced by the documentary in a following dramatised scene that depicts Joyce at home scrawling a ''to-do list'' in the back of a book by Maya Angelou. That it is the maintenance of feminised signs of outward success – aims such as ''lose weight'' and ''nails'' – that are implied as a priority for Joyce over and above the content of Angelou's work in the scene bolsters Elton's suggestion that Joyce was not explicitly into the ''race thing". The scene does, nonetheless, signal the everyday labour required to pass as ''somebody'' in accordance to norms of sophistication and promise that those such as Beverley Skeggs have identified as being particularly central to white, middle-class standards of respectability and belonging.

Despite suggesting lingering anxieties surrounding class and racial identity, and the repeated quotidian efforts required to continually present oneself as ''somebody'', the testimonies in *Dreams of a Life* underscore Joyce as the ostensibly successful embodiment of social mobility and, in so doing, present something of a purification narrative that contrasts with the abject horror of the opening scenes of the film. Not only does the documentary visualise literal processes of cleaning by repeatedly showing extermination staff de-contaminating Joyce's flat, but in a more figurative move, these flattering testimonies ''clean up'' memories of Joyce. The consequences of this process are made explicit within *Dreams of a Life* as a recording of Joyce's voice is played to those who knew her, as well as several journalists who worked on the story. While friends and colleagues offer

contrasting responses to the voice and the extent to which it evokes the Joyce they specifically remember, one of the reporters summarises the shared sense of wonderment at the vividness of the recording: ''you see, that's it, isn't it? We're not talking pathologists anymore, bodily fluids, stains on the carpet, or whatever. You're not talking about all that grim (sic), you're talking about a human being full of vibrancy''. With the body-stain established as the prime symbol of ''all that grim'' within *Dreams of a Life*, a reminder of the ''runny, gaseous, flowing, watery nature of bodies'' (Longhurst 23), the journalist's comment directly acknowledges that this found footage can help to figuratively ''purify'' Joyce by rescuing her from the material erosion of the self visualised in the film's opening. Testimonies and archival materials not only give Joyce a fleshy vivacity, but they also restore her to a ''clean and proper'' body (Kristeva 8), helping to wipe away the taint of ''bodily fluids, stains on the carpet'', the corrupting traces of death and decay.

By following the momentary sonic resurrection of Joyce by immediately cutting back to a dusty tape lying on the floor of the flat in which she was found, the film nonetheless complicates the impression that its process of cinematic recovery necessarily banishes all spectres of decay and rot. David Eng and David Kanzanjian argue that ''loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read and sustained'' (2). The linking back of evocative recording to physical trace settled in the dust implies that the tape, so instrumental in giving palpability to Joyce, does not displace dirt, disorder and detritus; rather, it is found amongst it. In a discussion of the film in *Sight and Sound*, Morley emphasises the importance of visualising the material traces of Joyce to give the film ''the texture of discovery'' (Morley in Bradshaw 44). The frequent panning shots over the debris of Joyce's life counter the impression that these remnants are solely to be understood as a landscape of loss or signs of absolute eradication by suggesting that they can also be a source of recovery in the attempt to restore Joyce to cinematic vividness. The scene of abandoned domesticity that commences *Dreams of a Life* consequently seems less to signal disintegration than a necessary moment of cinematic immobilisation, freezing both space and time to halt ''rot's ineluctable forward progress… presenting and bringing floating and fixed objects'' into our sights (Brinkema, Rot's Progress 74). The seemingly barren landscape of death momentarily stills rot in order to bring before our gaze the visible traces of a life on the verge of dissolution.

