

Concrete Dreams – Dramatic Realism and Fantasy in the Urban Environment in *Hitting Town* (Stephen Poliakoff 1975) and *Catch* (April de Angelis, Stella Feehily, Tanika Gupta, Chloe Moss and Laura Wade, 2006).

Katherine J. Worth in the introduction to her 1972 book *Revolution in Modern English Drama* writes:

The English Theatre in 1972 looks as though it might be about to move out of the orbit of Realism which has held it throughout the century and into another for which there is as yet no name.ⁱ

There is, perhaps, still no name, but rather, within the past thirty years, a further fragmentation of the concept of dramatic realism, a fuller recognition of the futility of representing the staged experience as 'real' when the goal of an ultimate definition of dramatic realism continues to evade us. We recognise that it has always to be in flux, perhaps because performance continuously defines itself as unreal and because contemporary obsession with televised 'reality' demonstrates how reality is performed. This attempted documentation of the real perhaps reveals both the limits and the scope of the concept and makes us wonder if it is worth pursuing in so literal a manner. In addition, our definitions shift through decades (viewing of a 1970s television drama looks slow and 'stagey' to us now) and we are never satisfied. Yet a 'holy grail' of definitive realism still remains a goal.

I want to talk about the connection between the concrete urban landscape, an architecture established in the 1960s, already deteriorating in the 1970s and a failure of interest in theatrical realism and inevitably, of a moral imperative in its narrative construction. Not an obvious connection, but one that can, I would argue, be traced through a loss of certainty about modernism.

In her book *The Death of Character: Perspectives of Theatre after Modernism*, Elinor Fuchs remarks on the split, traceable from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between psychological realism of character and modernism.ⁱⁱ Within this she identifies three tendencies: the critical analysis of a dramatic situation as exemplified by Brecht, the mystical and allegorical, and the theatrical, stating that:

Because of its ability to hold two or more planes of reality in ambiguous suspension, theatricalism has emerged in the twentieth century as a favored dramatic mode to express the relative and multiple nature of self-identity.ⁱⁱⁱ

The relevance to the plays discussed here is not the 'theatricalism' in the sense of displays of 'tricks' or conscious displacements of time and place, but rather the casual shifts between fantasy and reality in exploration of early post-modernist uncertainties of identity and environment.

Background

Nearly two years ago, in December 2006, I saw a new play at the Royal Court (Jerwood) Theatre Upstairs. *Catch* had been commissioned by the Artistic Director, Ian Rickson, as part of the events of the Royal Court's 50th anniversary^{iv}. *Catch* is a collaborative work, written by a group of playwrights: April de Angelis, Stella Feehily, Tanika Gupta, Chloe Moss and Laura Wade. I will outline the plot later, but will begin by saying that the concrete, urban, setting of the play and the casual brutalism of some characters, their disconnection from their humanity, made me think about the negative aspects of the urban environment of the 1970s. Much of this response was subjective, a link with my own memories of growing up with a prominent local example of a style of Brutalist architecture that, in spite of its origins in the 1960s on sites of wartime bomb damage, seemed to reveal its true significance during the economic decline of the 1970s, co-incidental with its own early structural decline. These two events are linked in my memory: that the early 1960s idealism invested in modernist architecture very soon started to show cracks and fault-lines in its fabric in the 1970s, concomitant with what I recall in that area as a sense that, in general, things in both art and life were not quite working out as well as we had hoped.

All of this is, of course, arguable in terms of social history, I am not making a case against this style of architecture, (which I personally prefer to some of its often poorly executed and less radical successors) but exploring its part in a growing sense of unease with the purer tenets of modernism and the tensions between art, idealism and life. My particular interest within this brief to consider the 1970s, is the issue of how this urban wasteland has been staged. Specifically, I am interested in its relationship to theatrical realism. This is not so much in respect of the practical issues of staging - these are frequently and successfully managed by certain signs, shorthand that has become staging convention, such as a single graffiti-covered wall. It is, rather, the dramatising of what this urban environment produces - a set of architectural ideals that ultimately do not translate for its inhabitants, and are not, if only because of their vast proportions, easily aligned with a general notion of theatrical naturalism in setting. This landscape, and its barely-grasped ideals, is dimly parodied in the characters' desperate and ingenious mythologizing and celebration of its ugliness, in denial, defiance, or in anger, at its

