

Surfaces, Textures, and the Long Take in *Death Line*

Gary Sherman's low-budget British horror film *Death Line* (1972) was reviled by the vast majority of critics upon its original release. Indeed, the critical vitriol in Britain was strong enough for Rank to limit the film's cinema release in this country.¹ What upset critics was not just that it was a horror film, but a film about cannibalism beneath the streets of London – this horror seeming simultaneously too visceral and too close to home for most critics to bear. One of the few dissenting voices was that of Robin Wood (1972), who urged for a more nuanced approach to the film's content, and has even called it 'arguably the finest British horror film' of its period (1986: 75). Wood also maintained that *Death Line* was a film about exploitation in British society, scraping away bourgeois confection with a sharp blade, probing the atrocities residing beneath a deeply repressive capitalist culture.

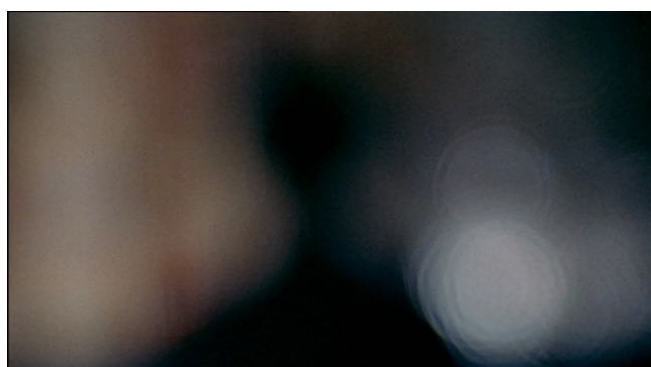
Certainly, *Death Line* is a film about surfaces and what may lurk beneath them. The film's concern for surfaces and concealed depths is dramatised most clearly in the use it makes of the London Underground, where much of the film's more obviously horrific events take place. It can be productively thought of as a film which takes us into two worlds: the world of normality and its corresponding dark underground network, where the rails and tunnels become not merely part of the architectural structure, but suggestive of veins and arteries, the Underground itself coming to seem like some sort of living predator. Yet Sherman is also concerned to suggest continuities between these two worlds, implying the horror within the everyday human world, and a struggle for everyday human dignity within the 'monstrous'. It is one of *Death Line*'s achievements that its interest in surfaces is relentlessly explored via its organisation of sound and image. This is especially true of one particularly striking long take, in which several of the film's thematic preoccupations coalesce.

This long take comes about twenty-six minutes into the film and last for just over seven minutes. Compared to the rest of the film, it is stylistically unique, and marks our introduction to (what we will discover is) the subterranean home of the film's cannibals, who have been picking off

Tube passengers for food. Sherman handles the transition between the two worlds with an economy and style that speaks to the continuity between them. We move from Inspector Calhoun's (Donald Pleasance) well-appointed office to the underground dwelling of the last two remaining cannibals when Calhoun casually drops a teabag into his cup. Upon this, we cut to the 'plop' of a drop of water beneath ground, establishing an aural link for this potentially disruptive shift in location. This mundane sound of Calhoun's teabag inaugurates a precise rhythm of dripping water that never loses its tempo throughout the shot that follows, which will reveal to us this new and seemingly far less familiar space.



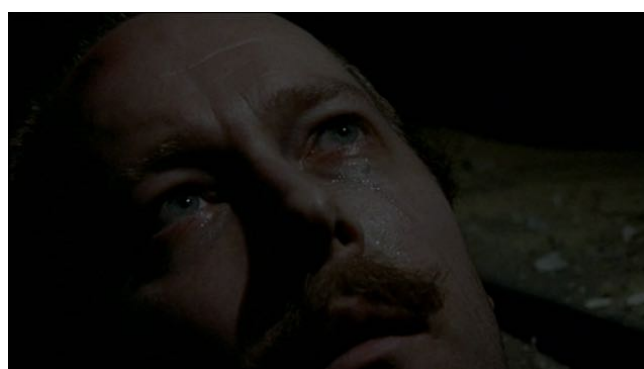
Our introduction to the cannibals' 'lair' begins with a good deal of spatial confusion, stemming partly from the camera's proximity to the objects it encounters. From the first framing there is an insistence on almost a macro scale, which makes it difficult to keep our bearings, or even see what things are. We are placed just above the uneven ridges of what appears to be concrete or stone, hard lighting accentuating the uneven, rough nature of the this material as water drips and slides off it. The camera slowly moves from right to left through the relentless inky-black darkness. The sound of an off-screen rapid scurrying alerts us to the presence of something, and in the dim light a rat is briefly glimpsed. While these materials immediately differentiate the world above and a world below, the decision to introduce this space through deliberate disorientation in fact continues a pattern of problematising our spatial perception, which began with the film's very first shots of London. During the opening credits, an initial collection of indistinct abstract shapes and colours is brought sharply into focus. The image formed from them is of a soberly dressed, bowler-hatted James Manfred (OBE) (James Cossins), who we are surprised to find stalking through the sleazy bars and clubs of 70s Soho with the cool deliberation of a well-tailored predator. Surfaces and superficial appearances have thus already been established as something not to be trusted. Spatial confusion is re-established as part of the film's project at the opening of this take; as such, we are also prepared for the possibility that other kinds of preconceptions could be overturned.