This cinematic stilling, or slowing down, of decay resonates with Laura Mulvey's notion of a ''delayed cinema'' that allows for the revelation of something that has lain dormant, waiting to be noticed (9). Arguing that enduring fragments often speak to our fascination with the boundary between life and death, Mulvey's work contributes to a different understanding of the body-stain shown at the beginning of the documentary. Rather than function solely as an unintelligible smear that indicates the loss of materiality, the stain also stands as testament to former presence. This dual capacity of the stain moreover resonates with the work of Sheena Vacchani. While others, such as William Cohen and David Trotter, have emphasised the potentially productive capacities of filth and mess respectively, Vacchani specifically focuses on the stain, arguing that it can enable both ''the manifestation and re-presencing of the excluded'' (40). Despite often coming to consign subjects to invisibility due to its connotations of taint, the stain can also be a means by which to ''bring flesh out of exile'' (35). While a mark on a carpet is, on the one hand, an abject and unliveable residue, *Dreams of a Life* similarly suggests that traces, including stains, ''do not simply lose intelligibility, but… continue to be hailed by creative possibilities'' (Eng and Kazanjian 8). Marks on floors, discarded dresses covered in dust and an abandoned tape; all these contribute to the uncanny confusion of the life/death boundary as these seemingly inanimate remnants become ''fleshed out'' and enlivened, helping to give further fullness and vivacity to Joyce's cinematic image, to memorialise a subject otherwise lost between the cracks of vision.

Seeping into dissolution

Archival footage and dramatic re-imaginings help revitalise Joyce as a tangible figure of promise, restoring her to a vividness that counters the initial connotations of disappearance and eradication that otherwise accompany the body-stain. Instead, the staging of continued returns to material traces within the film becomes a ''way to give a bodily envelope, to add an imprint to the 'evidence' of presence'' (Elsaesser 18). One of the most evocative examples of the creative potential of such remains is a scene in which Joyce sings into her hairbrush in her flat, dressed in an electric blue dress. As a powerful complement to stories about Joyce's interactions with famous singers, the living-room performance in front of the mirror is a familiar screen conceit that conveys how ''ordinary lives articulate with fantasies of being 'somebody''' (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 24). In this scene, the documentary brings the fantasy of musical stardom to life. As the camera swings around Joyce in continuous sweeping close-up, her face is lit up like a screen idol. Joyce blows kisses to an imaginary audience and even winks just beyond the camera; while her gaze does not quite meet

the lens, this moment that almost breaks the fourth wall seems to give particular affirmation to this mesmerising scene, heightening the possibility that we can witness her desires brought into being. Referencing both the tape of her singing and the blue dress later shown in the detritus of the empty flat, this scene not only gives a further vividness to Joyce's image, but moreover indicates the potential of these discarded remnants to bring intimate fantasies to life.

And yet, revealingly, this fantasy scene in front of the mirror cannot quite hold. Poignantly, the moment splinters; as the record runs to its end, we see Joyce crouch down and cry into her hands. The beautiful ''starry'' lighting fades, revealing the smears on the cupboard doors behind Joyce, the plate of food left out on a side-table. This disillusioning dirt signals the visual weight of attrition that the banal everyday can inflict on dreams of ''the good life''. The sense that the desire to be ''special'' or noticed can only be temporarily sustained resonates with Adam Phillips's recent discussion of the notion of the ''unlived life'', those shadow dream lives of unfulfillable desires than run in parallel to quotidian existence. Yet, the particular title and lyrics of the song Joyce performs, *My Smile is Just a Frown, Turned Upside Down*, also suggest an irrepressible secret masked beneath Joyce's veneer of feminine perfection and vitality. The impression of a threatening ''underbelly'' to Joyce's surface vibrancy increases throughout the documentary, such as in another notable scene in which several of Joyce's friends reflect on their experiences sharing a house with her in West London. While her former flat-mates praise her beauty profusely by comparing her with the popular singer Sade, they admit that Joyce often left the bathroom in a dirty state. The overlapping of these comments transforms the anecdote into a shared confession, even if the collective laughter inspired by the memory of ''the ring around the tub, yes, like a Saturn ring'' concurs with the overall impression of the house-share as a happy time. However, the slightly visible recoil as Kirk exclaims ''I wouldn't go in there with my flip-flops!'' insinuates a vaguely repellent grubbiness beneath Joyce's otherwise beautiful exterior.