everyday realities. Certainly, in the two plays I am examining, these realities are denied by means of reinventing and colonising the urban life and landscape. The creation of a modernist underworld, watching the characters playing out their re-created realities, takes place not in their minds or a separated chronology or dramatic space, but in the same time and space. Thus, the new dimensions of the cities have created new rules and possibilities for the inhabitants – particularly those outside of the law. In particular, *Catch* recalled for me a play written just over thirty years earlier, Stephen Poliakoff's *Hitting Town*, which premiered at the Bush Theatre in April 1975.^v The connection is not based upon any similarity in plot, but rather the creation, by the characters, of a hidden world within the concrete maze and, a sense, particularly with Poliakoff, of being mesmerised by an environment so apparently devoid of any humanity that realism and fantasy have to be redefined by its denizens in order to elude total despair.

The connection I made between *Catch* and the 1970s was, I discovered when later reading Ian Rickson's introductory comment to the text, not entirely incidental. *Catch* itself was conceived as a loose connection to the Royal Court of the early 1970s:

As a provocation, I gathered together a company of playwrights and gave them a group written play. LAY BY, from 1971. LAY BY was collectively written by Howard Brenton, Brian Clark, Trevor Griffiths, David Hare, Stephen Poliakoff, Hugh Stoddart, and Snoo Wilson, and is one of several group written plays from the Royal Court's past. CATCH is not a response to LAY BY. It is the result of a unique collaboration between a group of Royal Court playwrights exploring their collective imagination.^{vi}

Lay By examines pornography and exploitation in a direct, crude (and male-driven) 1970s approach and switches between the realistic and the contemporary styles of agitprop, music-hall and sketch to reflect and criticise hypocrisies the writers had located within the contemporary anti-pornography laws.^{vii} *Lay By* remains a shocking play from any perspective, staging the casual sexism and objectification of women's bodies - dramatising an agenda of liberation versus censorship without apparently connecting and engaging critically with any feminist agenda. However, one parallel to be noted in these two examples of creative symposia separated by thirty-five years is less their subject matter than the significance of this type of collaboration. Both plays are a group consensus and subversion of the grand narrative and state-of-the-nation drama, looking instead at the state of the underside of the nation and at the relationship of the dispossessed, underprivileged or victimised to their environment. What is immediately evident is that *Lay By* was (inevitably, in that period) written by a group of exclusively male playwrights and *Catch* by a group of exclusively female

playwrights. The latter might, although Rickson does not say, have been a deliberate choice, but reflected in the subject matter of *Catch* is that any challenging of values reveals not only a far more fragmented approach to undermining the power of an establishment, but an equally disparate notion of (and lack of interest in) what now constitutes that establishment. What is significant is precisely where an establishment resides in relation to this tangle of urban culture and how much it even matters to the protagonists, who have long established their own hierarchy within their concrete underworld. Here, the identity that comes from material goods and celebrity culture (as opposed from any establishment values) is more important. An uncomfortable sense of anarchy is, however, belied by the existence of an infrastructure of the underworld. The infrastructure and values are the mythologized dregs of what has filtered down from the over-world. In *Catch* it is identity and image as commodity, a commodity which is increasingly and more pathetically difficult to control the lower in the pecking order it descends. In *Hitting Town* it is the consequences of poor design – flickering neon and trashy artefacts, the uneasy sense that all the characters have, in some level of their consciousness, that there is a joke embedded in the design and that, given their limited control over their existence, the joke might be on them.

