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Precarity and Resistance: Mediating Home across Contemporary Europe through the Short Hybrid Film

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Abstract: *Addressing an increasingly globalised housing crisis, European filmmakers have turned their attention to the precarity of home, generating a vast mediascape of activist documentaries, essay films, shorts, and some features. Adopting a film and urbanism approach, in this article I take a specific focus on the short film form, framing it as a space for experimentation, and offering a snapshot of a wider transnational corpus of media. I compare two 2019 short films by two emerging women artists: British Ayo Akingbade's* Dear Babylon *and Portuguese Leonor Teles* Dogs Barking at Birds *(*Cães Que Ladram Aos Pássaros*). These artists' works establish film as a form of resistance while, at the same time, being rooted in an understanding of socio-economic inequality in housing. Purposedly merging observational, participatory methods with the fictional, these two films share a focus on young people in uncertain living conditions. Grappling with their individual situations the youth at the centre of these stories build forms of resistance to their present housing struggles in the attempt to shape a better future for themselves and their community.*

In recent years, a "transnational precarious home genre" has emerged on European screens, vividly portraying an increasing globalised housing emergency (Sborgi, "Precarious Homes"). This fiction and nonfiction corpus includes different modes and formats—the documentary, the essay film, the short, the feature—and, similarly to the global crisis from which it originates, is better understood, I argue, within a transnational framework. Not only local precarious home representations exist within a wider global media flow, they also are the expression of a phenomenon, the housing crisis, which has both local and global socioeconomic ramifications. Work in housing studies has demonstrated how this double focus is necessary and recent edited collections on the home on screen have equally taken an approach beyond the national (Rolnik; Watt and Smets; Baschiera and De Rosa; Palmer). This article takes a specific focus on the short film form, framing it as a space for experimentation, while also offering a snapshot of a wider transnational corpus of media on which I have conducted research.[1] In it, I compare two short films by two emerging women artists, both of which were released in 2019: *Dear Babylon* by British Nigerian artist and filmmaker Ayo Akingbade and *Dogs Barking at Birds* (*Cães Que Ladram Aos Pássaros*) by Leonor Teles, a Portuguese filmmaker of Romani descent.[2] I argue that the filmmakers' focus on the experiences of marginalised youth and their attempt to withstand the violence of displacement goes beyond simply depicting precarity and contributes to a new cinematic genre of "housing resistance", exploring the intersection of housing politics and community representation. I demonstrate how resistance is conveyed in both films through the movement of the people represented between the domestic space and different parts of the city, and between interiors and exteriors. The connections between spaces and people convey a multilayered representation of home, and a tightly knit pattern of offscreen socio-spatial relations emerges on screen. Adopting a socio-spatial approach, I explore how the films articulate narrative through a distinctive use of space and movement. Before getting to the analysis itself, however,

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I will situate the two films in their broader context and highlight the thematic and formal resonances that bring them together.

Housing Precarity, the Impossibility of Home, and Youth in the Short Hybrid Film

Set in London, Ayo Akingbade's *Dear Babylon* follows three art students, Ada (Donna Banya), Jazz (Marla Kellard-Jones) and Rooney (Emmanuel Adeneye). While at a party, they learn to their disappointment that the AC30 Housing Bill has passed, entailing that any tenant living in housing-association-managed properties would need to pay a £18,000 fee to continue living there or would have to leave. This bill is fictional although it does reflect the ever-increasing housing costs that housing-association tenants face in the UK. More broadly, it resonates with tendencies in recent UK housing legislation, such as, for instance, the Housing and Planning Act 2016, which further privatised housing provision to the detriment of social housing, a process that has been ongoing in Britain since the 1980s. To protest against the bill, and to show the value of social housing to a broader public, the students decide to shoot a film on the lived experience of their community. Meanwhile, in a gentrifying Porto brimming with tourists, Leonor Teles's *Dogs Barking at Birds* captures the real-life experience of young Vicente (Vicente Gil) and his family, facing eviction from the house in which they have lived all their life. Teles, a Lisbon-based artist, was awarded an artist residency by Porto's municipality to make a film about the city. During her time there, the filmmaker came across the Gil family and set their story against the backdrop of urban change and tourist-led gentrification in the city.