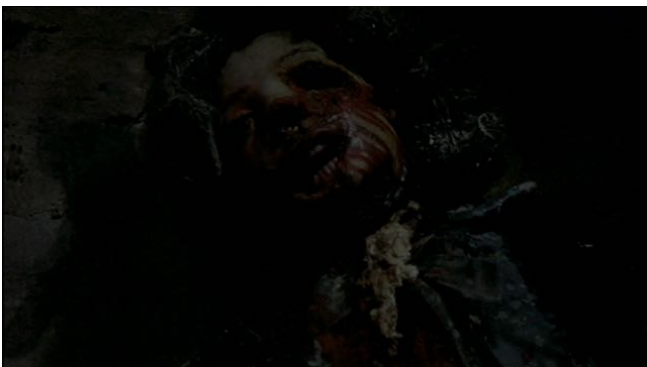
Soon, a new object with a different texture, surface, and colour can be seen through the gloom. We are again initially so close to the object that it is difficult to discern, but we can see that its surface qualities contrast sharply with the irregular, hard qualities of the concrete. This is something smoother, altogether more supple, more easily prone to damage and decay; its bruised exterior is torn and ripped, rotting. We realise, finally, that we are looking at a limb, though we can't be sure it is a forearm until we see the shredded remains of a hand. From having been given so

little information, we are now almost overwhelmed, but there is still no clear sense of where we are, or what the significance of this fleshy forearm is. It is certainly not attached to a body. The flesh is stripped from two bony fingers. Maggots crawl and writhe over its putrid skin, flecks of light highlighting their bloated bodies as they squirm over and into the flesh. Solid, unforgiving concrete is now made to contrast with soft, penetrable flesh, gnarled bone, and the inflated forms of the maggots feasting on oozing remains. The rivulets of blood that run along the arm and towards the hand provide a gruesome guide for Sherman's elegantly controlled camera.

We are still given little opportunity to orientate ourselves as the shot continues its movement, passing over the rigid face of Sir James Manfred (to whom I will return),



before continuing across an aging plaster wall. The precisely directed low-key lighting emphasises every fissure, gouge and crack. Judging issues of scale and distance between the camera and its subject continues to be difficult in this relentless gloom. From the damp walls, awash with water, we might be forgiven for thinking that a number of objects hanging from a nearby wall are raincoats mounted on meat hooks, a small detail that we may at first overlook. The shot maintains its minimal lighting, but a brief pause in our movement gives us an ominous



foreshadowing in a delicate and subtle camera movement, which allows us to realise that this is actually tanned human flesh: faces and eye sockets can just be made out in the shadows. All this time the drips persist, falling like a relentless metronome, helping the camera to pace its journey.

The strangeness of this space lies partly in the odd hybridity of surfaces and textures that make up the location, initially displayed in a dizzying sensory arrangement. But from its details we can gradually begin to piece together an image of a place that appears to be some sort of larder, where corpses, or pieces of them, are stored. Manfred is propped



up against the wall, next to the grizzly severed forearm. His title, wealth and privilege count for nothing in this space, and his fine tailoring again makes him stand out in what seems to be not just a grubbier and darker space, but a much older one. What is also clear is that, while he may be immobile, he is still conscious, blinking as drops of water splash against his face.

Our response to discovering Manfred here is likely to be ambivalent. We already know him to have been a victim of some monstrous force. The film's opening sequence culminated in his becoming prey to something unseen in the Underground (its identity concealed by the camera having assumed its point of view). Yet, at that moment, given what we have had seen of him, it is also hard to feel too sympathetic towards his plight. Following his predatory stroll around Soho, we had seen him descend to a tube platform, where he spied and approached a young woman, teasing her with proffered money. When a swift knee to the groin rendered him helpless and the woman made off with his cash, we were unlikely to feel he received anything less than he got what he deserved. Equally, when he succumbed to whatever was pursuing him, there seemed some cruel poetic justice in the hunter having become the hunted. Our relationship to his character is encouraged to become still more complicated, though, by what we learn of what, or who, has brought him to this place.

Panning past the table and down a narrow, crumbling brick corridor, we realise we have also tracked and zoomed out, and for the first time our sense of space becomes comprehensible. The camera continues to rove around this ghoulish larder, a little faster now, and we are able to see dim oil lamps, buckets for sand and oil, and a shabby wooden table. Increasingly, these elements suggest a simply constructed makeshift living quarters. The question is: for whom? The introduction of the 'monster' is a key moment in any horror film. In the hands of a skilled director it can instantly create a sense of the film's ideological stance and its relationship to generic conventions. It seems clear from what we have seen of this place that we are not just dealing with monsters, but also cannibals. In horror cinema

cannibals are the ultimate emblem for human degradation, often – for instance, in the case of zombies – rarely more than a stumbling, lurching corpse. As we shall see, Sherman plays with this convention, making it simultaneously horrifying, tragic, and touching.