To briefly outline plots:

In *Catch* Claire, 'thirty five and black' is a successful 'personal profiler' with 'Chrysalis Identity Solutions'. Her bourgeois feminism is identified by a caricature of her narcissism and fixation with designer labels as identity, and her patronising of her clients. Below her impressive 'ivory tower' office is a sinister, dark, underpass haunted by a teenage gang, the most articulate of whom are two girls, Jade and Casey. Claire must pass through this tunnel on her way to and from her work. Systematically, on many levels, the inhabitants of this real and metaphorical 'underpass' invade Claire's life and deconstruct her protected world, actually exploiting the surveillance culture and CCTV that Claire relies upon for protection. Ultimately, the information about her own identity that Claire has concealed: that 'Claire' is not her real name, but that she is a single mother who, eighteen years ago, abandoned a baby girl, and that she does not respect the information she holds about her clients, is revealed in a scenario of violence and, ultimately, fear of the surveillance that was her security.

In *Hitting Town*, which has a companion piece, *City Sugar*, also first staged at the Bush Theatre, later in the same year, October 1975, Clare and Ralph, brother and sister, are developing an incestuous flirtation that has possibly been established in the past. It would seem that Clare, the eldest by ten years, is the instigator, although she rebuffs Ralph and is clearly more afraid of discovery. At the opening of the play, she is waiting, in a depressing 'box' of a new flat in the city centre of Leicester, their home-town, representing a desolate midlands where she is literally 'boxed in'. She is waiting for a visit from Ralph, now a student in Birmingham, who she has not seen for some months. In addition, she is clearly depressed after the recent break-up of a relationship. The action of the play is described in the introduction as:

Together, they decide to 'hit the town'. But against a background of commercial radio, city-centre-precincts, Wimpy Bars and dangerous practical jokes, the incestuous relationship that develops between them seems the only way of affirming their vitality...^{viii}

Ralph and Clare do not appear in *City Sugar*, which develops the story of Leonard Brazil, the DJ who briefly appears in *Hitting Town*, and Nicola, the waitress from *Hitting Town*.

Catch and *Hitting Town* both stage an inverted world where that which is normally judged to be ugly, a decay that is frequently the result of deliberate neglect and despair, is simultaneously mocked, embraced and finally, perversely admired. In this ugliness is a defiance recognised by those who inhabit it, and consider themselves to be of it. This landscape and, in *Hitting Town*, the harshly-lit eateries, the junk food and its dirty and depressing condiments, are displayed as badges of honour and sites of battles fought, the only manner of taking power being the act of returning the implied gaze of the theorizing intellectual middle classes who are watching, fearfully, both themselves and the underworld and making comparisons. Clare and Ralph appear to satirise this banal environment as an ignominy symptomatic of their stasis.

Hitting Town is an example of drama being less about a reaction to the environment than a morbid and fatalistic fascination. Its blankness mirrors the life of the characters. It refers back, in part, to the satirising playfulness and surrealism that characterised the urban-set dramas, stage and film, of the earlier/mid-1960s (such as Ann Jellicoe's *The Knack* or Willis Hall's *Billy Liar*). The compulsion of the characters here is less with how to separate from it than how to engage with it, even become part of it in spite of distaste, a self-denigrating anti-aesthetic, a masochistic experiment with the extent to which the human spirit can interact become one with this environment. This experiment would, in the early 1970s, in a more general social

sense and for those who had achieved some success, ultimately lead to a desire to retreat, to give up the game and leave the city for the countryside, simultaneously abandoning those who had no choice but to stay and haunt the underpasses. In *Hitting Town* and in *Catch*, respectively, Clare and Ralph, and Claire, are educated and have more highly developed critical faculties. Other characters, if not without some sense of irony, mostly take their environment at face value. Both plays dramatise despair and a resultant abdication of any responsibility toward, or historical connection with, the immediate environment. In both of the plays, the personal and the internal has become a permanent, rather than initial and preparatory, site of action for drama. The dramatic 'inciting incident' is suspended further throughout the play, creating a sense of neurotic and hyper-realism because the circumstances of the characters afford fewer opportunities for moral choice and thus dramatically structured action and resolution. Where resolution does occur it is less the outcome of revelation and decision than of a violent and perhaps random act and the resulting change is less likely to be consciously defined by the characters and thus directional. It can be argued that one reason for this is the perception that the modernist environment has hitherto failed in its attempts to provide a positive and inspirational setting and thus the retreat is, for those with no personal or social compulsion for revolution, inward into some form of oblivion. One form, as suggested by Mark Ravenhill, in his play *Shopping and F**king*, an example of the so-called 'cocaine-fuelled' and hyper-real drama of the 1990s, is into self-gratification as an ideology, the only remaining viable realism.^{ix} The world of the street and the bedsit is, in such drama, no longer that of the reflective, of the class-warrior, or the political activist. It belongs to the compulsive consumer of goods, drugs, and alcohol and this retreat is dramatised by obscuring the boundaries between fantasy and reality.

