DAVID FORREST

Celluloid Singapore
explores Singapore's preoccupation with nationhood, historicity and the performance of both in and through cinema, taking the nation-state up to its screen culture present. It provides a great deal more than overview or a history of Singaporean cinema. Instead it offers a theoretically informed exploration of cinema as a site for conflicting representations of and by Singapore on the local, regional and global stage, thus revealing this most astonishing phenomena in the historical complexity it so richly deserves. Edna Lim's book speaks to those interested in Southeast Asian studies, postcolonial studies and aesthetics as well as cinema studies. It is a rare and welcome addition.'

Ryan Bishop, University of Southampton

This is a ground-breaking study of the three major periods in Singapore's fragmented cinema history – the golden age of the 1950s and 60s, the post-studio 1970s and the revival from the 1990s onwards. Set against the context of Singapore's own trajectory of development, the book poses two central questions: how can the films of each period be considered 'Singapore' films, and how is this cinema specifically national?

Author Edna Lim argues that the films of these three periods collectively constitute a national cinema through different performances of Singapore, offering a critical framework for understanding this cinema and its history in relation to the development of the country and the national.

Edna Lim is a Senior Lecturer with the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore.
NEW REALISM
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Contemporary British Cinema

David Forrest
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Traditions in World Cinema is a series of textbooks and monographs devoted to the analysis of currently popular and previously underexamined or under-valued film movements from around the globe. Also intended for general interest readers, the textbooks in this series offer undergraduate- and graduate-level film students accessible and comprehensive introductions to diverse traditions in world cinema. The monographs open up for advanced academic study more specialised groups of films, including those that require theoretically-oriented approaches. Both textbooks and monographs provide thorough examinations of the industrial, cultural, and socio-historical conditions of production and reception.

The flagship textbook for the series includes chapters by noted scholars on traditions of acknowledged importance (the French New Wave, German Expressionism), recent and emergent traditions (New Iranian, post-Cinema Novo), and those whose rightful claim to recognition has yet to be established (the Israeli persecution film, global found footage cinema). Other volumes concentrate on individual national, regional or global cinema traditions. As the introductory chapter to each volume makes clear, the films under discussion form a coherent group on the basis of substantive and relatively transparent, if not always obvious, commonalities. These commonalities may be formal,
stylistic or thematic, and the groupings may, although they need not, be popularly identified as genres, cycles or movements (Japanese horror, Chinese martial arts cinema, Italian Neorealism). Indeed, in cases in which a group of films is not already commonly identified as a tradition, one purpose of the volume is to establish its claim to importance and make it visible (East Central European Magical Realist cinema, Palestinian cinema).

Textbooks and monographs include:

- An introduction that clarifies the rationale for the grouping of films under examination
- A concise history of the regional, national, or transnational cinema in question
- A summary of previous published work on the tradition
- Contextual analysis of industrial, cultural and socio-historical conditions of production and reception
- Textual analysis of specific and notable films, with clear and judicious application of relevant film theoretical approaches
- Bibliograph(ies)/filmograph(ies)

Monographs may additionally include:

- Discussion of the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange in light of current research and thinking about cultural imperialism and globalisation, as well as issues of regional/national cinema or political/aesthetic movements (such as new waves, postmodernism, or identity politics)
- Interview(s) with key filmmakers working within the tradition.
INTRODUCTION

In this book I identify a recurring set of emphases and features within a range of films produced in Britain over the first two decades of the twenty-first century that considered together form a new tradition of realist cinema. While not a concerted or self-defined cycle of films, viewed collectively they can be seen to have re-imagined, re-cast and re-enlivened realism, a mode that, while fundamental to the discourses of British cinema, is conceptually mutable, contested and ill-defined. This book aims to re-visit and re-ignite debates about the British realist screen text, and in the process to anatomise what I am here terming new British realism (new realism hereafter). The use of ‘new’ as an adjective is of course always already redundant, yet it is necessary to indicate the sense in which over the last twenty years something quite fundamental has altered in realist practice.

Here I examine the works of five film-makers: Duane Hopkins, Joanna Hogg, Andrea Arnold, Shane Meadows and Clio Barnard. This is not an exhaustive new realist cast list, and by no means do I attempt to cover every element of their oeuvres, but I draw out what is consistent across their work: a commitment to rendering depictions of the familiar and the tangible in ways that are best described as realistic, or, indeed, realist. While their methodologies vary and the nature of their reality effects are divergent – ranging from the intimate and participatory, to the painterly and observational, from the perceptually textured and phenomenological, to the stylised and referential – the films are united by broad but clearly recurrent characteristics, which will be identified and investigated here.
The book traces common areas and elements of form, style and method, and the thematic emphases that underpin the contemporary tradition of realist cinema in Britain. The films under consideration all undertake a concerted examination of the relationship between environment and identity – evolving beyond merely a deterministic account of social, economic and cultural forces – giving shape to the trajectories of the films’ protagonists so that this dynamic is also felt at the experiential level, where multiple visual and aural registers of place, space and landscape are accented to invite spectatorial contemplation and empathetic participation. They are bound too by a meticulous, rhythmic poeticism, inculcated through recurring motifs of quotidian sound and imagery, constructing a mode of realism which we might understand as both image-led and attendant to the aural and to other forms of sensory engagement. These elements are combined to foster a mode of everyday poetics that are frequently enabled by and navigated through young protagonists, or at the very least individuals who are aimless, uncertain or half formed, and in turn these character portraits are repeatedly generated alongside refreshingly multi-dimensional portrayals of the non-human. A rich and multivalent authenticity is also foregrounded at the level of experience, with the directors frequently drawing on their personal biographies as stimuli, or at the very least, connecting the films’ concerted emphases on place to their own personal geographies; this extends to the realm of performance, with the regular deployment of non-professional actors, individuals who are invited to bring their own narratives into dialogue with those that they are enacting on screen. Taken together, these features unite a range of seemingly divergent films and film-makers and point to a redefinition of this most contested and foundational tendency in British film culture.

In, Through and Beyond the National

The re-examination of realism that has occurred in British cinema in the twenty-first century presents broader questions for the ways in which national cinema is conceptualised and felt at the textual and institutional levels. While the films examined in this book can be seen to respond to cinemas and cultural traditions beyond Britain, managing, as Ezra and Rowden put it, to ‘transcend [. . .] the national as autonomous cultural particularity while respecting it as a powerful symbolic force’ (Ezra and Rowden 2006: 2), they are, because of their concerted emphasis on landscape, like many global ‘new realisms’, imbued with a referential specificity of nationhood. In this sense they can be aligned with and understood within those other emerging contemporary realist traditions that Tiago de Luca has called ‘realist programmes in overt dialogue with their local realities’ (de Luca 2014: 27). While it is productive to think of British cinema in global terms, not least to resist the ‘homogenising and
enclosing tendency’ (Higson 2006: 22) of an essentialised conception of the national that Andrew Higson argues against, this book will seek to situate the films as projects which, while fuelled by global cinematic traditions, respond to and artistically interrogate a distinctly domestic set of iconographies. These films’ very poetic stimuli are what Higson terms the ‘familiar images, images of the mundane, the quotidian, the unremarkable [. . .] which are at the same time steeped in the habitual customs and cultural fabric of a particular nation’ (Higson 2011: 1).