I selected these two films within a wider corpus because of several resonances between their makers' career stages and position within the film industry, their thematic focus on youth and their shared interest in experimenting with generic hybridity. Firstly, the films are made by two women filmmakers, both born in the 1990s. Ayo Akingbade is the author of twelve internationally acclaimed shorts. Her work has been screened mostly across different artist moving image circuits, such as galleries and festivals, but was also streamed on MUBI in 2021. In the same year, her work was also recognised by a solo exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. This show, entitled *Glittering City*, was a collaboration with the youth collective Duchamp & Sons and aimed to voice young people's aspirations and concerns on home, displacement, and the future of the city in the uncertain times of the pandemic. Akingbade's work shares a consistent focus on home, in particular as seen from a Black British perspective. As she recalls the experience of making her first film on housing, *Tower XYZ* (2016), which, together with *Street 66* (2018) and *Dear Babylon*, forms a "social housing trilogy", the filmmaker noted how she felt there was a gap in representation within the British context:

> I often say I started to make films because it was born out of necessity. I wasn't seeing films or content which spoke to my lived experience or others I knew. Born out of frustration with film school and a certain dogma, I made *Tower XYZ* knowing this was my voice, the identity of a young British Nigerian female.

Both multiculturalism and racial difference appear in London-set narratives of housing displacement, for instance in feature-length and community-driven films like Andrea Luka Zimmerman's *Estate, a Reverie* (2015), which sensitively portrays the Haggerston Estate community from within, or Enrica Colusso's *Home Sweet Home* (2012), which centres on the experiences of the residents of the Heygate Estate, demolished as part of the large-scale Elephant and Castle regeneration. Despite foregrounding their perspectives, however, very few

of these films are produced by Black British filmmakers and artists themselves.[3] This somehow falls into a wider pattern of underrepresentation and barriers in the industry, which has been outlined by recent scholarship (Cobb et al.). The increasing recognition received by Akingbade's work is therefore even more meaningful in this context.

Teles belongs to a very different sociocultural context and operates in an industry, the Portuguese one, which is of course not directly comparable in size and structure to the larger British film industry. Many young Portuguese filmmakers, indeed, emigrate given the scarcity of opportunities to progress with their careers. As Mariana Liz notes, "[s]truggle, survival and resistance are key terms for the study of contemporary Portuguese film" (4). Portugal, she argues, is an example of the "cinema of small nations" that occupy a position of marginality within wider global media flows. Women, she further notes, experience further marginality within this context.[4] Although Akingbade, as a Black British artist, operates in a sector where institutional racism creates more specific barriers, Teles shares with her an emerging trajectory within an industry where women face unequal access to production. Moreover, she shares with Akingbade a combined interest in representing spatial change and inequality. Her work ranges from the exploration of her own Romani descent to an interest in place and gentrification. In 2016, Teles was awarded a Golden Bear at the Berlinale in the Short Film category for her *Batrachian's Ballad* (*Balada de um Batráquio*, 2016), exploring xenophobic behaviour against the Roma community in Portugal. The press enthusiastically labelled her as "the youngest filmmaker to ever win a Golden Bear", something she felt uneasy with, as she explained in an interview with Susana Bessa at the time:

> What is it with me being young? Wouldn't it be equally victorious if I were the oldest ever on record to win the Bear? I only spoke of what I knew about. And though where we both come from life experience may play a more powerful role towards successful endeavors, it is quite pathetic to label it. And that doesn't mean that from now on, because I've directed two short films that have done well, I should now update my work to a feature film. The filmmaker is not doing shorts just because it is a premature display of a body of work.

Teles defends the short film as a creative space in its own right and her words highlight how hard it is to be taken seriously in an industry where women, racialised artists, but also younger filmmakers are marginalised on account of an experience they often struggle to access because of institutional barriers. At the same time, it can be argued that these two 1990s-born filmmakers, who have produced a consistent body of work through the short film form—the importance of which I will detail in the next sections of the article—are now at a similar career stage, where their work is increasingly recognised beyond independent art film circuits. I argue that the work of these women filmmakers, with its strong focus on identity, place and space in a context of radical urban change, crucially brings into focus the role of women creatives, so foregrounding media representations of home as resistance.