Domestic slovenliness in the bathroom may not appear particularly significant. After all, as Robyn Longhurst argues, the bathroom is a liminal space for the maintenance of cleanliness, being a realm ''in which bodily boundaries are broken and then made solid again'' (66). Standing out, nonetheless, amidst the general praise for Joyce's appearance, this striking glimpse at something ''dirty'' beneath Joyce's public persona establishes a growing surface/depth tension within the documentary. As the narrative of *Dreams of a Life* works both to *recover* Joyce as a living, breathing

entity, and simultaneously *uncover* something lurking beneath this image, this harkens back to the desire to link the body-stain into a logic of ''ordered causality'', to offer an explanation for the particular circumstances of Joyce's death. However, the corrosion of Joyce's glamorous reputation through references to her messiness also links this surface/depth tension with pre-existing frameworks within which both the allure and ''fall'' of femininity have been aesthetically negotiated. Rosemary Betterton argues that the contrast between outer beauty and rotten depth has long structured figurations of femininity across the visual arts; in cinema, this tension has particularly informed the figure of the *femme fatale*. As a complement to the subtle investigative tone of the documentary, *Dreams of a Life* is interspersed with nods to the *film noir* genre more generally; for instance, in the use of shadowy lighting for shots of nighttime London, and the framing of Joyce in a blue dress as an homage to the traditional sartorial styling of the *film noir*. Yet, it is the epistemological drive to unravel Joyce as ''a mystery that we might never solve'' that confirms her as a potential *femme fatale* figure within the documentary (Morley in Bradshaw 45). The unknowable nature of the *femme fatale*, exemplifying the supposed riddle or enigma of femininity, positions her as the cinematic paradigm of the epistemological trauma (Doane). In parallel with the stain, the *femme fatale* signals a crisis of vision, because ''she never is what she seems to be'' (Doane 1). As Doane explains, her position at the limits of knowledge prompts our desire to peel back her layers in an ''epistemological striptease'' that seeks to expose something beneath the veneer of femininity. *Dreams of a Life* undertakes a similar process of unravelling and exposure, whether in shots of Joyce crouching and crying in her living room, or testimonies to her secret grubbiness in the bathroom of a shared house.

With the documentary's dramatisations probing beneath Joyce's glamorous exterior, her immaculate image begins to leak and sag as though the repressed signs of dirt and decay are spilling out onto the screen. Davinia Quinlivan has spoken of a filmic ''hyperrealist corporeality'' as attention to the body that ''fleshes out the otherwise discrete, liminal or even invisible moments that are normally untraceable, forgotten or lost'' within the realm of the everyday (152). Quinlivan's notion of ''hyperrrealist corporeality'' aptly describes increasing attentiveness to the micro-gestures of Joyce's body in *Dreams of a Life,* a focus that suggests her as a subject in painful decline, signalled through her tired eyes, her unkempt hair, her tight breathing, and shots of her rubbing cream into an open sore on her leg. It is this domestic slovenliness that is particularly central to insinuations of disintegration as Joyce is furthermore shown drinking milk straight out of the bottle,

catching the drops of white liquid that threaten to trickle down her chin; in another scene, we see her almost dripping jam onto her dressing gown. While these moments sit more in the field of mundane messiness than the ''violently visceral and putrid'' unmasking more typically inflicted upon the *femme fatale* (Ravetto 54), the polarity between earlier testaments to Joyce's glamour and this apparent ''underbelly'' is significantly revealed through errant, uncontained fluidity. Open wounds and spilt fluids come to threaten the maintenance of Joyce as a clean and proper body by reminding us not only of the repressed viscosity of the body, but more particularly, the body-stain that haunts the documentary from its very beginning.