Realism is, then, by definition a cultural phenomenon that is intensely localised and one that asserts the familiar even in a globalised world. As Hallam and Marshment put it, ‘all definitions of realism are locally (regionally, nationally) specific’ (Hallam and Marshment 2000: x), and this is especially true of a realist tradition such as the one examined in this book which derives so much of its affective energies from lyrical encounters with distinctly national and often regional topographies. To return to Higson, I wish to make clear, however, that national cinema and national cinema traditions are in this book not ‘used prescriptively rather than descriptively, citing what ought to be the national cinema, rather than describing the actual cinematic experience of popular audiences’ (Higson 1989: 37). Instead, we need to conceptualise the national as fundamental to the aesthetic and more often than not political preoccupations of the contemporary realist text, rather than as a homogenising framework for idealising a fixed notion of ‘British culture’.

The realist films examined here circulate against the backdrop of an uncertain and increasingly divisive political landscape that has nationhood at its very heart, and yet we must guard against an uncritical understanding of their status as statements on or reflections of national life. Indeed, the result of the 2016 referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union was nothing if not a reassertion of the national; a reminder that the local remains the primary means of experiencing and actualising one’s identity, and yet, with a few exceptions (Fish Tank (Andrea Arnold, 2009), This Is England (Shane Meadows, 2006)), the films surveyed in this book have struggled to find a popular, national audience – in short, while these realist texts might speak of the nation, they do not speak to it.

Realism’s status as an iteration of national cinema is thus complex – its intrinsic commitment to location defines its geographical and more broadly spatial parameters as necessarily narrow, limits that are felt, too, in terms of audience. As mentioned earlier, realism’s relationship to the transnational is similarly complex and ambivalent. Many of the features of contemporary realist practice are echoed across the global media landscape, yet they are necessarily interwoven with and examined through the lens of localised locations and thematic contexts. The question of audience is again relevant here. As this book shows, the new realist tradition in Britain is formed from directors often
working on superficially divergent subject matter but with common aesthetic strategies and/or artistic sensibilities. This textual unity however does not, as I have already suggested, result in anything like a consistent audience base in the UK, and, beyond, in Europe. Although *Fish Tank* (shown in Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, France [41% of admissions, 243023], UK [18%, 1110168], Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia) and *This Is England* (Belgium, Denmark, Spain, France [21.967%], UK [40.972%] Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Sweden [15.143%], Slovenia), the two domestic successes that I mentioned earlier, can be viewed as transnational at both the industrial and the textual levels, many of the other films that I examine in this book have simply not travelled. Indeed, the works of Joanna Hogg, arguably the director whose films most clearly speak to a particular tradition of European cinema, have received almost no circulation beyond Britain. Thus, while I seek to connect, cohere and conceive of a British tradition of new realism across these pages, I do so with an awareness that the boundaries of the national, with its essentialising and homogenising mythologies, should be approached with concerted critical scrutiny. The Britain of which new realism speaks is of course always partial; despite the progressive tendencies of these films, the nation is imagined as overwhelmingly white, and almost always English.

**Mapping a Tradition**

If new realism’s status as and of national cinema is necessarily slippery, the very definition of what constitutes realist practice is equally and, I hope, productively, complex. My ‘new’ realist prefix adds to a long list of descriptive orderings of realism from the ubiquitous social and poetic, the moral, the emotional and so forth, each carrying their own definitions. As David Tucker argues:

> [p]art of the problem for realism, as for social realism, is one of definition. But whereas a lack of clear boundaries for social realism presents opportunities at the same time as it poses difficulties, the issue for realism is often one of too-simple definitions. (Tucker 2011: 11)

This simplicity manifests itself in multiple, reductive ways. As I will explore throughout this book, more often than not realism is evoked pejoratively as a generic framework against which a film-maker or cycle of films is contrasted

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1 Figures taken from Lumiere Database on admissions of films released in Europe: [http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/search/](http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/search/)
and marked as distinctive. In this way, British realism is constructed discursively as a homogeneous, aesthetically fixed paradigm. In contrast, this book argues that what is consistent about British realism is the maintenance of traditions of narrative film-making in Britain which are grounded in representations of common experience and everyday life, but which evolve dynamically, and are historically and culturally contingent. Realist traditions and cycles are thus always in processes and form porously against one another, reframing themselves against and within the shifting national and global contexts in which they operate. Realism, imagined as a static entity embodying fixed and specific conventions, simply does not and cannot exist.

As the recognition of a new and emerging realist impulse presented itself towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Nick Roddick, writing in *Sight and Sound*, inadvertently slipped into this critical blind alley:

> With film, realism is a necessary corollary of the photographic image. If we leave aside animation, narrative cinema – in Britain as much as anywhere else – is ‘reality plus’, with our spectre of that ‘plus’ running all the way from Grierson to Gilliam. (Roddick 2009: 20)

Roddick rightly suggests that film is always constructing rather than replicating reality and that there exists a broad British tradition of elevating the everyday for narrative ends. His argument about contemporary British films is that they are in fact ‘anything but realistic’ (2009: 19), before listing a range of films (including *Fish Tank*) that ‘all have an almost adversarial relationship with the real, determined to see what lies beyond’ (Ibid.: 19). What, however, is this ‘realistic’ cinema that Roddick describes? What are those films that do not ‘go beyond the real’? Indeed, Roddick even cites Ken Loach – a film-maker who, as we will see, is profoundly connected to social realism – as part of this contemporary cycle of anti-realism. This apparently direct realist tradition, I argue, does not exist. In its place lies a persistent impulse in British cinema to conceive, interpret and confront ‘the real’ in multiple ways depending on a range of factors – thus, while we see shared points of emphasis in the filmmakers covered in this book, there is, of course, no aesthetic consensus on what constitutes ‘the real’. John Hill’s argument that ‘[r]ealism, no less than any other type of art, depends on conventions, conventions which, in this case, have successfully achieved the status of being accepted as “realistic”’ (Hill 1986: 57) is useful in that underlines realism as a constructed, considered practice rather than an unmediated representation of ‘things as they really are’, yet we can counter the pejorative implication of Hill’s statement to suggest that these ‘conventions’ are enabling rather than obstructive. Contemporary realist film-makers are not illusionists who work to naturalise and flatten the dynamics of everyday experience to close off ambiguity and critical engagement.
Instead, they operate consciously and openly within such ‘conventions’ to ground their films through realism(s) and to represent differing levels of and perspectives on the familiar and the common; the very fabric of everyday life. The films explored in this book make no attempt to offer authoritative depictions of ‘real life’, they instead consciously admit and revel in the partialness of the ‘realities’ they depict, heightening and making emphatic selected elements of lived experience for their particular poetic and political ends. For example, while some of the films foreground intimate, subjectively tethered representations of their subjects, emphasising sensory encounters with their environment, others take that very environment as their centre point, enabling conspicuously observational and more distanced perspectives – both of these approaches demand an active participatory mode of spectatorship, predicated on what I have termed a sense of ‘being with’ and ‘being there’ respectively. Thus, our view of the characters and their locations is necessarily and wilfully restricted, depending on the particular ‘conventions’ of realism the film-makers choose to deploy.