Fantasy

Fantasy is here a mode of survival. A weakness, and perhaps failure, of modernist utopias can here be paralleled with failure of interest in modernist dramatic psychological realism, resulting in a shift towards playing out the uncertainties and ambiguities. *Hitting Town* makes an early, and unsubtle, attempt at playing these ambiguities, but, as is implied by their self-knowledge, Ralph and Clare *are* playing, even 'slumming' in this environment until they emerge into a more satisfactory level of existence. The creation of more satisfactory inner worlds is a way to control and redefine, to customize, the outer world of the street and to colonise it as an extension of one's own psyche. Increasingly crucial to this in our own time, in *Catch* it is the

issue of being watched and the act of watching and the connection between this surveillance and the deconstruction and re-construction of identity, of meaning and of the real. If the urban environment can be seen as intractable, it can equally be seen as shifting, it has dark stairwells and hidden, dank, alleys and corners. If in the 1970s the urban modernist dream of the 1960s had already begun to fail, the dream has crumbled and reconstructed itself into a state where its failure no longer matters, as a setting for a generation who do not remember its origins and the intentions of its creators.

The staging of 'real' and 'myth' or 'fantasy' in *Hitting Town* and *Catch* involves characters switching between the worlds of fantasy and reality, of playing with the two states as a challenge to the continuing uncompromising nature of their surroundings.

Catch

In *Catch*, mythologising of the landscape is both the privilege of the educated (the primary reaction being that of fear) and the last resort of the desperate, who make a fetish of the superficiality of urban life, suggesting that the external urban desert might be a reflection (and even celebration) of an inner void, the fascination with and mythologizing of its topography an end in itself rather than a revolution against, or preliminary move toward, freedom and a better future.

Catch is concerned not only with urban life, but contemporary youth obsession with celebrity, image and designer goods. Here, fantasy is in the ambivalence of real/unreal; anything is possible – the wealth can be taken. Its main concern is surveillance and identity and in particular, the mode in which young women view themselves, returning and exploiting this gaze in contrast and (unconscious) reaction to 1970s examples of women being surveyed and objectified; perhaps a legacy of *Lay By*. The playing out of these issues of objectification and image also, however, invite some speculation about distinctions between the reality and illusions, in particular, the illusions and delusions of urban mythology.

There is a sense that Claire's fear of the environment creates her reality and attracts an eventual attack by the gang. The armour of self-image and designer clothes and accessories she wears to defend herself in the street. Claire understands everything and nothing about the importance of image and her surroundings, her sophistication is academic and intellectual and has disconnected her from the environment, making her prey.

On their first appearance, Jade and Casey, two young women in the street gang, are discussing an article on the luxurious lifestyle of unnamed celebrities with two plasma television screens in their bathroom in a significantly-titled magazine:

CASEY: How d'you know anyway?

JADE: Read it.

CASEY: Where?

JADE: In *Real*.

CASEY: I think they're bollocks them magazines. I reckon they make it all up.