In turn, the place given in these films to race and class-based marginalisation, on the one hand, and to youth as centre of representation, on the other, prompt us to question what a sustainable housing future could look like. A few years older than the subjects they represent, these filmmakers can offer a sympathetic perspective as they share similar generational concerns; they also live in a world where labour and housing precarity are making it increasingly difficult for younger generations to achieve social and economic stability. Their two films share a focus on young people in uncertain living conditions: grappling with their individual situations the youth at the centre of these stories build forms of resistance to housing

precarity in an attempt to shape a better future for themselves and their community. A few other examples in the wider European corpus of short films on housing precarity offer a similar focus on the perspective of the youth. Margarida Lucas's *Slope* (*Rampa*, 2015) depicts the experience of eviction of a teenage girl in Lisbon. Brid Murphy's 2021 *Graft* project film installation in Cork captured a group of young people in overcrowded accommodation and projected in a loop the images of their compressed bodies from the window of a derelict building on the central Oliver Plunkett Street, powerfully reminding passers-by of the housing emergency in Ireland. However, most short films on housing precarity focus on other types of vulnerabilities, for instance, the experiences of single mothers in temporary accommodation, whose lives in shelters and hotels are captured by short and feature-length films, such as *No Place* (Laura Kavanagh, 2019), *Rosie* (Paddy Breathnach, 2018) and *Herself* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2020). While these representations are of course equally worth analysing, I argue that a focus on youth can offer a fresh and much needed perspective from those living in transitional spaces at a particular transitional stage of their life, deeply shaped by precarity.

Today, the so called "Generation Rent", young people aged sixteen to thirty-four, will likely experience housing insecurity for longer times than previous generations, with both material and emotional consequences, including "delaying family formation for some, whilst for others it undermined their sense of belonging and local attachment to place, and also increased their reliance on family support" (Mckee et al. 313). The particular challenges experienced by young people are tightly connected with employment issues, in a "low-pay, no-pay cycle" that increasingly locks them out of the private rental sector and that, without widespread provision of affordable and social housing, causes increasing rates of homelessness, as scholars have demonstrated (Watt, "Press-ganged"). While young workers struggle to secure an affordable and stable home, the student population is also severely affected by broader housing shortages in face of an increasing number of students in British and Portuguese universities (*Financial Times*; Malone; TnP/Lusa). Student housing has therefore become an emergency in several states across Europe (Mocova).

The characters at the centre of the two films are students at the end of a cycle: respectively, Vicente in Porto is at the end of school and the art students in London are at the end of university. This should be a moment of celebration and light-heartedness and hope for the future, yet their hope is instead dramatically disrupted by housing displacement. In films about housing precarity among young people, questions of gender and identity are also particularly relevant. This is evidenced, for instance, from a wider subset of "precarious home narratives" in public housing that connect the exploration of girlhood to the transitional spaces they inhabit (Sborgi, "Precarious Homes"). Although *Dear Babylon* and *Dogs Barking at Birds* do not belong to this type of girlhood narratives, precarity and identity in these films are tightly intertwined. While in *Dear Babylon* this aspect is articulated through questions of racial and class-based marginalisation, in *Dogs Barking at Birds* it is thematised around issues of gender and masculinity. Vincente is captured at a delicate moment of growth and identity development: while his friends seem to experience a carefree summer, his role becomes to support his mother emotionally, as she involves him more directly than his brothers and sister in the choices they have to make as a family. In the violent crisis that the eviction represents, Vicente leaves adolescence behind and becomes an adult.

The two films resonate with each other also because of formal aspects. Both films are shorts, a predominant format to depict housing precarity both in fiction and nonfiction and within the wider European corpus I have examined. The short film emerges as a particularly productive way to engage creatively with housing issues, as for instance in the work by

Portuguese collective Left Hand Rotation or filmmaker Margarida Lucas, as well as a wide range of films on the housing crisis in both Britain and Ireland. From a production perspective, it is of course unsurprising that this form is privileged by emerging artists and activist filmmakers as short films require less funding to be made and often represent a stepping stone to eventually obtaining financing for longer features. At the same time, numerous specialised short film festivals worldwide—such as the London Short Film Festival and The Curtas Vila do Conde International Film Festival—testify to the importance of this as a form on its own right. Moreover, shorts offer a way to compensate a smaller budget with greater creative freedom and independence. As Teles herself points out, "[t]he short is so free of a standardized form" that it allows for a type of formal experimentation that would not work in feature-length film (Bessa). I want to suggest, therefore, that this format offers a particular space of experimentation where to reframe political forms of filmmaking beyond social-realist narratives—such as the above mentioned *Rosie* and *Herself*, but also for instance *Listen* (Ana Rocha de Sousa, 2020)—and expository feature-length documentaries that are often a popular choice for narrating the housing crisis, such as Paul Sng's *Dispossession* (2017), Fredrik Gertten's *Push* (2019) or Nikita Wolfe's *Concrete Soldiers* (2017), which I have analysed elsewhere in relation to the housing crisis in Britain ("Housing Problems"). Though these longer formats have an equally important function in depicting housing precarity for a variety of audiences, I suggest that the short film form provides a strongly experimental, liminal space, where boundaries between documentary and feature can be blurred more freely. The generic hybridity that is so distinctive of these two films is therefore born of this space of experimentation, which allows filmmakers to devise new ways to communicate precarity and housing resistance. In an interview with Charlotte Jansen, Akingbade herself claims this space and the need of a new language for depicting these social issues:

> Although *Tower XYZ* explores themes like gentrification and social cleansing, I didn't want to make a piece that was kitchen-sink style or a depressing social realist depiction of London because it is dry and super repetitive, found nearly everywhere in British TV and film. It was important the characters came from different backgrounds and traditions reflective of the multicultural society I live in.

Both filmmakers distinctively and purposedly merge nonfictional observational and participatory methods with fiction, so experimenting with modes that go beyond those of most current representations of the housing crisis, the social realist feature and the expository documentary.[5] The two films speak to each other in their shared hybridising of fiction and documentary. *Dear Babylon* merges fictional sequences with archive segments and interviews with the inhabitants of the Dorset Estate in Bethnal Green in East London, built by architects Skinner, Bailey & Lubetkin in 1957. This group includes tenants, community organisers, and John Allan, an architect and conservationist with expertise on modernist architecture, in particular Lubektin. The building itself has been and is currently used as shooting location ("Dorset Estate"). In line with this, the film's narrative becomes the making of the film itself, while the authentic interview footage centres the subjects in the space they inhabit, building an archive of their lived experiences. Moreover, as the fictional framework establishes that what we are seeing is the actual film made by the three arts students, filming space effectively becomes an act of collective resistance. The film's coproduction ethos is made explicit in a series of dialogues between the three students who decide to embark on "a big collaborative project" where they "will ask residents to share their lives". Before starting the interviews, the students meet up in the basketball court of the estate to rehearse questions and scripts. At the end of the film, we are again reminded of the documentary process in a sequence showing Ada editing the film on her computer. In the final sequence, we see her closing a field notebook

labelled “2017/2018 Dear Babylon” and smiling in a direct address to the audience, which make the filmmaking process even more explicit.



Figure 1: The three students with their cameras in front of the Dorset Estate.
***Dear Babylon*, by Ayo Akingbade. Ayo Akingbade, 2019. Image courtesy of LUX.**

While *Dear Babylon* inserts interviews in a fictional framework that renders the making of the film explicit, *Dogs Barking at Birds* adopts a somehow opposite strategy. The film is based on participant observation of the Gil family at the centre of the story through the time leading to their displacement. However, the viewer is never made aware of the documentary nature of the footage, which is organised around a loose fictional narrative, at the centre of which are Vicente’s family members, who all act in the film. Teles clarifies the meaning of this formal hybridity in her director’s note in the press kit for the film:

> With this film there was a declared intent to experiment, to changeover frontiers between documentary and fiction. This allowed me to explore different methods during the creative process, as well as having a more intimate access (and more dignified as well) to the lives of the characters. It’s absolutely crucial for me that the people involved also take an active part in the bringing up process of the film and don’t just conform to following previously written lines and directions. The act of making a film must be perceived as a collective space. The intentional mix of documentary and fiction occurs in order to make closeness possible, to approach their state of naturalness. Vicente plays himself, the family we see on screen is his own. Fiction arises as a tool to potentiate realness.

Emphasising the process of filmmaking as one of cocreation and generative intimacy between the director and the subjects at the centre of the story, Teles establishes fiction as a powerful

instrument to convey a sharper political argument, rather than considering it a form that dilutes the social issues at the centre of the film. Both directors, therefore, take up genre hybridity as an opportunity to craft stories that centre the lived experience of their subjects while experimenting with a reflective use of film genre. Differently from *Dear Babylon* where this is made explicit through dialogue and mise en scène, in *Dogs Barking at Birds* the material is not clearly identified as authentic, and the carefully stylised narrative could be mistaken for fiction. Overall, both filmmakers originally blend constructed and spontaneous interactions, fiction and nonfiction.