The dynamics of realist texts are therefore dependent on the encounters they enable with the viewer – between the lived experience and the depiction of lived experience. This again runs counter to an understanding of realism as rigidly conceived and fixed to particular generic conventions and ideological effects. As Hallam and Marshment put it, ‘[p]re-knowledges and existing schemata are of particular importance in ascribing degrees of “realisticness” to film texts and assessing their “truth” to experience’ (Hallam and Marshment 2000: 127), thus realist films in particular, with their focus on common, lived ‘experience’, appeal to spectatorial subjectivities, inviting the viewer to bring their narrative to the texts as interpretative resources and frameworks in order to situate the feeling of authenticity within the film. These encounters are of course also dependent on time, and the historical context that the film both depicts and is circulated within. As mentioned earlier, the contemporaneity of realism is always already fragmented – and realism, perhaps more than any other mode of filmic representation is historically contingent, as Paul Marris argues:

[...] classically, ‘realisms’ are perceived as ‘realistic’ at the moment of their introduction. That is to say, in contrast to previously established artistic conventions, they are received as giving a more convincing and contemporarily relevant account of the social, offering new insights that speak to their times. Realism should not be taken as a fixed formal recipe. If so, it atrophies; over time, the formerly perceptive becomes routine and conventionalized and is no longer adequate to the changing situation. (Marris 2001: 250)
Multiple traditions of realism exist because they form around and as a response to the aesthetic trends of their period, themselves products of a range of environmental factors. What appears realistic in the contemporary moment, an age of the global and of the digital in which the very parameters of what is meant and felt by the real have been stretched and disrupted, would differ vastly from the conventions of, for example, 1960s realism, and of the fundamental experiences of reality in that period. That said, perhaps more than any other realist tradition, the films that are examined in this book foreground the physical nature of being in the world through highly textured emphases on space, place and the very experience of the landscape, and the haptic and sensory realm to emphasise the feeling of everyday life in ways which are not necessarily dependent for their meaning on a fixed sense of broader, contextual verisimilitude. Thus, many of the defining characteristics of the realism of the last twenty years can be seen to mitigate to an extent the trappings of temporal and historical specificity in their evolution of a more universal and fundamental emphasis on lived experience.

New realism should however not be seen as a consolidating or cumulative moment in the development of British realist traditions, but rather another iteration of a dynamically evolving impulse in British (and global) film culture. It is to acknowledge the dynamism and porosity of the realist mode that I offer no descriptive prefix beyond the assertion of these films’ contemporaneity and to mark their difference to what has come before. This is an attempt to move away from the aforementioned monolithic understandings of, for example, ‘social’ realism, which, as I have argued here, have all too often come to function as a proxy mechanism to define rigidly an apparently fixed and conservative national cinema.

Although social realism is useful in so far as it does help us to understand and identify a particular iteration of and point of emphasis within the broad traditions of realism in Britain and beyond, it should not be seen as its defining framework. Hallam and Marshment’s definition of the social realist mode usefully identifies a range of key features and thematic concerns:

Social realism is a discursive term used by film critics and reviewers to describe films that aim to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity. Traditionally associated in Britain with a reformist or occasionally revolutionary politics that deemed adverse social circumstances could be changed by the introduction of more enlightened social policies or structural change in society, social realism tends to be associated with an observational style of camerawork that emphasises situations and events and an episodic narrative structure, creating ‘kitchen sink’ dramas and ‘gritty’ character studies of the underbelly of urban life. (Hallam and Marshment 2000: 184)
For Hallam and Marshment, the social realist tradition is defined by its overt examination of the determining relationship between social (and economic and political) forces and the resultant circumstances and experiences of the film’s protagonists and locations, aligning this logically with a distinctive and clearly articulated political project. Moreover, they identify particular aesthetic and formal elements that enable and authenticate social realism’s ‘reformist’ project. Many of the new realist films that I discuss in this book can be understood within this definition. For example, the relationship between environment (at least in some form) and identity is, I argue, central both to the formal and thematic qualities of the films, and some of the films might, as I have already suggested, be seen to foreground a sense of the viewer as observer within the diegetic space. Yet, they are also films that invoke more subjectively orientated modes of address as routes into more empathic, sensory experiences and representations of reality. These films often seek to elevate through a range of means particular visual and or aural elements of their locations to invite broad interpretations and meaning making, and it is therefore often difficult to ascertain clear and specific socio-political prescriptions from their varying aesthetic strategies.

In this sense, then, new realism might be seen to evolve from and develop out of the social realist mode rather than operating as a continuation of it. While social realism is indeed used as a ‘catch all’ for the kinds of pejorative statements about realism that I have already described, Hallam and Marshment’s definition is also useful because it clearly specifies conventions that this particular tradition can be identified by, and films that it can be identified with.

The centrality of the kind of social realism defined here within British culture is, I would argue, indelibly connected to the consistency and prominence of Ken Loach. While a rich tradition of television drama in Britain can also be seen to work within the particular conventions anatomised by Hallam and Marshment, in terms of film, Loach is the defining representative of the social realist tradition in Britain. As such, while they might not realise it, when critics speak of social realism in Britain they speak of Ken Loach. Although his collaborations with a diverse range of writers have placed multiple accents upon his oeuvre, his thematic preoccupations and his working methods are remarkably consistent. In line with Hallam and Marshment’s definition, Loach’s films are often driven by a didactic treatise on the relationship between economic forces and socially marginalised protagonists, with realist tools working to make authentic and to humanise a politically explicit analysis. Characters are necessarily representative figures, and narrative situations, while specific, can be extrapolated to unlock wider socio-economic issues in the national and geopolitical realms. This suggests a dynamic in which the effects of realism are directed towards the articulation of the films’ primary political projects, and this is certainly true of Loach’s work since the 1990s. Thus, the indeterminate
qualities of the new realist film, their focus on physical and sensory experience, their lyrical and often opaque treatment of location, for example, are out of place in a social realist mould which depends on clarity rather than ambiguity for its meaning making. As Deborah Knight argues, Loach’s films pursue very particular rhetorical strategies: ‘discussions, meetings among co-workers, speeches, interviews, recollections, confrontations’, and frequently see their protagonists ‘asking questions of another character’ (Knight 1997: 66). While delivered within the quotidian frame, these devices are designed clearly to generate a dialectic framework that locks in and makes visible the nature of the protagonists’ struggle against the forces of capitalism, and it is this unambiguously and unapologetically didactic approach that defines his particular realist method.

