Abstract:

This paper examines two films by independent director Penny Woolcock: *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999) and *Tina Takes A Break* (2001). In Woolcock's portrayal of a working-class community on a Leeds council estate, the woman protagonist, Tina Crabtree, is a shoplifter whose successes and failures are produced by, and in response to, the specific order that conditions her environment. Pursuing a consideration of environmental *l'Informe* or 'formlessness' (Bataille), this paper looks at instances of mess as a measure of (female) disorder as it relates to the embodied relation of women to their environment. It then seeks to show that this 'formlessness' is echoed in the aesthetics of Woolcock's filmmaking. Formlessness in film, which can itself be compared to contemporary strategies in feminine digital narrativity, is considered in this paper to be a feminine technique.

Introduction:

I'm going to talk a bit about two films by independent director Penny Woolcock: *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999) and *Tina Takes A Break* (2001). These were both made for television and shown on Channel 4. The films dramatise the experiences of a community living on a Leeds council estate. Tina, Woolcock's protagonist, who is related to half the estate, makes her living as a shoplifter. She proudly tells us that she has 'set up her own business,' taking orders from friends and family as part of her 'shopping service,' as she calls it. Despite the criminality and poverty of her environment, Tina is portrayed as a strong and likeable character, as are many of the women who form her support network. In these dramas, it is men who are presented as weak, and who fall victim to the squalor and criminality of their environment.

When I first started looking at the Tina dramas, I read them as a reversal of the fate of the naturalist heroine, Gervaise Macquart fom Zola's 1877 novel, *L'Assommoir*. Although a cursory consideration may reveal little to connect the two, like *L'Assommoir*, the Tina dramas present a working-class environment that is sealed away from contact with the middle-classes; the Paris slums of Gervaise's story might, perhaps, find a modern cultural equivalent in the Northern housing estates that were built to house the workers of vanished industry. In both cases, dramatic interest is located within the clearly circumscribed confines of the narratives' geographic setting.

However, whilst Zola presents an inevitable degeneration of an individual (in response to heredity and the morally corrupt environment of the working poor), within the criminality and drug-driven economy, of Tina's estate there exists what Woolcock herself calls, 'a perfectly functional social order.'[1]

This paper isn't intended to be a comparative analysis as such, but my reading of the Tina dramas have been informed by Gervaise's struggle to impose order onto her environment in the face of a constant threat of disorder – what I consider to be an environmental 'formlessness' (I'll come back to this in a moment). As a way of monitoring Tina's reversal of Gervaise's fate, I began to look at instances of mess, and Tina's relationship to it, as an indication of her ability to resist the slide from order into disorder that we see taking place in *L'Assommoir*. In the final part of this paper, I think about formlessness as it relates to the filmic text itself, and begin to consider that a certain kind of filmic formlessness in the Tina dramas might demonstrate a particular kind of feminine expression.

George Bataille's *l'Informe*:

Georges Bataille explains the concept of formlessness, or *l'Informe,* as follows:

> What it designates does not, in any sense whatever,
> possess rights, and everywhere gets crushed like a spider or
> an earthworm. For academics to be satisfied, it would be
> necessary, in effect, for the universe to take on a form […]
> To affirm on the contrary that the universe resembles

[1] Woolcock, P. 2004. 'Stories From the Margins' Forman Lecture, Manchester University, accessed:
http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/socialanthropology/research/forman/documents/Woolcock_Forman_2004.pdf February 23, 2007, p. 6.

nothing at all and is only *formless*, amounts to saying that

the universe is something akin to a spider or a gob of spittle.[2]

In his *Encyclopædia Acephalica*, Georges Bataille makes an entry for 'Hygiene' under that for 'Formless'. He writes: 'Cleanliness had no *raison d'être* outside of very limited circumstances, prior to carrying out certain rites, being itself no more than a rite of purification.'[3] Bataille implies that hygiene and cleanliness are nothing more than a means by which individuals impose a system of order onto the disorder of the universe, thereby resisting formlessness. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Kraus describe the function of *l'Informe* as 'a term allowing one to operate a declassification, in the double sense of lowering and of taxonomic disorder.'[4] The implied link between the two entries seems to be that by recognizing the moral artifice of cleanliness, perhaps even by rejecting it altogether, one can indulge in a declassification of experience, an experience that liberates one from the constraints of the prevailing social order.