The merging of fiction and nonfiction is productively articulated through the centrality of space in both films. Narrative unfolds from multilayered spatial relations and movement that place a focus on the urban spaces in transformation where the action takes place as well as on the role of the characters within them. As geographer Doreen Massey noted in a well-known 1999 interview with Karen Lury in *Screen*, responding to a tradition in geography that saw representation as spatialising and fixing: "no spaces are stable, given for all time; all spaces are transitory and one of the most crucial things about spatiality (a characteristic which lends both its continual openness and, thus, its availability to politics) is that it is always being made" (231). Viewing the production of space as an ongoing transformation and negotiation, I argue, is extremely important in approaching representations of housing inequality and displacement because it highlights the different claims to urban space and housing in the moment they are unfolding. As spatial media, film participates in a range of social relations, and space is made on and off screen at the same time. As Massey writes in *Space, Place and Gender*: "what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'" (2). Film and media refract "social relations stretched out" as they portray the ongoing negotiation of space by marginalised communities. Housing politics are essentially spatial politics: different groups struggle to access public space and real estate and those who have fewer means lose ground. Film and media are crucial in capturing the politics of resistance to spatial displacement. Both films I am considering make these socio-spatial relations emerge vividly on screen.

Space, Movement, and Resistance in *Dear Babylon*

In *Dear Babylon* space is crucial at different levels: the space of the Dorset Estate, zoomed in as a specific type of architecture, which is also situated in broader relationship with the wider landscape of social housing in the city; the porous relation between exteriors and interiors where the interviews are filmed; and the movement of characters across different types of space. Firstly, the space of the estate is presented as multilevel and dynamic. A wide variety of camera movements enables us to apprehend the structural complexity of the architecture. Sometimes the camera frames the building from below while simultaneously rotating to encompass its width, so emphasising the dynamism of the external components of the building, such as the walkways, a typical feature of modernist architecture. This dynamism is then echoed by the internal spiral staircase, a landmark component of Lubektin's building, as long-time resident Edna Fury, one of the interviewees, remarks. Another scene captures the parallel movement of the three students who, each on a different floor, knock on all doors simultaneously in a sort of rhythmic sequence, initially with no answer from the tenants. This variety of takes provides an in-depth, multilevel rendering of the space of the estate, differentiating it from stock images of social housing blocks as imposing concrete monoliths, a recurring representation in film and photography associated to stigmatised visions of social housing.

Moreover, the space of the Dorset Estate does not exist in isolation, but is purposedly connected to the broader space of the city via montage. Archive footage and stills are interspersed with the main narrative to link them with other spaces in London. We see images of other housing estates, such as some stills from the demolition of the Heygate Estate in South London (2011–2014), which led to one of the largest displacements of social tenants in the history of British housing and, in a brief shot in the film's opening, we see the fire at Grenfell Tower in West London in 2017, which killed seventy-two people, to whom the film is dedicated. The interweaving of these images portrays housing as a complex system where the systematic dilapidation and lack of investment in the housing stock, a long-term process that housing scholar Paul Watt argues is "captured by the phrase 'managed decline'", is not disconnected from what could be superficially considered one-off sudden tragedies like Grenfell ("Housing" 236). Moreover, we see the city's streets, as the film opens with archive network television footage of riots from the 1990 poll-tax protests and the 2011 riots in Hackney. The images are used as a stand in for riots in the present portrayed in the film, as the voiceover describes people demonstrating against the fictional AC30 Bill. At the same time, these two types of spaces at different moments in time contextualise the depiction of a specific place, the Dorset Estate, not only within the broader topic of the demise of social housing, but also within longer histories of racialised and classed inequality in Britain. By weaving together images of different areas and estates beyond the eastern part of the city that are undergoing regeneration or demolition, the film contextualises the story within a broader reflection on London, social housing, and displacement. Moreover, the connection between similar housing stories across the city also points to an ongoing transformation, where space negotiation is happening.