Loachian social realism therefore exists as a and not the tradition of British realism, and it can and should be distinguished from the trends and characteristics traced across this book. This relationship of contrasting realisms is taken on by Stella Hockenhull in the context of her study of contemporary British women film-makers. Hockenhull notes the shared features of films by directors such as Lynne Ramsay, Andrea Arnold, Samantha Morton and Clio Barnard, and suggests that in contrast, Loach’s films are defined by ‘straightforward narratives in order to identify societal problems within a credible environment, and usually dialogue is the key vehicle for facilitating the narrative’ (Hockenhull 2017: 20). The ‘female film directors’, Hockenhull argues, are progressing the Loachian realist tradition by ‘making films not only with a bias towards societal concerns, but also through a poetic optic’ (Ibid.: 20). It is this identification of the ‘poetic’ that is most frequently used as a mechanism for framing the films of new realism. Indeed, I use it throughout this book, and so it is necessary here to spend some time identifying what this pivotal adjective might constitute in practice, and how it has been deployed historically to examine and contextualise multiple realist traditions.

Hockenhull, for example, usefully substantiates the ‘poetic optic’ of the realist films examined in her book through textual analysis. Hockenhull’s discussion of Morton’s The Unloved (2009), a film about a child’s experience of the care system and inspired by Morton’s own childhood, analyses the ‘lyrical’ and ‘poetic’ framing of the protagonist Lucy’s (Molly Windsor) solitary walks through the city of Nottingham (Ibid.: 133). Hockenhull notes the similarities between Morton’s and Arnold’s approach to location (in Fish Tank), describing how ‘the backdrop of high-rise accommodation appears majestic and lyrical’ and ‘how the visual splendour is used to counteract Lucy’s miserable existence’ (Ibid.: 133). Hockenhull also notes Morton’s use of sound to ‘mobilise Lucy’s feelings of alienation’ (Ibid.: 133), and, as the analysis develops, registers the emphasis Morton places ‘on the minutiae of Lucy’s life via aspects of the mise en scène’ (Ibid.: 134). This ‘great attention’ to quotidian
detail is seen as the platform for a subjective examination of Lucy’s memories, which in turn are presented in a sensually heightened manner through one particularly sensorially rich scene where Morton ‘retains focus on the autumn leaves which swirl in the wind’ as Lucy ‘wanders around a churchyard with a deer grazing nearby’, while ‘Morton manipulates sound to interject the film with an atmospheric effect’ (Ibid.: 134). Hockenhull sees this sensory, subjective impulse as central to the film’s poetic examination of its subject matter. Crucially, Hockenhull cites Morton’s own repudiation of the didactic model in favour of the lyrical approach: ‘If I’d wanted to do that, I would have made a documentary. I didn’t go for the jugular. I hope I’ve made a poetic statement if anything’ (Ibid.: 134). Morton’s own contrasting of the poetic against a more explicit and direct ‘documentary’ method, is another discursive framing of the qualities of the poetic (ambiguity, the invitation of contemplation, subjectivity, non-linearity) against the didactic or social (clarity, forcefulness, direction, coherence). More specifically, Hockenhull identifies a range of vehicles for and enablers of these poetic qualities: the child protagonist, the subtle transformation of the mundane location, the manipulation of sound design, the accented presence of the animal, the meticulous emphasis on the fragments and details of a character’s existence. What emerges here, then, is a set of characteristics that help to substantiate the ‘poetic’ in realism, characteristics that are crucial in helping us to identify what is distinctive about the tradition of new realism in Britain.

Poetic realism is of course not exclusive to Britain, nor to the contemporary period. Indeed, it is perhaps best known as a descriptive label for French films of the 1930s and, while superficially these films are markedly different from those examined here, the fundamental connotations of the adjective are strikingly similar. Dudley Andrew’s definitive study of French poetic realism, *Mists of Regret*, identifies in the genre ‘a combined attention to the everyday and a heightened concern for subjective mood’ (Andrew 1995: 14); a desire to ‘deliver not a message about frustrated desire or expression or battered hopes or helplessness but the very experience of those feelings’ (Ibid.: 20); and a concerted attempt to ‘sublimate the everyday’ (Ibid.: 336). These features clearly offer parallels to a contemporary British approach to the poetic which, as Hockenhull implies, is similarly defined by its roots in and subtle transformation of everyday processes and imagery; its atmospheric foregrounding of the experience of reality; and its elevation through formal means of quotidian details that would otherwise be overlooked or directed towards more prescriptive meaning. What emerges here then is a consensus of a particular set of aesthetic and philosophical practices that begin to define characteristics of the poetic and are subsequently visible across multiple realist traditions and modes of practices.

As mentioned, Lynne Ramsay is one of Hockenhull’s key subjects, specifi-
itionally Ramsay’s film *Ratcatcher* (1999). This film, I want to argue, is a formative text in the tradition of new realism, not only as a direct influence on the likes of Arnold, Hopkins, and Barnard, but as a film which in broader terms opened up the possibilities of realist practice in Britain and unmoored the mode from its hitherto indelible association with the social realism of Loach. The film, a highly lyrical account of twelve-year-old protagonist James’s (William Eadie) journey through grief and guilt against the backdrop of the Glasgow bin-men strike of 1975, condenses many of the features of new realism that will be examined and expanded upon as this book unfolds. Moreover, scholarly readings of *Ratcatcher* initiate a critical vocabulary that enables a renewed consideration of the features and formal elements of poetic realist practice. For example, Tina Kendall has described how the film ‘registers a myopic attention to physical reality in all of its tactile detail’, to invite the ‘spectator into a sensory realm that is located below the threshold of ordinary aesthetic experience’ (Kendall 2010: 180); how its ‘lushly composed images with their emphasis on the static arrangement of people and things within the frame, offer evidence of the film’s grounding in either a photographic or a painterly aesthetic’ (Ibid.: 190), later arguing that conspicuous editing styles and lengthy shot duration encourage contemplative dialogues with the images on multiple levels. Again, then, these analyses open up the possibility of a realist practice which is at once rooted in a concrete evocation of physical and emotional experiences and which enables interpretative relationships with meticulously composed and yet everyday imagery. Annette Kuhn describes this in her book on *Ratcatcher* as cinema’s ability to ‘conjure a world that resembles the one we normally inhabit, and yet is at the same time self-evidently virtual’ (Kuhn 2008: 11). Thus there is at once an engagement with the quotidian and the immediate and, through stylistic means, ‘the exploration of a detail or a moment, that distinguishes poetry’ (Ibid.: 12), since for Kuhn ‘film can accommodate a meditative attitude that is akin to reverie’ (Ibid.: 17), and it is the capacity for meditation on that which is familiar and authentic that defines poetic realism in contemporary cinema. Kuhn goes on to further anatomise what she terms ‘film poetry and the poetic in film’: ‘lingering, thoughtfully composed, motionless or near-motionless images; slow, silent explorations of spaces; intense, searching close-ups; visual rhyme; recurrent visual and auditory motifs’ (Ibid.: 12).