Jade and Casey know it is not 'real', yet perhaps as 'real' as their own lives in terms of value, at least. There is a tacit understanding that 'real' is a game and a shifting value. The play does not present the girls as necessarily underprivileged, or unintelligent, but it becomes clear that one definition of 'real' is to be the subject of surveillance, either that of CCTV, or of the mobile phone cameras of friends. The discrepancy between information through watching and real understanding is one theme in the play. Where *Hitting Town* shows behaviour influenced by the environment, *Catch* updates this concept to include the growth of paranoia and the strengthening of the concept of an urban species created by this specific type of environment, gangs who randomly attack anyone as opposed to containing the violence to their own warfare. In *Catch*, Claire is mugged in the underpass, and the 'key' to her database of clients is stolen in the attack. Her defensiveness proves to be also a defence of her true identity – a single mother. A need for surveillance for security and a fear of its eventual discovery of her own secret is a recurring theme, along with the issue of the shifting reality of surveillance and its significance to the gang. When threatened by them, Claire, whistling in the dark, repeats her constant mantra of the presence of CCTV cameras all around, to which Casey replies: 'Catchin' us at the mouth of this hell. It's my Kodak moment' .^x Later, however, the effectiveness of the cameras is denied by Casey, saying 'they don't have no tape'.^{xi} Reality and fantasy are thus interchangeable; the real threat of CCTV cameras as security is not as important to the gang as their self-created reality, that of their images captured by themselves on their own mobile phones. Here, in this bleak environment, CCTV is a blind God.

In *Catch*, Dean, the private detective hired by Claire's estranged daughter to trace her, is murdered by the same gang who mugged Claire and thus her identity is protected from revelation by the aspect of the urban landscape that she most

fears. The stolen key is finally returned to her, by Casey, in a scene which lays bare the hollowness of Claire's surveillance of her clients. Casey has said that there will be 'no catch', but there is; Casey meets her in her office and wants money. When Claire gives her £100 from the petty cash, then comes the real 'catch' when Casey offers Claire the money back in return for her own profile, saying, 'What type am I?'"^{xii} Claire then, uncomfortably, embarks upon an interview with Casey. The next, penultimate, scene, is a one-page description by Casey of a typical, and horrible mugging ending in a death; the scene is titled 'Catch of the day'. Casey then plays, on her mobile phone, the video of a man screaming for his life. The 'Catch' thus, has several applications, all of them referring to a condition of the urban life, but the most disturbing implication being that there *is* now actually a choice, and the worst path is being taken not out of true desperation, but from a desire to create a dimension of the hyper-real in a world where 'real' has become too mediocre to contemplate, conditions of excitement have accelerated to a new level and being observed is desired more than it is feared.

Hitting Town

At the beginning of *Hitting Town*, Poliakoff describes the set:

The set should be suggestive of an overall precinct-style environment, neon lit, in which Clare's room is the dominant part, a featureless nasty blank box. Other areas and the front stage can be used for the rest of the locations – walkway, precinct, snack bar, and disco – which can be suggested simply by concrete blocks etc., litter bins, and bright striking graffiti. ^{xiii}

The Precinct here signifies the boundary of a small world. Theatrically, there is already shorthand for staging such an environment: a language mainly of absence, of a void that can only successfully be filled by ugliness.

Ralph talks of an increasing and ever-present, but unspecified, noise coming from the neighbouring flat. Clare is clearly refusing to hear the noise and, by implication, acknowledge the intrusion. This is an early indication of Ralph's objective to draw Clare out of a closed world she has created to block out the memory of a failed relationship with a man they do not name. Ralph later refers to 'The Sound of Muzak' in the precinct around which he creates a absurd and strangely comforting myth:

There's no escape. (*Louder*) There's one woman, you know, one *single, anonymous, lady*, who arranges all this muzak, produces it, by herself, she does, this is true! It just pours out of her, uncontrollably, tons and tons of it! A real madwoman.

.....

There are three enormous warehouses of it. This is absolutely true. And they take it away in lorries – tankers.... Drive it to every corner of England. Everywhere you go you hear her artistry, flowing out. She can rise both to a small café and a major airport. The lot. To keep the people ‘happy’! And you know something. She lives in this town. Here. She does. ^{xiv}

Poliakoff’s interest in the collection of information and its dissemination and meaning is here turned towards the threat of a body of a work of non-meaning produced for no more than the fact of its own existence; another feature and extension of the function of the growing concrete jungle. The register is that of the threat of nothingness and the necessity to either escape to ‘reality’ or re-define it with what is available within the limited aesthetics of the neon-lit precinct.