As the students themselves note, the areas in which they live are in transition: one of them claims to be in "Bloody Hackney!", the other responds: "Actually we are in Tower Hamlets, Hackney is across the road". Shifting boundaries between the neighbourhoods are important to signal a newly gentrified geography of spaces, with Hackney increasingly signifying a middle-class neighbourhood, whose inhabitants live next to those in Tower Hamlets, an area that is touched by regeneration to a lesser extent. Within these shifting landscapes, spatial reframing on screen allows for the possibility of resistance as the trajectories of the people who inhabit these spaces and are at risk of displacement are powerfully written into them. In a reflective mode, this is performed within the narrative by the three young filmmakers at its centre, but it is also achieved by Akingbade's film as a whole. The framing of people within the space of the estate itself works as a form of resistance to the erasure of their presence by attempts to displace them, a wider ongoing process in Britain that, as I have demonstrated, is evoked by the montage between the images of the architecture of the Dorset Estate within the wider public housing stock. The use of archival material contributes to refract "social relations stretched out" on-screen across a multilayered history written in the built environment of the city, while the narrative set in the present embodies displacement and the resistance to it as ongoing. More specifically, the film creates a wider archive of Black British representations in the city, as also indicated by the choice to include a variety of archive footage: images of the riots from television news repertoire, but also those of Black girls walking together and laughing among themselves. The wide use of photo and video archive images in the film places Akingbade's in the lineage of a broader Black British film history, that of the work of the 1980s collectives, such as, for instance, Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC).[6] The use of archive material is also remindful of BAFC's founder John Akomfrah's practice. Working with the archive is, for the British Ghanian artist and filmmaker"about trying to build a memorial, a monument or altar piece" of the diaspora (Akomfrah). At the same time,

by placing at the centre of the stories this group of young East Londoners' movements and explorations of space, Akingbade recentres their perspective.

This same recentring is carried out by the set-up of the interviews, which reframe the interviewees' relationship not just with the estate as a whole but with the interiors they inhabit. The interviews are organically embedded in the broader narrative through the use of camera movement and the image editing that make them look grainy, resembling the actual archive footage. The use of music, in the form of the reggae and electronic music soundtrack of the film introducing some of them, blends the ethnographic moment within the fictional narrative. The interviews themselves are carefully staged and framed as environmental portraits, with the interviewees occupying a central space within the frame, surrounded by familiar objects symbolic of their identities, such as books and paintings, a distinctive portraiture technique. One of the tenants, Spencer Brown, is portrayed in front of a large window so that we can see the beautiful skyline view he has from the flat. The subjects, therefore, are shown to be at ease in the spaces they habitually live in, suggesting that appropriating space and making it one's own is within the range of possibilities offered by social housing. By standing at the centre of their own flats, the tenants shelter in place as a form of resistance. At the same time, as many of them are long-time residents, they reconstruct through their words the broader history of the community. Rather than being isolated in their individual homes they are part of the external space and, thus, of the local community. The porosity and communication between these different spatial levels offer a possibility to take possession of space and, hence, to resist.

An equally important form of spatial appropriation in *Dear Babylon* is movement across different spaces. The fictional narrative of the film starts with the dancing at the party, a dynamic activity that speaks to a moment of youthful, joyful collective sharing (notably, a similar scene takes place in *Dogs Barking as Birds*, marking an abrupt contrast with the gravity of the pending eviction), and ends with Ada walking back home alone through a market. As we are in East London, this is most likely Ridley Road Market, a traditionally working-class, multiethnic community in Hackney, which is also at risk of displacement and gentrification (this has been the object of a campaign (#saveridleyroad) and a campaign film by Alfredo Broccolo, *The Faceless Ones: Save Ridley Road* (2020)), a destiny shared with other similar businesses such as the Brixton Arcades in South London, a traditionally Black British space. Moreover, the core of the film, which develops around the physical movement of the main characters across the estate as they carry out the interviews, both highlights the passages from exteriors to interiors and the wider framing of the architecture. Though the interviews themselves are static, we enter the space of the flats through the movement of the students across the estate and the movement of the camera, which is at the same time Akingdbade's and their own as they are making the film. This conveys the porosity between interiors and exteriors as well as the connectedness between the individuals' experiences and the broader community at risk of displacement of which the students are also part. As I have demonstrated earlier on, the interviews and the way they are set up within the film are key to connect at different levels domestic and public spaces, individual stories, and collective histories of the neighbourhood.

