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# Distant Voices, Still Lives

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**85 minutes, 1988, UK**

**Director:** Terence Davies

**Cast:** Freda Dowie, Angela Walsh, Dean William, Lorraine Ashbourne, Pete Postlethwaite

## Synopsis

The second (or fourth and fifth) of our Terence Davies retrospective comes from 1988. 'A landmark of modern British cinema, Terence Davies' two-for-one (shot two years apart) impressionistic memorial to his own working-class, post-war upbringing is an astounding balancing act: both elegy to his mother's endurance and exorcism of his father's brutal regime of domestic violence; a fusion of English social realism and European arthouse; and a paean to the ecstasies of Hollywood's Golden Age musicals, whose every frame ruthlessly exposes yet still fiercely celebrates the Dream Factory's happily-ever-afters. Davies' gliding tracking shots and sepia-toned tableaux of misery are spare, but this is no still life. Charged with an urgent spiritual longing, it's true cinematic poetry from a major artist.' (Leigh Singer BBC)

## Review: (Adrian Danks, Montreal)

The basic structure of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* consists of an ephemeral string of images and events evocatively joined by a sense of place, time, character, class and social milieu. The film comprises a kaleidoscopic, though stylistically precise, collection of tableau vivants. The artificiality of the images, their exquisite framing, occasional gentle panning, and often long-held 'emptiness', facilitate us perceiving these images as isolated fragments that are unlocked and remembered before our eyes and ears.

Davies presents these vignettes as shards of memory which conversely contradict and rhyme with one another. The basic effect of this is to produce a complex emotional, social and familial landscape in which no character (not even the violent and unhinged father) is drawn simplistically or holistically. These memory images contrast and compete with one another to produce a range and ambiguity of character rare in such a fragmented and heartfelt autobiographical cinema.

The effect is like that of memory stratified, where memory-images trigger other memory-images, creating a structure which seems to lack predetermination. Rather than an expected randomness a sense of wholeness, and a uniqueness of structure, emerges within which no compositions, expressions, gestures or snatches of music (flooding the soundtrack or defiantly sung by one of the film's many stoic female characters) seem out of place.

This description may make the film sound extremely ethereal and even pretentious but Davies also has a keen eye and ear for the rhythms of popular culture, in particular the music, radio and popular cinema of the period (amongst the film's key visual reference point are the rather abstract set pieces of the MGM musicals of the '40s and '50s). In the process, the film presents a complex notion of British culture in the '40s and '50s: a mix of Hollywood movies, transatlantic popular song at times gently inflected by more exotic elements (such as 'calypso'), British radio (the football results and "Round the Horne") and the elegiac strains of Ralph Vaughan Williams and Benjamin Britten.

Davies also demonstrates a feel for the transformative and transcendental potential of this cultural material: when characters cry during a screening of *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955) or a solo female character defiantly sings "I Wanna be Around" we witness a social ritual (attending the cinema, a sing-a-long at the pub) that allows an expression of pain, bitterness, tenderness and even vengeance unable to be experienced or expressed elsewhere. In essence it is the representation of these social, cultural and generational rituals (the violence of men towards women in particular) that is the heart of the film.

This sense of a life remembered is delivered more in terms of sensory experiences, a colour, a tint, a smell or a peculiar sound, than exhaustive, concrete or tangible documentation. This is matched by the film's uncanny ability to simulate and reflect the half-remembered, embroidered and 'artificial' recollections of childhood. Throughout memory emerges as a contested realm full of points of resistance and possible counter histories: to be rewritten and rescreened but, also, to be respected.