In the 1970s world of *Hitting Town*, the idea of being watched, or listened to, by a neighbour, remains a limited and domestic threat, even an imagined one, the creation of the continuation of a game between Ralph and Clare. Clare’s first conversation with Ralph is a telephone hoax obscene call, again, a continued joke between them. However, in the mid-1970s, the anonymous telephone voice was a more immediate threat than hidden cameras, particularly in the way in which it could quickly and effectively define a woman as a victim of private surveillance and an object of disturbing personal fantasy. In the opening scene Claire also articulates another more terrifying 1970s urban fear, that Ralph, a ‘drop out from Birmingham University’, might have been caught in the Birmingham IRA pub bombings. There is a genuine sense of danger, albeit sublimated, and Ralph is stimulated by it and wants it to continue.

The playing out of the incestuous relationship in *Hitting Town* as a game against the backdrop of a bleak and banal cityscape implies that the relationship is equally banal, and that the banalities are sinister. The bleak environment that crosses the external/internal boundaries of the characters, informs both the worlds of Poliakoff’s characters and, more knowingly, the urban landscapes of twenty and thirty years into the future. Waiting for service from the uninterested waitress, Nicola, Ralph creates a riff upon the complete lack of nourishment in this environment, the plastic tomatoes, the rubbish deposited inside them by disgruntled customers, and the ‘recipe’ he can create from them and from the other condiments. Concocting a disgusting mixture of old crisps, brown sauce and anything they have in their pockets, such as old sweets, tobacco, a piece of old Mars Bar, tranquillisers to a parody of TV-chef commentary, Ralph remarks that it is ‘...about the only food you can get round here any more..’ Ending on the cutting open of the plastic tomato-

shaped sauce bottle, he produces from it chewing gum, 'half of a sardine...lots of cigarette butts....And a tooth!^{xv} The significant mix of the inedible, rubbish, dregs and tranquillisers are, Ralph comments, an insight into any town:

You can always tell a town by what's in its tomatoes. All its undesirables are pushed there. It spews out of them.^{xvi}

The depressing condiments and furnishings of the café, and Claire and Ralph's fascination for them, are symptomatic of the inertia induced by the unlikelihood of immediate escape, or in their case, the will to escape from the overly-familiar and hopeless environment that can only be distinguished from another town by its detritus. These artefacts have, in fact, now become retro classics, but at the time obviously carried no such status, not even the status of kitsch, but just of mediocrity, a third-rate modernism. Clare and Ralph use them as displacement objects, symbols of non-meaning, in a bizarrely played out dance around both each other and an unspoken darkness of their mutual childhoods, embracing the environment as a fortress against engaging with any more stimulating existence in which, one assumes, they have failed and fear further failure. The concrete for them is a forest in which they play babes in the wood, their incestuous relationship reflected in the closed nature of their environment.

Clare and Ralph's story is about the sublimation of memory, they have clearly obscured their childhood memories of the origins of their sibling relationship and cannot confront it. In the anonymity of the urban concrete in which the play is enclosed, they preserve their oblivion and recreate themselves as playful lovers. Key to their denial is a place in which to get lost, to be invisible, and, for Ralph, who has come to reawaken the relationship, exploit the ambient numbness and indifference of the milieu in order to cross boundaries of behaviour. The brutalism of the architecture has a fascination for Poliakoff, in the way its failed ambition, limitations and despair themselves become a refuge for its inhabitants.

Nicola, a sixteen-year-old waitress in the restaurant Ralph and Clare visit seems somehow exotic, a pale and enchanted creature who seems never to emerge from the strip-lit shopping mall and its entertainment arcades. She has been dreaming her own urban life – to shine in the Precinct disco. Nicola, whose story is developed by Poliakoff in *City Sugar*, is a blank character, flat and apparently emotionless in the manner of the urban lost, but underneath is the one-track desire to shine for a moment, as Ralph says to Claire whilst watching her prepare to perform :

She probably hasn't seen daylight for weeks. Been living off strip-lighting, hasn't she – like you.

Nicola's moment is a karaoke performance of 'Wheel's on Fire' and Poliakoff's directions are:

Her concentration is total, her expression remains completely blank, but we feel something building up inside her, a clench feeling, and during the second verse she gets louder and louder, until after the last line of the verse, a tremendous and shattering scream comes out of that calm face and we feel real danger. The tape cuts out.^{xvii}

Nicola (*total blank stare*). Thank you.