We hear the ‘monsters’ before we see them; it is the sound of someone in pain, and someone else without recourse to language trying to ease their suffering. The camera pans down and our ‘monsters’ are finally revealed. With his characteristic control of the long take, Sherman positions us so we cannot see them clearly. This is partially due to the light and partly due to the composition. Amongst piles of straw and hay, it would appear a rather bedraggled, dying pregnant woman (June Turner) is being ineffectually, but nonetheless tenderly, comforted by an equally dishevelled man (Hugh Armstrong). Both wear clothes which amount to little more than rags. These figures seem, perhaps, even to represent another era. What is quickly clear, though, is the tenderness that exists between them. Although their language abilities have been lost, there is a tender, tactile quality to their body language. With no medical instruments on hand, the male can offer nothing but companionship and physical closeness. With gentle care he strokes the woman’s face and hair. The urgent, frustrated nature of his grunts communicate his powerlessness and emotional frustration. Even if their faces are pock marked

and pitted, this shot deliberately makes it difficult to think of this pair as ‘monsters’.

Crucial to the significance of this moment is the contrast it establishes with another couple in *Death Line*: Alex (David Ladd) and Patricia (Sharon Gurney), ostensibly the film’s romantic ‘hero’ and ‘heroine’. From their first scene the central couple has been established as less than ideal. Introduced disagreeing over whether they should report to the police having found Sir Manfred’s unconscious body in the Tube (Patricia is adamant they should, Alex dismisses him as just a drunk), the young pair have a fractious and tetchy relationship, forever bickering – never showing for one another anything like the level of tenderness and care we see here in the ‘monstrous’ couple’s relationship. This in turn brings greater poignancy to later scenes. After the male cannibal has captured Patricia (presumably in hopes of making her his partner following the death of his mate), he tries to communicate with her using the one English phrase he knows: the wretchedly meaningless motto, ‘Mind the doors’. He modulates the phrase in a gentle way, reaching out to her with his hands in a manner recalling Karloff’s pathetic lack of comprehension to the blotting-out of the sun in James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931). His appeal might sound to us more affecting than threatening, yet Patricia can only scream in fear. This aspect of the long take thus places in a critical light the relationship of the film’s ‘normal’



couple, demonstrating again the shot's dedication to revealing the complex depths beneath surfaces we initially assume we understand.

The most audaciously revelatory moment of the shot, though, is saved for the take's end. The camera tracks past the ailing couple and glides through corridors which feature a number of neo-classical arches. It is here that Sherman is at his most brilliant and playful. Throughout the underground scene, the film's tempo has been modulated by the dripping water; however, as we reach a collapsed part of the tunnel, complete with warning signs of its fragility, a new sound gradually fades in over the image of the pile of rubble, and for the first time the camera moves into and amongst the fallen brick-work itself. Simultaneously, we hear disorienting sounds of screams and falling masonry, for which there is no correlative in the scene.

Earlier in the film Inspector Calhoun's deputy, Detective Sergeant Rogers (Norman Rossington), had noted that part of the tunnel collapsed during its construction around the turn of the century, with numerous labourers being assumed dead. The speculation was that, never having been properly searched for by their employers, a small community of these workers could have been living underground ever since. The dislocation between sound and image here seems to endorse Rogers' theory, meaning that what we are hearing is an event which happened many decades earlier, while the camera lingers over the effects of that event in the present. This imaginative way of combining disparate time periods represents a daring strategy for any mainstream film, and there is certainly no other moment in *Death Line* to match the bravura style exhibited here in the use of either camera or sound. Yet the importance of the effect is equal to the ambition of the device, and this revelation of the embeddedness of history in the present represents merely the culmination of a shot whose purpose throughout has been slowly to excavate beneath appearances.

This long take condenses much of what makes the film as a whole valuable. Despite the gruesome subject matter, there is an evident care at work in the palette of textures making up the art direction and sound design of this space, as well as in the careful, steady camerawork that allows us to appreciate it. In addition to constituting a dazzlingly executed and integrated combination of mise-en-scène and cinematography, the shot also offers such thematic density that one feels, if it had been conceived by a more acclaimed director – or perhaps found in another genre – critics would be cooing with delight at its formal brilliance.

Far from the generically mundane and aesthetically repulsive work it was widely accused of being upon its release, *Death Line* shows a sophisticated knowledge of its genre, and deploys its décor and camera to considerable expressive effect. One senses the electric crackle of excitement in Robin Wood's first piece on this film, in which he championed the British horror work of Sherman (an American), among others, as capable of standing toe-to-toe with the best offerings of contemporary Hollywood. Sadly, though, Rank was soon to crumble in the face of opposition to this film and others, compounded by the harsh economic climate in this period of British cinema. As such, *Death Line* still seems to represent a lost opportunity – both for critical engagement with a film of rare intelligence, and for the career of Sherman, which – thanks partly to the critical reaction to this, perhaps his richest film – was never to reach its full potential.

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¹ For an account of *Death Line*'s critical reputation, see Perks (2002).

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