Not only do these seeping fluids jeopardise the recovery of Joyce as a beautiful and glamorous figure, but they also suggest the eruptive return of her inauspicious background, the otherwise evaded forces of social exclusion and inequality, as the documentary builds to the revelation that Joyce left her aspirational job in the city to work as a cleaner. Earlier in the documentary, anecdotes about her untidiness prompt one friend to state that he thought ''she is going to have to get a maid''. There is uncomfortable irony in the fact that it is Joyce who is later employed in the cleaning profession. Narrated as a secret Joyce tried to hide from key confidant and ex-boyfriend, Martin, this revelation prompts surprise from her colleagues; as one ruminates, ''I'm just trying to picture her doing that sort of work, and I just can't do it, you know. Knowing the sort of person she was… I suppose I'm trying to picture her doing it all dolled up and you know, in her immaculate dress with her hair''. The vehemence of their surprise is partly grounded in the disparity between her surface performance of an ''immaculate'', sophisticated femininity and the occupational taint that surrounds so-called ''dirty work'': the term for the stigmatisation of those working in the cleaning and hygiene professions. This stigma operates on the principle that ''it is not the people who generate the domestic dirt, mess or waste who are tainted by its stain but those who clean it away'' (West 73). Since ''the avoidance of dirty work remains a marker of social and cultural ascendancy'' (West 74), the uncovering of this secret implies Joyce's slippage from being ''somebody'' into an invisible, subterranean labour force of urban London that has been criticised for its reliance on migrant workers[8]. Given the insinuation of Joyce's class aspirations and her desire to ''get something more out of life'', her imbrication in ''dirty work'' suggests the return of those relentless social forces that erode the pursuit of ''respectability'', and dreams of the good life.

Dreams of a Life is haunted by the sense that our grasp upon Joyce, her restoration to corporeal vibrancy, is essentially flimsy, being continually borne backwards towards the body-stain that is revealed at the beginning of the film, yet also stands as the impending future-to-be. The overarching fragility to Joyce's cinematic image comes to parallel her social precarity within the dirty/pretty confines of contemporary London. Unlike Manchester in *The Alcohol Years*, London is not here subjected to explicit criticism, but the allusion to the power of Manchester's self-mythology in Morley's previous documentary resonates with the subtle critique of London's allure in *Dreams of a Life*. While Joyce's successful city job initially positions her as a poster girl of social mobility, the documentary gestures towards merciless structural inequalities that render London ''both a pretty utopian place of opportunity and a dirty space of social exclusion'' (Whittaker 22). However, the documentary's exposure of the wider ''fraying fantasies'' central to Berlant's notion of ''the good life'', including job security and durable intimacy, is always located in the specificity of Joyce's narrative as the focal site of disillusionment and disappointment. Continually the seeming stability of the everyday uncannily ruptures to reveal something ''darker'' under the surface: the revelation that Joyce had to leave jobs in the city due to sexual harassment; testaments to Joyce's beauty transforming into Martin's expressions of jealousy and an uncharacteristic moment of violence towards another admirer; the puncturing of rosily lit scenes of Joyce's childhood through her mother's premature death; the belief that Joyce sheltered in a women's refuge to escape domestic violence at the hands of an unidentified ex-boyfriend. Trotter argues in his discussion of mess that ''it is unusual for a stain to nurture fantasy, but not impossible'' (3). *Dreams of a Life*'s imaginative use of residues and fragments suggests that the challenge of utilising the ''messy'' remnants of a life is less about their capacity to conjure up fantasy than about their ability to *sustain* it. As the eradicating connotations of the body-stain repeatedly return throughout the film, we are continually borne back to the opening scene of death, both as the residue of physical decay and the symbol of the attrition of Joyce's suggested desires and hopes.

Television/trash

Since it seems the film cannot ''stop the rot'', the inexorable progress of putrefaction gradually ensnares Joyce in the barren domestic landscape introduced at the beginning of *Dreams of a Life*. By increasingly containing Joyce within the flat, lit only by the flickering light of the television, *Dreams of a Life* nods to media reports which assumed that Joyce must have been a loner or a couch potato for her death to be conceivable. Not only does the film repeatedly emphasise that

Joyce died at home in front of her television, but even more strikingly, the television was still on when she was discovered three years later. From the first shot of the documentary, a television screen of static, this supposed source of communication and information is a continually murmuring presence implicated in the dissolution of Joyce's life, and the horror of her isolated death. As one journalist states in the film, ''I think that's the really depressing thing. You've got Saturday night TV, X Factor, Big Brother… all these people speaking at this corpse.'' The idea of such a programme ''speaking *at* this corpse'' ascribes a passivity to television-watching that resonates with wider perceptions of the medium as culturally stultifying. For instance, screenwriter Abi Morgan recently discussed the wider dismissal of television as that which ''rots the senses in the head. It kills the imagination dead''. Although Morgan proceeds to defend television from this association with sensual malaise, her allusion to its perceived degrading capacities is eerily reminiscent of Joyce's own disintegration in front of the same medium. While the creative potential attributed to the residues of Joyce's life throughout *Dreams of a Life* does counter the assumption that rot and the imagination are necessarily antithetical, the entropic influence of television is gestured towards in the documentary through the opening death scene that gives the supposedly corrupting nature of television spectatorship a gruesome literalness. As the film moves immediately from the nauseated faces of those discovering Joyce's (absent) body to a shot of the television, this not only directly implicates the television in the horrifying circumstances of her death, but moreover evokes the enduring association between televisual transmission and physical and mental wasting.[9]