In *L'Assommoir*, not only does Gervaise's environment threaten her sense of order and bring about her demise, but the position she holds in relation to the disorder of that environment can be read as gendered. As David Trotter notes in his discussion of mess-theory and nineteenth century art and fiction:

> Those who have power make more litter, directly or
> indirectly, than those who do not, and clear less of it up. The
> burden of mess has always fallen disproportionately on
> women, and on people of a 'lower' class or race, whose
> discovery of themselves with a broom or cloth in hand is a
> reinforcement of servitude.[5]

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[2] Bataille, G. 1995. *Encyclopædia Acephalica*. Ian White trans. London: Atlas Press, p. 51-2.

[3] Bataille, G. 1995. *Encyclopædia Acephalica*. Ian White trans. London: Atlas Press, p. 51-2.

[4] Bois, Y, and R. E. Kraus. 1997. *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books, p. 18.

[5] Trotter, D. 2000. *Cooking With Mud*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 30.

If, as I read it, woven through Zola's many descriptions of the mess threatening to consume Gervaise, is a principle of *l'Informe*, conveying a 'lowering' and a declassifying of ordered systems, then this provides an interesting yardstick by which to measure Tina's fortunes.

Unlike Gervaise, Tina is not presented as passively crumbling under the weight of her environment or heredity. This can be seen in her negotiation of disorder and mess. In these films, mess and waste are indicative of a way of life that is shaped by poverty and social deprivation, but it is not necessarily one of degeneration, as is the case in *L'Assommoir.* Indeed, this mess, says Woolcock, is 'one of the things which most attracts me – that rambunctious, bawdy quality which is so often completely filleted from bland, middle class life.'[6] Her fascination is evident in the opening frames of *Tina Goes Shopping*, in which the first shot shows beautiful Yorkshire countryside, which is swiftly replaced by a high-angle shot of the estate, sprawling messily across the frame. Woolcock seems to revel in the mess of Tina's Beeston estate, allowing the camera to wander "off topic," exploring the various manifestations of this mess. For example, when Tina's boyfriend Aaron is talking about his ill-treatment of Tina, and his addiction to drugs, the camera picks out details of the estate: the graffiti, the crumbling corridors, and the empty cola can from which he smokes crack-cocaine.

Men, and especially weak men, are responsible for most of the mess-making and production of waste in both Tina films. In *Tina Takes a Break*, the scenes set in Kev's house are memorable, not just for the mess itself, but for the other kinds of filth he produces and consumes. Sitting on the sofa, with a child either side, surrounded by the squalor of his living room, Kev watches pornographic television programmes. In these films, mess-making is often shown to be a masculine activity, an activity that characterises the men

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[6] Woolcock, Penny, personal interview, 17 March, 2007.

themselves. An extreme example from *Tina Takes a Break*, is the man they call the skydiver, who, at the start of the film, threatens to commit suicide by jumping from the top of a high-rise block of flats. In the final shot of the film, he does jump, recalling the Naturalist fall of *L'Assommoir*. We see from the skydiver's wasted appearance that a physical decline has already taken place. His jump expresses that decline dramatically and completes the classic Naturalist trajectory. Tina's story is set against the background of this fall, and yet she herself is able to resist it.

The skydiver, like many of the men in the film, has become society's waste product –one of Tina's friends, Moon, offers the view that, were he to jump, the outcome would be merely a 'fucking mess' for somebody else to clear up. Moon's observation that men don't care who cleans up the mess identifies mess-making as a male activity, cleaned up by women. Men like Aaron, Kev, and the skydiver are excreted from the system as waste. They, like Gervaise, have become anonymous, formless and, in Tina's opinion, they are pathetic.

Aaron is presented as the weakest character on the estate. In *Tina Goes Shopping*, he steals from Tina, physically abuses her, and is eventually 'scratched' from the estate. The incident that prompts his departure is the slaughtering of a stolen cow in Tina's kitchen in order to sell the meat. This scene is notable for the mess that the slaughter causes, and the positions held by Aaron and Tina in relation to the mess.

    [clip from *Tina Goes Shopping* in which Tina arrives home to the mess
    of the slaughtered cow]

Aaron makes this mess, and not only does Tina hold a position of disgust in relation to it, but she refuses to clean it up, and instead, she replaces Aaron with a supportive network of women friends. The slaughter scene, and its subsequent cause-effect sequence, demonstrates Tina's negotiation of mess, almost as though mess represents an interface between systems of order and the disorder that threatens it.

However, Tina's system of order is by no means a familiar or universal one. It is specific to her environment, and this is nowhere signaled more than at the end of *Tina Goes Shopping* when Tina, pushing her pram in the heart of the estate updates us about her successful shoplifting business: 'I'm alright, kids are alright. I 'ant heard from Aaron…I aren't lifting knickers and pins no more either. I'm going for the big stuff now. Monday Man's ordered a grandfather clock!' Although by most standards, this account of her increased criminality might be measured as a decline, for Tina, it is a measure of her ability to adapt to her environment and to survive.