Like Jade and Casey in *Catch* the things that move the inhabitants of this landscape are themselves counterfeit. Their dreams and fantasies are created from the desperate, ersatz 'celebrity' world that does not even connect with any of the genuine excitement or desire normally associated with glamour. This is cut-price glamour, at several removes from anything more culturally enduring, lacking any imaginative verve or creativity. In *Hitting Town*, fantasy is an uninspiring and (deliberately) unconvincing state and just as fantasy is about both conjuring a pathetically inadequate excitement from the urban anonymity, surveillance is being watched by the dead eye of the camera or the waitress in the strip-lit junk-food emporium.

In the 'disco' scene, Clare, although enjoying the situation, becomes self-conscious, stating that 'It may be my imagination but isn't absolutely everybody looking at us.' Ralph leads her on into the fantasy that the 'whole town will be talking about us soon..' culminating in 'By morning we will have caused a sensation Clare.'^{xviii} The pre-occupation with exhibitionism, and the extent to which one is seen in such an anonymous town, or exists at all, refers back to the presence of Clare's unseen neighbour and Ralph's enjoyment of the possibility of voyeurism.

The dual nature of anonymity and surveillance in the urban landscape and its role as identity-forming is further refined in *Catch*, where it is implied that Claire's interest in her clients is more voyeuristic than helpful. They are curiosities and the object of contempt, but a newer technology adds a further layer to the question of what is real, what matters and what is acceptable in this surveillance. In *Catch*, the issue of surveillance is double-edged; at once threat to freedom and privacy, and a flattering and reassuring affirmation, replicated by the mobile phone camera. To survive in the urban landscape it is necessary to create reality, to control the act of

surveillance and to be able to be seen and not seen at will; the world is what you create and frame.

In *Hitting Town*, Poliakoff appears to have identified these emerging definitions of real and unreal, the levels of comprehension of the significance and effects of this environment and of morality, by the manner in which the lack of human contact and the ugliness is increasingly celebrated by those who are, for whatever reason and in whatever manner, damaged and in need of anonymity. In the twenty-first century, *Catch* defines a moral and aesthetic relativity as an important part in redefining dramatic realism. In *Catch*, one character, Maya, breaks the surface and appears in Claire's office as her work experience secretary articulately questioning and challenging the value and the use of the database information Claire holds on her clients, saying:

All adults as far as I can see spend half their lives trying to hide who they really are. Think by hiding things they're more in control. ^{xix}

In this, some hope is articulated that there is an alternative. Maya's sharpness belies her initial image as the working class job experience girl that Claire can patronise. She is not a member of the gang, she is sharp and ambitious, but not caught up in the ambition and envy that traps Claire and Jade and Casey. Maya understands computers and easily breaks through Claire's security, to view her database of clients, as she does so, appearing to break the spell of the fascination with the 'magical' power of technology and Claire's belief in the need to possess and protect the precious 'key':

All this identity actualising and you haven't got the slightest clue about yourself or me – do you? And I thought you were the smartest woman in the world. You and your stupid Hub. It's not a fucking oracle. It won't tell you anything. Even if you had the details of every single person on the planet it wouldn't tell you who they are. I've been looking through the information on the Hub, it's meaningless. ^{xx}

Maya brands Claire 'sick' and 'a fake'. At this point, the play seems temporarily to lean toward plotting simplification in the need to fulfil a law of dramatic inevitability that Claire will be shamed and unmasked. Maya's breaking of the surface does indicate that with this rather awkward moral stand the concept of an objective 'real' (and with it, realism) is still present. Here Maya has truly broken the surface of her own life, emerging into a more conventional dramatic moral choice, choosing to walk away. However, what seems most significant is the presence of choice and the implication that, surrounded by moral ambivalence, there are simply more choices

and it is harder (and less dramatically inevitable) to take a moral stand as it is less likely that one's individual path will be noticed in a concrete maze. In addition, the final scene of *Catch*, coming after the horror of Casey's description of a gang killing, contains some hope and some ambivalence, the idea that, in a more sophisticated society, a choice is available, even if it might not be taken. Claire is in the underpass and meets a woman laying flowers at the site of Dean's murder.