That the journalist particularly imagines ''Big Brother'' as part of the televisual output blaring at Joyce's corpse moreover heightens the ''dirty'' connotations of Joyce's death in front of the screen due to the frequent appraisal of reality television as ''trashy''. Typically seen as a lowbrow corruption of the documentary form, reality television often trades off the spectacularisation of the everyday and the mundane. While its blend of the informative and the entertaining has been commercially successful, it has also been deemed a ''trivialising and contaminating force'' that evidences a cultural dumbing down for a number of critics (Kilborn 2). The insinuation of a diseased, contagious quality to 'lowbrow' televisual output in Richard Kilborn's use of ''contaminating'' resonates with the work of Amy West, who links the figuratively ''dirty'' reputation of reality television with the genre's own focus upon physical grime and filth as signs of the ''uber-ordinariness'' of its subjects. The reification of dirt as an indication of the ''real-ness'' so integral to

the genre speaks to reality's television's fetishisation of the banal.[10] However, the genre also plays off the negative connotations of dirt by creating moralising storylines and voyeuristic gazes that invite judgment upon the everyday performances of its subjects. Spectacles of dirt are therefore privileged signs of intimacy and heightened ''real-ness'' within the realm of reality television whilst retaining their long-standing associations with moral degeneracy.

The moralising tenor of reality television has, moreover, been seen as particularly intensified for women. In her examination of the genre's depictions of femininity, Valerie Walkerdine argues that reality television particularly perpetuates the belief that working-class women are ''shameful, dirty and to be improved'' (225). Helen Wood and Bev Skeggs have similarly identified femininity as the focus of the judgmental narratives of reality television, in part due to the enduring belief that women are the guardians of the intimate (Berlant). As the genre typically propagates the idea that ''not to be feminine, married and/or a mother is to be pathologized'' (8), Woods and Skeggs suggest that storylines seek to restore women to ideals of ''proper'', self-controlled femininity. This dynamic between voyeuristic pleasure at the ''dirtiness'' of reality television's subjects and its enforcement of redemption narratives grounded in the removal of squalor resonates with the tension at the heart of *Dreams of Life* in which figurations of Joyce are torn between the putrid and the purified: the haunting memory of the body-stain battling with the restoration of the glamorous exterior. Utilising the banal minutiae of quotidian dirt to give Joyce a sense of presence yet also suggest her later decline into alienation and isolation, *Dreams of a Life* gestures towards the belief that ''proper'' femininity is maintained by keeping dirt and disorder not only at the margins of the self, but moreover of the home.

That the visual disintegration of Joyce's attractive feminine exterior in her barren flat is accompanied by speculation on Joyce's maternal desires towards the end of *Dreams of a Life* consequently appears to mobilise the judgmental gaze of reality television enthralled with the (self-)destructiveness of ''failed'' femininity. Friends of Joyce wistfully ruminate on whether Joyce's life might have been different had she married one of her former boyfriends, either Martin or Alistair. The suggestion that this may have prevented the ''mess'' shown at the beginning of the documentary evokes Berlant's work in *The Female Complaint* on the sentimental attachments we may cling to in elevating romantic love or marriage as redemptive fantasies that could keep death, and its corollary, decay at bay. These fantasies are given particular allure as the documentary builds