As we will see, these characteristics, here connected to *Ratcatcher*, are also fundamental features of the new realist tradition in British cinema. Indeed, Kuhn anticipates and contests the possible categorisation of *Ratcatcher* within the ‘tradition of social realism’, arguing instead that the film ‘does set up and weave together several levels of “reality” (including a social realist one)’ and that ‘one of the film’s unique qualities is the way its various levels of reality imbue each setting in overlapping, and sometimes changing ways’ (Ibid.: 17). I would argue, however, that what was perhaps unique to *Ratcatcher* in 1999
new realism

is now one of the defining features of the tradition of new realism: that is, the evocation of multiple levels of and experiences of reality, which in turn invites active and engaged spectatorship. Just as Arnold, Meadows, Hopkins, Hogg and Barnard do, Ramsay’s film evokes:

realities – documentary, drama of working-class life, social history, referencing as they do an outer, social world – dominate the film, either separately or collectively. Rather, they are set against, and qualified by, ‘realities’ that are best described as inner, imaginal, even fantastic. (2008: 17)

To return to the historical traditions of poetic realism, this fragmentation of realism and multiplication of realisms is formed around and through lyrical encounters with ‘the everyday’ to ‘explore the relationships and rifts between outer and inner worlds, worlds of external reality and worlds of imagination and fantasy’ (Ibid.: 18). Realism is thus defined by its porosity and the non-hierarchical relationship between its many possible facets. As Ramsay herself describes it, this constitutes the movement from ‘the mesmeric to hard reality; from internal reality to outside world, from internal [or] brutal to observational’ (Ibid.: 85). Cinema, for Ramsay, is uniquely placed to enable this rendering of and dialogue with multiple realities:

God is in the details. There is a lot of tenderness in the least obvious acts. A miniscule detail like [James pulling his mother’s laddered tights over her toes] can say a lot about a relationship. I’m constantly trying to think cinematically. What can be shown instead of said. (Ibid.: 85)

Again, then, we are understanding the poetic through its emphasis on the indeterminate potentials of the image over the more prescriptive model of dialogue-driven realism:

I love to see great dialogue in the cinema but I hate to see ‘Film TV’. When I go to the cinema, I want to have a cinematic experience. Some people ignore the sound and you end up seeing something you might see on television and it doesn’t explore the form. (Andrew 2002)

This again centres the poetic around an invitation for the spectator to interpret multiple meanings but to root these contemplations in the familiar and in the realm of common experience. Ramsay goes on: ‘I try for sensuousness and, though it’s difficult to express it, to reach for the sublime in the everyday. I believe you can approach a character’s psychology through a detail or an action better than through a succession of sequences’ (Kuhn 2008: 85). Here
Ramsay makes tangible a realist practice which operates vividly at the surface level – an affect-centred approach to the everyday and to direct experience – which, through its emphatic attention to detail, in turn unlocks that which lies beneath, in this case the internal realm.

**Theorising Realism, Recovering Realism**

If Ramsay’s film works as a manifesto for new realism, Andrea Arnold’s *Fish Tank* (2009) and Clio Barnard’s *The Selfish Giant* (2013) put its edicts into practice. Both films concern youthful protagonists struggling against harsh domestic situations, making sensorial and richly tactile encounters with their landscapes; both present their environments in heightened, accented ways, drawing the spectator into contemplative, non-prescriptive relationships with space, place and landscape; and both foreground material worlds which are multi-layered and which feel very tangible and authentic while also being able to accommodate subjective modes of narration, communicating powerful representations of their characters’ inner worlds. I will go on to explore these films in more detail, but I mention them here because they illustrate in practical terms the poetic legacies of Ramsay and *Ratcatcher* and, owing to their relative prominence, they exist as totemic examples of the new realist tradition more broadly.

It is for this second reason, I think, that Clive Nwonka calls upon these films to structure his thoughtful critique of new realism, or as Nwonka calls it ‘New British Social Realism’ (Nwonka 2014: 2010). His own neologism is revealing in that it re-asserts the hierarchical presence of the ‘social’ in realism, rather than embracing the plurality of realisms that we have identified in *Ratcatcher* and that define the films that followed it. Indeed, tellingly, Nwonka’s criticisms of the films emerge again from valorisation of Loach’s particular and, as we have seen, apparently definitive brand of realism:

> The distinction between this period and contemporary accounts of realism is that, while Ken Loach’s characters have always charted the erosion of the working class, his characters’ decisions are not simply just a matter of personal morality but forced upon them by the socio-economic situation. (Ibid.: 207)

For Nwonka, then, the contemporary films are ‘politically neutral’, complicit in a ‘decontextualisation of poverty’ which reduces ‘the filmic narrative of inequality to a behavioural rather than a socio-political consequence’ (Ibid.: 206). The films represent and are instruments of ‘Third Way ideology’, with Nwonka connecting their apparent effacement of politics to the New Labour governments of 1997 to 2010. He sees the films as both illustrating and
apparently complicit in an ‘erosion of social collectivity’ replaced by ‘individualism, personal agency and the supposed disintegration of class identities’ (Ibid.: 209).