Woman: There's a slight breeze up there, but spring is coming.
 You can really feel it. Smell it even.
 Not that you'd ever know that,
 Down here.
 I walked through the park on my way.
 Well, I say a park but it was really a square
 And there was such a lot of green, a lot of lushness. Seems to
 have happened overnight.

 Are you crying?

Claire: No. I'm not. ^{xxi}

In *Hitting Town*, Ralph concocts desperate fantasies that he will not return to Birmingham, where the IRA bombings are a constant presence and have disturbed him to the extent that he regards every building as dangerous and fantasises that '...when I was walking along the pavement if I stepped on the lines a steel mantrap would spring up and get me by the leg...' ^{xxii} His desire to escape this truly harsh reality, the blowing apart of urban concrete, keeps him in the anonymity of his home town with Claire. He desperately fantasises that they will take off on an (unlikely) gangster-type killing spree or to live in some 'very flat, empty spot. Marshy' ^{xxiii} As well as being empty and remote, the spot would be soft and unlikely to hurt on contact. In his desperation, Ralph attempts a variety of juvenile attempts to shock, including a call to their mother pretending to be Clare's boyfriend and a hoax bomb call to a local paper, ludicrously failing when he runs out of change for the pay-phone. The ending is similarly ambivalent, as Claire declares herself willing to let their relationship continue. As the morning comes and the noise of the city intrudes, Ralph becomes disturbingly passive-aggressive and prepares to leave, commenting on the voice of the local DJ, Leonard Brazil over the muzak he is playing on the radio. Ralph holds his hand over the flame of a lighter and remarks:

 He's made of plastic and if I light this under him, he'll bubble and melt into a long black sticky line and flow completely away – taking all the rest with him.

Clare responds with 'Yes... when this music stops... I'm going to work'^{xxxiv}

Their relationship might, or might not, continue and the low-level aggression of their lives might, or might not change. The concrete world will remain and continue to deteriorate; many will continue either not to care or to despair. Equally some might break through the concrete and re-discover their humanity. In one sense, of course, this lack of dramatic imperative and the ambivalence about reality and fantasy is closer to a dramatic truth. In both plays, the ubiquitous presence of the urban fabric highlights this truth by its inability to lie or compromise by pretending that any action or choice is easier than it is. In addition, its re-invention of the landscape removes an obligation toward theatrical naturalism, or, rather, perhaps it reconfigures this obligation along with the post-war reconfiguring of the landscape. The adherence to theatrical representation of social realities and modes of living that characterises the ideal of naturalism shifts along with the representation of characters who do not think of themselves as citizens in the same way that they might previously have done as the city they inhabit has so radically changed its form. *Hitting Town* shows the early years of this change, thirty years later, *Catch* depicts a refined and more sophisticated version. The urban landscape might have changed, some of the Brutalist architecture abandoned or demolished, but its replacement could be argued to make a more ambivalent statement. The attempt, in cities, to replace the radical statement of Brutalism with first, the post-modern and playfully self-referential styles of architecture, with cool steel and glass and with an apparently more forgiving and (sometimes) fake image of the traditionally-built, might have provided the *Catch* generation with a considerable sense of removal from any deep historical connection with, or any narrative of, their environment.

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- viii *Hitting Town* Introduction – p.1
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- xi Ibid. Scene 12, p. 86.
- xii Ibid p. 89
- xiii *Hitting Town* Introduction.
- xiv Ibid. Scene 3, p 14.
- xv *Hitting Town* Scene 3, p. 16
- xvi Ibid. p.16
- xvii Ibid Scene 6, p. 34
- xviii Ibid Scene 5, p. 29
- xix *Catch*, Scene 10 pp. 78/79.
- xx Ibid , Scene 10, p. 79
- xxi Ibid, Scene 14, p 95.
- xxii *Hitting Town*, Scene 7, p.44
- xxiii Ibid p.47
- xxiv Ibid p.51