towards Martin's declaration of love for Joyce. While this sincere and quietly devastating scene provides some of the most dramatic evidence for Morley's claim that the film is a ''powerful love story'' (Morley in Morley and McDonald), *Dreams of a Life* does not leave the affective seductiveness of this scene entirely unquestioned. The interweaving of Martin's pronouncement with the comments of other friends who suggest that marriage was not possible due to Martin's father's concerns about mixed-race children signals the enduring social inequalities – in this instance, racism – that punctures the supposed universality of fantasies of marriage, respectability, and the nuclear family. It is the corrosive force of internalising these barriers that are contrastingly acknowledged by another former boyfriend, Alistair. Having movingly referred to Joyce as having been ''my friend, my lover, my partner… my everything'' earlier in the documentary, he speculates that perhaps dreams of marriage and children felt ''too good" for Joyce, provoking, for her, the anxious question of ''I want this but is it really me?'' Thus, while another friend suggests that marriage was, for Joyce, ''the life she should have had'', the juxtaposition of differing testimonies invites us to reflect on the social structures that put these supposedly sustaining collective fantasies of lived fulfilment out of Joyce's reach.

That *Dreams of a Life* ultimately questions the sentimental fantasy that marriage and children could have saved Joyce, without, moreover, invoking explicit judgment upon those giving testimony in the film, therefore sets up a contrast between the moralising narratives of reality television, and the social agenda historically attributed to the documentary form. Kilborn has argued that the recent trend for reality television has generated an emergent nostalgia for past eras of socially driven documentary and Public Service Broadcasting. The association of Big Brother with Joyce's death in front of the television certainly suggests a critique of our supposed ''communication society'' by implying that social media exacerbate divisiveness and apathy, making forgotten lives possible. However, just as the documentary ascribes a creative potential to the otherwise abject residues of Joyce's life, so too does it counter the impression that the ''contaminating'' force of television always ''kills the imagination dead'' in intermittently suggesting television as a possible portal of connection between Joyce and her friends. With the documentary at times imagining itself directly speaking to Joyce through the television by showing testimonies playing to Joyce on the screen in her flat, the film implies that the supposedly degrading forces of television, its contagious networks of information, may have a sustaining effect. In this sense, the film does implicitly acknowledge the extent to which the ''dirty'' connotations of television hold the capacity for pleasure. In his article

'Television as Lover: Part I', Brian Ott emphasises the potential *jouissance* of television watching; those moments in which the television invites the viewer to ''dissolve into it'' like a lover offering an ecstatic pleasure that can override the passive and ideological effects attributed to the medium (26). The implied dissolution of Joyce in front of the television is not wholly reconcilable with the subject-dissolving *jouissance* of Ott's account; indeed, it is the replacement of ''lively, durable intimacy'' with the compensatory networks of the television-lover that are implicated in Joyce's isolated death.[11] Nevertheless, despite its allusions to television as atomising and numbing, *Dreams of a Life* concurrently weaves a fantasy of reconnection into the medium it otherwise seems to question.

What is nonetheless striking about the scenes of television watching is that Joyce is not only shown to lack the explicit ''pleasure'' celebrated in Ott's account, but towards the end of the documentary she is shown to be increasingly disengaged from the narratives streaming out from her set, culminating in a shot of her switching it off with her remote control. In light of recurring ethical debates around spectatorship and representation in the documentary genre, the decision to show Joyce ambivalently captivated by these stories indicates the boundaries of cinematic memorialisation. In *Selfless Cinema*, Sarah Cooper contends that ethical approaches to documentary acknowledge that lives do not end at the limits of the filmmaker's vision. Showing Joyce actively turning off the flattering narratives playing out on the television encourages us to reflect upon the difficulties of paying testimony; what memories do we believe honour the life of another? What stories capture the experiences, desires and dreams that constitute other lives, particularly those lived out of view? Joyce's imagined lack of interest certainly communicates a sense of numbness that resonates with a broader contemporary ''aesthetics of disengagement'': what Christine Ross has termed ''an acting out of states of depression, encompassing boredom, stillness, communicational rupture, loss of pleasure, withdrawal, the withering of one's capacity to remember and project, to dream, desire and fantasize'' (xvi). However, it also leaves space for acknowledging a different interpretation of Joyce's life that does not disregard agency. Alistair suggests that perhaps ''Joyce didn't want to be found.'' That his comment is followed by a re-enactment of Joyce learning of her mother's death at the age of eleven somewhat counters this argument by pointing to the traumatic circumstances that shaped Joyce's upbringing. Nonetheless, rather than solely position Joyce as a symbol of structural invisibility and the body-stain as evidence of the insurmountable forces of social, economic and physical degradation, Alistair's