If formlessness can be considered as an undoing of order, of base matter bubbling up through a veneer of civilized society, then both *L'Assommoir*, and the Tina dramas can be read in terms of disorder, symbolised by mess, which is indicative of the protagonists' ability to adapt to her environment. Unlike Tina, Gervaise fails to develop strategies for imposing systems of order, and so she is unable to flourish within them. Her environment grows increasingly hostile as she fails to adapt to this condition of disorder and, ultimately, she dies.

Formlessness consumes Gervaise completely and, eventually, she *becomes* formless. We can see this in Zola's description of Gervaise's body, particularly in the penultimate chapter when she has become physically formless, but also lowered, subject to that kind of declassification that Bataille's *l'Informe* envisages:

        Suddenly she noticed her shadow on the ground. When she
        came near a lamp-post the blurry shadow would concentrate
        and sharpen, becoming a huge, squat mass, so round it
        looked grotesque. It would spread out, the belly, breasts and
        rump sliding and flowing into each other. She was limping so

badly that the shadow did a somersault at every step […]

How comic and how frightening she looked![7]

This reminds me of a passage from hypertext fiction writer Shelley Jackson's 2003 'essay/rant,' 'Stich Bitch.' Jackson likens the female body, grotesque and untidy, to writing that anarchically rejects conventional forms. In a defence of electronic literature, she speaks of the dirty clutter that hypertext writing proudly displays. She describes how, through the editing processes of print, such disorder is usually eliminated from the clean civilized artistic systems, especially within the novel. Hypertext, she says, is:

> [A]morphous, indirect, impure, diffuse, multiple, evasive. So
> is what we learned to call bad writing. Good writing is direct,
> effective, clean as a bleached bone. Bad writing is all flesh,
> and dirty flesh at that: […] encrusted on every surface, a kind
> of gluey scum gathering in the chinks. Hypertext is
> everything that for centuries has been damned by its
> association with the feminine [...] Hypertext then, is what
> literature has edited out: the feminine.[8]

Hypertext literature is described here in language that echoes Zola's description of Gervaise's 'de-formed' body. Jackson could almost be describing writing that is an embodiment of Bataille's *l'Informe* as I am borrowing from it here. Considering Woolcock's style of filmmaking in light of this observation, it is possible to draw similarities between her work and Jackson's exposing of the feminine inherent in the stylistics of hypertext literature. I like to imagine that Woolcock's filmmaking approximates the formlessness of hypertext as a kind of disordering that, in undoing, creates spaces for different kinds of order, not just those that have become established alongside conventions of filmic and literary representation. For

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[7] Zola, E. 1995. *L'Assommoir*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 414.

[8] Jackson, S. 2003. 'Stitch Bitch: The Patchwork Girl' in: D. Thorburn and H. Jenkins (eds). *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*. London: The MIT Press, p. 247-8.

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example, let us consider Woolcock's filmmaking to be, like hypertext, a disordering of prevalent styles and genres. Woolcock herself claims that, '[t]oo much order sweeps life and creativity into the dustbin. My creativity definitely needs a bit of muck to get it going.'[9] As we have seen, muck and mess feature prominently in the representation of the housing estate. However, in the terms in which Jackson considers hypertext, it could be argued that Woolcock's creativity responds to the 'dirty flesh' of the feminine. *Shopping* and *Break* are fictions, of course, but they constantly rupture our understanding of fiction. Woolcock's extensive use of documentary film techniques manipulates our assumptions about documentary: there are numerous to-camera addresses by characters suggesting the presence of an interviewer; countless shots are taken with hand-held cameras; the editing is often rough, leaving visible cuts between takes of the same interview. These characteristics almost *feel like* 'dirty flesh' or a 'gluey scum gathering in the chinks'. The effect is a curious hybrid of documentary, drama, reality, and fiction that is presented through multiple viewpoints, a bricolage of narrative fragments and stylistic genres. I don't really have time here to give more examples but it seems to me that it is interesting to imagine that Woolcock's style of filmmaking approximates Jackson's description of hypertext writing's subversive, disordered and amorphous nature, and can therefore be identified as displaying an aesthetic of formlessness, one that can perhaps be likened to the dirty, messy, and misshapen female body that signals disorder in *L'Assommoir*, but which is used here to frame Tina's successful management of disorder—through which she finds, within apparent chaos, a highly functional, albeit idiosyncratic, order.

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[9] Woolcock, P. 2006 b 'Interview with Penny Woolcock' accessed: http://www.channel4.com/fourdocs/articles/penny_int.html March 12, 2007

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