Nwonka’s analysis, while compelling, is dependent on a clear idea of what realism should be rather than what it is, one which is in turn reliant on the discursive contrast between on one hand a worthy social realist model typified by the films of Loach, which situate ‘social realism within didactic contexts’, meaning that ‘socio-political epistemologies can emerge to counter hegemonic narratives held within the national sphere’ (Ibid.: 207), and on the other, ‘an anti-dialogical, static realism which produces a new modality of social realism where effects without cause become an important component of the New British Social Realism repertoire’ (Ibid.: 210). Of course, *Fish Tank* and *The Selfish Giant* do not ignore the causal factors and contexts of their protagonist’s situations, but perhaps what Nwonka is getting at is that this is not their dominant characteristic, rather, this examination of the socio-economic context unfolds alongside multiple other ‘realities’, in line with the characteristics of the ‘poetic’ that we have already begun to sketch out, denying the linear subordination of form to a prescriptive and specific end. It is this wilful plurality of realist accents that fully underlines the extent to which new realism is not ‘static’. As I have already noted, and as we will see as this book develops, the films are defined by their deployment of multiple aesthetic registers that sees them resist staticity and the notion of an authoritative account or vision of reality. Nwonka’s uncritical account of Loachian realism is reliant on a necessarily conclusive dismissal of Arnold’s and Barnard’s films and vice versa, and this means that we lose the possibility to disrupt the homogenising and monolithic understanding of a ‘realism’ in British film culture. For example, Nwonka argues that ‘*Fish Tank* and *The Selfish Giant* are comfortable in the mode of representation for the working class through sentimentality’, and that while ‘these sympathetic approaches have a clear narrative value in developing audience empathy, the very concept of the working class is reliant on there being a class-structured society’ (Ibid.: 219). Nwonka conflates his critique of ‘sentimentality’ and ‘empathy’ inducing strategies with the often-repeated criticism of realism as a mode that naturalises rather than provokes critical dialogues with class structures. However, given the reliance of Nwonka’s argument upon Loach as an exponent of the apparently necessary and ideal form of politically committed realism, this assumes that Loach’s films eschew such emotive strategies.

Yet sentiment and empathy are fundamental components of Loach’s method, as Deborah Knight argues:

> we observe and possibly also feel the frustrations such characters suffer, the aggravations they must tolerate, and the humiliations to which they
are subjected. We watch while things go wrong, despite the best efforts of characters to try to make things go right. (Knight 1997: 76)

Loach’s characters do come up against the clearly defined and explicated structures of capitalism as they are found in every element of everyday life, but it is our emotional investment in their struggles that provokes both our realisation of these conditions and our outrage at them. This conjoined emotional and political currency is evident in a film like *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), where Loach clearly and pointedly invites our sentiment at the eponymous hero’s death, the tragic culmination of the film’s dialectic between his uncomplicated, virtuous nature and the labyrinthine and robotically unforgiving benefits system. We are able to feel both sadness and anger, just as we are able to feel with Mia, the young protagonist of *Fish Tank*, as she encounters her everyday life, to ponder the ambiguity of her fate as the film ends, and to understand the socio-economic determinants of her reality. The difference between these approaches to realism is one of emphasis, rather than the dichotomous relationship that Nwonka proposes.

However, Nwonka’s argument builds on an important tradition in screen studies in terms of the historical development and theoretical interrogation of realist practice. Indeed, Nwonka re-ignites the binary between an aspirational, politically legitimate and vital encounter with the real and an existing realist film culture that is perceived to be innately conservative and reductive. It is one that catalysed Colin MacCabe’s 1974 essay for *Screen*, ‘Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses’, and the response from Colin McArthur in the same journal. As John Caughie notes, these original debates reduced their respective realist positions to ‘polarities’ (Caughie 2000: 108), and we might argue that this approach similarly underpins Nwonka’s rhetorical strategy: Loachian social realism as politically committed versus new realism as sentimentalising and escapist. Indeed, MacCabe’s argument is reliant on a homogenised definition of ‘the classical realist text’ where ‘there is a hierarchy amongst the discourses which compose the text and this hierarchy is defined in terms of an empirical notion of truth’ (MacCabe 1974: 8), and as Deborah Knight puts it, ‘[W]hat seems to be meant by “empirical” has to do with the idea that what we see is what is true’ (Knight 1997: 68). As we have already suggested, the new realist films are defined by the disruption of these hierarchies through the productive plotting of multiple layers and accounts of reality within the same text.

Critiques of realist practice tend, as Knight puts it, to rely on an assumption that ‘spectators must accept “the truth” of whatever the camera observes and represents to them’, a ‘gross over-simplification’ that ignores ‘the various ways that visual narrations convey information, the different audience-text relationships these narrations make possible, and the importance of the audience’s
pre-understanding of various story structures and generic conventions’ (Knight 1997: 72). MacCabe’s critique, in particular, is of course reliant on the notion that the realist text is insufficiently capable of registering contradiction, an argument that finds parallels in Nwonka’s criticism of the empathy-evoking qualities of new realism and its apparent effacement of politics. To build on what Knight says, these arguments are further united by an assumption that the viewer, as constructed by realism, is passive. As John Caughie’s response to the realism debate suggests, however, this homogenous coding of the spectator ignores that ‘[v]iewers, as well as being textual subjects, are also social subjects, individuals with their own social histories and their own experience of contradiction and injustice and their own utopian imaginings’ (Caughie 2000: 108). For Caughie, evoking sentiment and empathy in the realist text need not be a barrier to political engagement: ‘but neither does being moved to tears necessarily signify a reactionary and debilitating sentimentality; it may represent, in the heart of domesticity, the sudden painful glimpse of the experience of injustice in the world outside’ (Ibid.: 108).

MacCabe’s use of Bertolt Brecht as an intellectual touchstone is felt in Nwonka’s critique of new realism’s emotional emphases. As Murray Smith puts it, ‘[F]or the Brechtian tradition, emotional responses to fiction of an “empathic” kind lock us into the perspective of individual characters, blocking a more interrogatory relationship with characters and narrative as a whole’, so that, for Smith, the view that ‘empathic emotions are an instrument of subjection’ is ‘reductive and ill conceived’ (Smith 1995: 54). To return to Kuhn’s exploration of the multiple realisms of Ratcatcher, I want to suggest in this book that new realism, precisely because of the elements that Nwonka criticises, is able to marry critical reflection with emotional response and that, in line with Smith’s implication, the two are symbiotically linked. New realism’s emphasis on landscape and its poetic encounters with place, its attempts to emphasise and accent the representation of perceptual experience, and its willingness to explore its characters’ subjectivities, are all elements which actively work against a sense of the viewer’s passivity. As Ian Aitken argues, one of the legacies of Screen theory’s emphasis on ‘deep’ or ‘innate’ or ‘self-regulating’ internal structures is the sense of ‘depleted conceptions of agency’ in theorising the relationships between a viewer and the realist text (Aitken 2006: 214). The ‘pronounced degree of essentialism’ (Ibid.: 214) that characterises many of the critiques of realism risks homogenising both the mode (realism as fixed, static, ahistorical) and the viewer (passive, politically resistant, prone to blind emotion). I want to suggest that not only should we conceive viewers as inherently dynamic and active but that new realist texts call upon and make demands of the activities of its viewers in particular ways. The process of dynamism is enacted through the realist text’s appeal to interpretative resources that are drawn from the viewer’s own realities. As Hallam and Marshment
put it, ‘[re]alism articulates a relationship between the conscious, perceiving individual and the social world, activating a mental mise en scène of memory, recognition and perceptual familiarity’ (Hallam and Marshment 2000: 125), and, in seeking to place heightened, poetic emphasis on the familiar, in often non-prescriptive and indeterminate ways, the films of new realism work to further the sense of realism as an exchange between text and spectator which is ‘interactive and in process’ (Ibid.: 125). In his own account of new realism, exploring the term as applicable to a tendency in global cinema, Thomas Elsaesser conceptualises this relationship as one of ‘contractualism’, where an audience is neither master nor dupe, but that spectators are partners in negotiated conventions, which make the social field, or indeed the visual field, into an arena where contracts can be entered, where there are conditions and conditionality, specifying what are the rules of the game, or indicating that a re-negotiation of the rules of the game is required. (Elsaesser 2009: 7)