suggestion does create space for acknowledging the possibility (however uncomfortable) that the illegible stain is also ''symptomatic of a desire not to be seen'' (Clark): deliberately out of sight, rather than pushed to the margins. If this essay earlier links disgust to the stimulation of a desire for narrative, a cause-and-effect linearity that can explain the disintegration of Joyce into the abject body-stain, *Dreams of a Life* does concede that the stain, and by extension Joyce herself, resists such transformation into absolute transparency or legibility. While the title of *Dreams of a Life* has been taken to denote the process of recovering an unfulfilled and, in some sense, unlived existence, it also indicates how the seemingly palpable textures of residues and remnants can only imagine – dream up – the fabric of another life.

It is this overarching sense of elusiveness to Joyce's story that therefore permeates the documentary. As one friend of Joyce comments, ''it's like she never existed. She was a figment of our imagination. She was a story. It was like someone we made up, almost.''[12] This comment intimates the unbridgeable gulf between the Joyce they knew and her obscured ''private'' life whose longings, fantasies and struggles are, of course, implied to be constructed and eroded by wider social and economic forces. Yet, it is the tantalising ''almost'' that stands out in this sentence; this is, after all, a documentary that introduces us to the ''almost-fluid'' of the stain, the ''almost-disappeared'': not quite eroded, not quite legible, but not quite absent, either. It is the alluring promise of this ''almost'' that propels the desire to recover Joyce, a desire channelled in *Dreams of a Life* into recurrent returns to suspended scenes of rotting domesticity which seem to offer something palpable to enable the process of cinematic resurrection. While the imaginative potential of these residues and remnants is at times mesmeric, Joyce's ultimate disengagement from flattering testaments to her life, and the splintering of scenes filled with luminescent promise, remind us that the physical remains of a life, including the stain on the carpet, can only be ''as a shadow… incomplete and concealing'' (Vachhani 34). To this degree, the hope that the stain and its subsequent associated remnants signal not only dissolution and loss but also ''the texture of discovery'', almost-gone-but-not-yet, provides the documentary with its poignant vividness, but also the self-acknowledged limit to the process of materialising memory.

This tension between the immortalising and decaying aspects of the body-stain – between its capacity to still absolute loss as a material trace and its concurrent evidence of disintegration and rot – permeates the final scene of the documentary. As Joyce lies on the floor of her flat in front of

the television, we recognise her as being in visible pain, perhaps even in the process of dying, due to the laboured rise and fall of her wheezing chest. This focus upon Joyce's breathing emphasises her as an embodied subject that ''creates another dimension of the lived body on screen for the viewer; it lends it value and shape through the suggestion of a human physicality that can almost be felt'' (Quinlivan 161). As the camera glides across from Joyce to the shards of glitter enmeshed in the carpet and presents lying haphazardly on the floor, there is a sense that the corporeality of the body is being directly translated, perhaps even rendered equivalent to, these fragments: the posthumous remnants that are drawn upon within the documentary. Yet, the palpability of the body and these objects are undercut by the final shot of the film. One of the few archival images shown in *Dreams of a Life*, a video of Joyce listening to Nelson Mandela is utilised as culminating footage. Earlier in the documentary, this piece of video is received as particularly revealing evidence of Joyce's immersion in a life of promise to the extent that it is shown repeatedly playing on the television screen in Joyce's flat. Aptly then, the film ends by returning us to this video with the camera closing in on Joyce's face. The quality of the footage means that as the camera moves closer, Joyce becomes increasingly fragmented. Leaving us with a pixelating image of Joyce references the fragmentation of society that *Dreams of a Life* subtly implicates in the creation of forgotten lives. Yet, it also underscores something ungraspable, fleeting in these material remains. The ''messy'' quality of the footage reminds us of the stain on the carpet that is implied to be an evocative testament to presence that could, just possibly, bring ''flesh out of exile'' (Vacchani 35). However, the distortion of Joyce's face into a smear of pixels undermines the tangibility of this footage, the capacity to seize upon it as a transparent or fully legible trace of Joyce. As Joyce's face turns to almost meet the camera fully, this signals the documentary's ambivalent desire to immortalise, or at least, to give ''more life'',[13] through cinematic resurrection, and its concurrent acknowledgement of the relentless forward march of material loss.

Notes

[1] Thanks to the editors who suggested this theme-appropriate play on *mise-en-scene*, as well as other invaluable comments on the essay. Thank you also to Jackie Stacey, who provided vital and insightful feedback on various versions of this article.

[2] Julia Kristeva identifies the corpse as the ''utmost of abjection'' (4), deeming it ''the most sickening of wastes'' (3). While *Powers of Horror* has its own predecessors (most notably, Sigmund Freud's ''Totem and Taboo'' and Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*), Kristeva's summation of the corpse as the paradigm of the abject has shaped subsequent discussions of ''dirt'' and ''mess''; see,

for example, William Cohen's discussion of ''filth'' in which he states that the corpse is ''perhaps the filthiest of all'' (xi).

[3] As the documentary makes clear, an inquest declared an open verdict regarding Joyce's death, with no suspicion of foul play (this ruling is, however, briefly questioned by some of Joyce's friends in the film).

[4] The particular impossibility of imagining oneself dissolving into a stain resonates with Cohen's comments on the limits to how much we can envisage our own death; as he observes, ''one can perhaps happily imagine being dust, but not being putrefied'' (xxv).

[5] As the documentary makes clear, Joyce's family chose to remain anonymous and do not therefore participate in *Dreams of a Life*. In the DVD Extra, ''When Carol Met Kevin'', Carol Morley does state that the family have seen the documentary in a special screening.

[6] See Stella Bruzzi.

[7] In her discussion of contemporary documentary and its increasing enthralment with issues of ''memory, subjectivity, uncertainty'' (103), Bruzzi utilises the term ''performative documentary'' for films that challenge the association between the documentary form and the revelation of ''truth''. That Bruzzi sees the visible (if self-questioning) presence of the film-maker as one key characteristic of ''performative documentary'' leads me to utilise ''poetic documentary'' as the more apt description for *Dreams of a Life*. In light of this distinction, I would suggest that Morley's interrogation of her younger self in her preceding film, *The Alcohol Years*, arguably resonates more with the emergent conventions of ''performative documentary'', although it shares many of the ''poetic'' formal qualities of *Dreams of a Life*. For an interview with Morley that touches on the similarities between *The Alcohol Years* and *Dreams of a Life*, see the video, ''Alcohol Years + Q and A''.

[8] For more on ''dirty work'', see Ruth Simpson et al.

[9] This is not to deny the long-standing academic debates over television spectatorship, in which many have sought to stress viewers as active producers of meaning, rather than empty vessels. Although I would suggest that television still remains a particularly potent sign of passivity in the popular imagination (often blamed alongside other social media, for example, in contemporary reports on growing levels of obesity in the UK), see Brian Ott's article ''Television as Lover, Part I'' for more on the debate surrounding the active/passive nature of television watching.

[10] See, for example, Anita Bressi and Heather Nunn.

[11] Indeed, in Ott's accompanying article, 'Television as Lover: Part II', which offers a first-person account of the ecstatic pleasures of channel surfing, he acknowledges that his particular experience of televisual *jouissance* was prompted when he and his life partner had to live apart.

[12] Strikingly, one talking head in *The Alcohol Years* offers the same description of Morley: ''Carol Morley was a figment of our imagination.'' This suggests a shared theme in both documentaries regarding the difficulty of grasping the elusive, fragmented quality of subjectivity as well as the extent to which we are constructed through the eyes of others, in keeping with Bruzzi's afore-

mentioned summation of contemporary documentaries as being particularly concerned with ''memory, subjectivity, uncertainty'' (see note 7).

[13] This phrase comes from Adam Phillips, who argues that the wish for immortality has been displaced by a contemporary desire for a fuller life, the dream of ''getting more out of life'': simply put, ''the promise of *more life*'' (xv, my emphasis).

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