To return to Nwonka’s important critique of new realism, we might find further theoretical affinities in the work of Mark Fisher. Fisher’s highly influential concept of ‘capitalist realism’, which describes the ‘the deep embedding in a world – or set of worlds – in which capitalism is massively naturalised’, reveals the ways in which ‘especially since 2008, that the (essentially 1990s) idea of the post-political and the post-ideological was always a cover for neoliberal hegemony’ (Fisher and Gilbert 2013: 90). Fisher’s term ‘consolidates . . . the idea that we are in the era of the post-political – that the big ideological conflicts are over, and the issues that remain largely concern who is to administrate the new consensus’ (Ibid.: 90), and thus aligns with Nwonka’s examination of an apparently apolitical ‘realist’ film tradition. Indeed, the very notion of realist art is particularly pertinent to Fisher’s work: ‘[w]hat counts as “realistic”, what seems possible at any point in the social field, is defined by a series of political determinations’, so that, in this way, ‘[e]mancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a “natural order”’ (Fisher 2009: 17). Fisher, building on the Althusserian formulations of ideology and hegemony that were so fundamental to the dominant critiques of realism in the 1970s, invites scepticism of cultural forms which seek to naturalise and form a consensus around an essential and fixed notion of reality. Paul Dave, however, whose work powerfully develops Fisher’s to examine the place of realism in contemporary political discourses, offers a way of redeeming the mode as a mechanism for actively encountering, understanding and engaging with the neo-liberal present. Building on Elsaesser’s work to situate it in the British context, Dave argues that the ‘epistemological scepticism’ that defined a ‘philosophical position that insists that all representations are culturally coded and
do not reflect external realities . . . is now clearly waning’ and that key texts of contemporary British realism which, as we will see, offer more complex and nuanced accounts of reality in its multiple articulations, negotiate a position with the spectator in which ‘our apprehension of reality becomes much more complex than it could ever be under constructivist scepticism, but so too does our sense of our own essential nature’ (Dave 2017: 123).

To return to Thomas Elsaesser’s wider examination of an ‘ontological turn’ in global cinematic realisms, particular features are identified as enabling a more productively fragmented approach to the presentation of reality, as Elsaesser puts it. The films emphasise ‘indeterminate or non-linear temporalities and privilege memory over chronology’ and

make sense/perception a major issue [. . .] by extending perception beyond the visual register, in order to expose or engage the body as a total perceptual surface, while deploying other senses/ perceptions – notably touch and hearing – as at least equally relevant to the cinematic experience. (Elsaesser 2009: 4)

Elsaesser sees film as a key site in a wider re-evaluation of the resources for framing and negotiating the very experience as reality:

[The new realism, if expressing the recognition that not everything is constructed, finds its manifestation in the humanities in general, but especially in film studies around a revival of interest and reinvestment in ‘the body’, ‘the senses’, skin, tactility, touch, and the haptic, to which corresponds in philosophy and evolutionary neuroscience the idea of the ‘embodied mind’. (Ibid.: 7)

As I have already suggested, and as this book will go on to evidence, one of the key tenets of the new realist tradition in Britain is a willingness to foreground precisely the phenomenological dimensions that Elsaesser emphasises – these are films that actively render the experiences of reality to effect a visceral interaction with the spectator, one which calls upon her or his own perceptual map of references. Thus, the films deliver affective impact through the representation of bodily encounters and experiences of familiar environments, interactions and landscapes, which necessarily invite dynamic viewing relationships. The apparent sense of a ‘constructed’ single reality, which locks in passive encounters between spectator and film and fails to register the complexities and multiplicities of contemporary life, is disrupted by this necessarily fragmented and indeterminate emphasis on the body and on the senses. Fredric Jameson similarly notes this turn towards affect in realism more broadly, arguing that the ‘contemporary or postmodern “perpetual present” is better characterised
as a “reduction to the body”’ (Jameson 2013: 26), wherein the representation and rendering of affect within the text works to ‘activate the body’ (Ibid.: 128) outside of it, something that is particularly pertinent in the realm of realist cinema, with its, as Elsaesser suggests, appeal to our sensory realms. For Jameson, affect is able to strike at a more fundamental realist encounter because it operates outside of ‘name and nomination’ (Ibid.: 128) – it is not subordinated to symbolic, allegorical or narrative ‘effect’, it does not ‘mean something’ within the text, and it can instead operate above and beyond its parameters because it is non-prescriptive. In more practical terms put forward by Joe Shapiro in his review of Jameson’s book, ‘[t]he impulse of affect [. . .] entails the representation of bodily sensation in language, scenic description rather than narrative plotting, and the appearance within narrative fiction of a kind of eternal present of non-individuated, impersonal consciousness’ (Shapiro 2015: 132). The filmic analogies are obvious in the ‘poetic’ dimensions of realist practice that we have already begun to identify in new realist films – not only an emphasis on the representation of experience as an end in and of itself, but a connected meditative engagement with space and place which is enabled by a lingering emphasis on devices which serve to accent and move the motifs beyond their narrative function.

Presenting these elements within a theoretical re-assessment of realism invites a recovery of some of the foundational thinkers of realist film theory, such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, amongst others, whose examination of the capacity of realist cinema to effect an active engagement with the spectator’s own realities was overtaken by the theoretical debates of the 1970s. As Lúcia Nagib puts it, Bazin’s ‘realist politics concerned doubt, or, in his words, “ambiguity of expression” as enabled by the surplus of time and space contained in the long take/long-shot combination’, thus ‘active spectatorship’ and ‘spectatorial agency and participation’ are enabled and not restricted by realist poetics (Nagib 2016: 28). Bazin’s well-known advocacy for depth of focus centres around bringing the ‘spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality’, which in turn enables a ‘more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress’ (Bazin 2010: 101). Meaning making is thus collaborative and, for Bazin, realism is theorised not merely in terms of offering a representation of reality but as a reflection upon it, ‘not to produce a spectacle which appears real, but rather to turn reality into a spectacle’ (Bazin 2005: 67). For Kracauer, [f]ilms tend to explore this texture of everyday life, whose composition varies according to place, people and time. So they help us not only to appreciate our given material environment but to extend it in all its directions. They virtually make the world our home. (Kracauer 1960: 304)
Kracauer describes cinema’s capacity to enable the apprehension of ‘physical reality in its concreteness’ (Ibid.: 165), wherein ‘small units’ are ‘free to range over all orbits imaginable’ (Ibid.: 303). For Kracauer, ‘[n]o doubt these are intended to advance the story to which they belong but they also ‘affect[s] us strongly, or even primarily, as just a moment of visible reality, surrounded, as it were, by a fringe of indeterminate visible meanings’ (Ibid.: 303). Realism is thus here theorised not as a set of cinematic conventions but as the binding philosophical mechanism of a dialogue between spectator, film and everyday life. In these terms, realism invites critical reflection, rather than absorbing it.

As Ian Aitken puts it, Kracauer situated his ‘redemption’ of realism in precisely this way: ‘bringing the individual into a closer proximity with a physical reality currently obscured by the forces of modernity’ (Aitken 2006: 159). Clearly for Bazin, and for Kracauer too, in order for this heightened engagement with the spectator’s own realities to occur, realist texts should pursue particular textual strategies. As Aitken puts it: ‘Kracauer argues that the way to escape from the “spiritual nakedness” of this debilitating modern condition is through transcending our abstract relation to our own experience of the world, and experiencing the world in its phenomenological richness’ (Ibid.: 165). This assertion of cinema’s capacity to evoke a heightened, sensory dialogue with the spectator finds application, of course, in new realism’s tendency towards a conspicuous evocation of physical perception and feeling.

We should also consider here Bazin’s and Kracauer’s shared belief in a non-instrumental and indeterminate realist aesthetic. As Aitken argues, ‘[a]t the heart of Kracauer’s conception of cinematic realism is the conviction that, at the level of form, film should allow images of the world a degree of autonomous existence from the controlling drive of narrative, action and plot’ (Ibid.: 168). Thus, many of the elements of new realist poetics that we have already begun to sketch out – its lingering and non-prescriptive emphasis on landscape, for example – should also be understood as actualising the philosophical pronouncements of realist film theory. This is useful to us because it points to a way of conceptualising realist form and practice beyond some of the more rigidly theorised, and ahistorical paradigms that I have summarised in this introduction, in the hope that we might begin to nuance and broaden our understandings of the relationships between film and reality in contemporary Britain.

A New Tradition

The rest of this book is divided into five chapters, with each covering a specific realist film-maker who has been active in the contemporary period. This is not to suggest that new realism is limited to the output of a closed set of practitioners but rather that it is more productive to devote concerted scholarly
attention to directors whose films have consistently reflected the features that I have highlighted in this introduction. For that reason, there is no space for the likes of Pawel Pawlikowski, nor Lynne Ramsay, mentioned earlier. This is not to underplay their formative role in articulating a new space for realism in the contemporary period, but it instead reflects that, since *My Summer of Love* (Pawlikowski, 2004) and *Morvern Callar* (Ramsay, 2002), both film-makers have pursued projects away from their initial concern with British landscapes. Indeed, it is for this reason that Steve McQueen, despite his desire to put an ‘audience in a situation that feels like reality’ (Gritten 2012), is also omitted. Andrew Haigh, whose film *Weekend* (2011) can be seen as an exemplar of new realism, has in recent years expanded his oeuvre, taking in *Looking* and the American-set film *Lean on Pete* (2017). The absence of a chapter on Haigh is not to dismiss consideration of television or of films located outside of Britain, but to do justice to the diversity of his output would be to dilute the focus on new realism as a specific tradition. There are also a number of individual films such as *Catch Me Daddy* (Daniel Wolfe, 2015), *Control* (Anton Corbijn, 2007), the already discussed *The Unloved*, *The Goob* (Guy Myhill, 2014), and Paddy Considine’s directorial debut *Tyrannosaur* (2011) that might also be productively located within a wider new realist tradition, but these films do not constitute a consistent body of work on the part of their directors and/or an exclusive focus on British realist themes and aesthetics.

Instead, I have chosen to focus on film-makers who have maintained a concerted emphasis on the features and fundamental components of new realism, with the case study approach enabling both a discussion of the specific characteristics of their oeuvres and a broader examination of the features that bind and connect their films to a wider tradition. Chapter 1 considers the work of Duane Hopkins, who, despite a limited output of just two feature films between 2008 and 2014 is, I argue, a foundational film-maker within new realism. The chapter explores in particular the ways in which Hopkins’s work is structured by a conspicuously constructed, lyrical examination of everyday practices, landscapes and objects to invite a poetic reflection on and elevation of such quotidian material.

This thread continues into a consideration of the work of Joanna Hogg in Chapter 2, whose films are similarly structured around everyday processes and routines. Hogg’s work is also particularly attentive to constructing a perceptual verisimilitude through both immersive sound design and a tableau-like approach to mise en scène that foregrounds a sense of spectatorial complicity. These elements, which combine to foster an often intense intimacy, point to the ways in which new realism can be understood to convey an experience of reality, and are also felt in the work of Andrea Arnold. Although similarly sensorially rich, unlike Hogg’s, Arnold’s films, discussed in Chapter 3, are
imbued with restless, participatory energy with the camera closely aligned with her subjects to build an embodied sense of identification. But just as in the films of her contemporaries, Arnold’s meticulous approach to everyday imagery both foregrounds a sense of a highly textured and familiar world and, through differing modes of emphasis, renders such material as defamiliarised and thus, poetic. This is particularly apparent in Arnold’s highly dynamic exploration of landscape, place and space, and it is this feature, as mentioned already, which can be understood as a defining tenet of new realism.

In Chapter 4, I introduce the work of Shane Meadows, whose highly collaborative, semi-autobiographical films, with their reliance on untrained actors and stylised elevation of everyday spaces, can be authentically located within the new realist tradition. However, the chapter also examines the uniquely, at least in terms of new realism, non-specific, and thus universal approach that Meadows takes to his use of location, and, in addition, considers the effects of television drama and seriality on filmic content. While Clio Barnard’s films are similarly invested in a concerted examination of the relationships between environment and identity, unlike Meadows’s work, they are engaged in highly place-specific narratives. Barnard’s three films to date, discussed in Chapter 5, are conjoined by a self-conscious examination of realist methodology and tradition. Each film operates under superficially distinctive auspices, yet they share examinations of landscape which are both visually realistic and revelatory in their uncovering of the political, economic and emotional forces that shape and are reflected by these locations. When combined, then, these films have formed a tradition that acts against the designation of Loachian social realism as the definitive realist mode.