The movement of the lift further represents a way of connecting inside and outside, individuals and community. The lift joins the different floors and the stories of the people who live on them, but, at the same time, it is also the threshold for the student to enter this space and narrate it for the audience. The lift in British social housing has a long history of being represented as a space of antisocial behaviour. Moreover, in many films in the US and Europe the lift also represents the broader failure of public housing, as the elevator in public housing often doesn't work when needed. Filmmakers like Marc Isaac have exploited this tension

creatively (Rascaroli), while more recent representations, such as the 360° VR documentary *Grenfell: Our Home* (Johnatan Rudd, 2019), emphasise the lift as a space of encounter in more positive terms, as happens in *Dear Babylon*. The fact that the students go up the building in the lift while chatting amiably suggests that this is not a threatening space, even though Rooney tells Jazz and Ada that he once got trapped in the lift together with a pizza delivery worker.

Finally, while different types of movement of people within the estate represent the possibility of resistance, movement also becomes a shorthand for a process of mobility as displacement, where working-class people are moved out of regenerated estates and priced out of the city, a topic that recurs in the interviewees' accounts. Movement is also, more broadly, the process of socio-spatial change in the city and how this is directed towards different ends. As I have argued, one quality of the film's multi-relational use of space is always establishing the broader relations between the local, the urban, and the national. As conservationist John Allan contextualises in his interview in the film, the building of the Dorset Estate was part of the wider postwar movement of erecting social housing. Building affordable housing, he suggests, has to be a constant investment and progression. Stasis in construction is seen in negative terms in this sense, while movement in this case is positive, antithetical to the movement as displacement described above.

Space, Movement, and Resistance in *Dogs Barking at Birds*

Differently from *Dear Babylon*, *Dogs Barking at Birds* is not articulated around one specific kind of modernist architecture. The film portrays two interiors, the home where the family have lived throughout their life and they are about to lose, the flat Vicente and his mum visit in the hope of renting it, a traditional Portuguese café in the city, a club where Vicente and his friends dance at a party, the public space of the street, and the riverside. While public space was evoked in *Dear Babylon* through the use of archival images and Ada's final walk through the market, Porto's historical centre acquires even more importance in *Dogs Barking at Birds*, where the individual story of displacement is explicitly tied to a commentary on the city's increasing gentrification.The film opens with a shot of Vicente, part of his family and friends sitting on a bench against the backdrop of a busy street. We see them smiling and laughing together, but the light-heartedness of the scene contrasts with Vicente's voiceover reading the definition of gentrification from Wikipedia, to signal that this joyful inhabiting of the city centre is now at risk and the people we see are in danger of being displaced.

Cities like Porto and Lisbon have seen radical change in recent years. The massive increase of tourism has led to a high rate of displacement of local inhabitants from their once rundown but affordable historical centres, due to skyrocketing rents and the proliferation of short-term renting practices through policies like Alojamento Local and platforms like Airbnb, specifically targeted to accommodate tourists and digital nomads. Because these processes lead only in part to the establishment of a new "gentry", as the incoming residents are mostly temporary inhabitants, scholars have debated whether the term gentrification, a concept originated in the Global North to describe the transformation of traditionally working-class inner-city neighbourhoods into more affluent middle-class areas, is effective to describe the recent transformation of Southern European cities. As Simone Tulumello and Giovanni Allegretti note, these are places "where gentrification was once considered to be marginal or absent" (114) and, they suggest, the complexity of these transformations can only be understood by adopting a multiscalar approach that takes into account neighborhood politics, local and national policies, global tourism and speculation flows (124).



Figure 2: Vicente, his family and friends sitting on a bench in Porto.
***Dogs Barking at Birds* (*Cães Que Ladram Aos Pássaros*), by Leonor Teles. Uma Pedra no Sapato, 2019.**
Image courtesy of Agência – Portuguese Short Film Agency.

In *Dogs Barking at Birds*, this complex, changing local environment is portrayed through images of a bustling historical centre, but also in an evocative scene gesturing to the clash between incoming temporary inhabitants and the longer-term residents. In a local, traditional Portuguese-style bar where Vicente is a regular, the elderly Portuguese bar owner asks Vicente to help him understand the coffee order of an English-speaking tourist couple. The order is so elaborate—a slightly cliched though humorous reference to gentrifiers' coffee culture—that it leaves even Vicente, who speaks English perfectly, quite confused. He navigates familiar spaces as they are undergoing change, and this is evident in one of the core aspects of the film: Vicente's movements through the city. As the plot synopsis in the film's press kit indicates, "Vicente moves around town on his bike, watching the urban landscape modify day by day. The town is no longer the same, the world is changing and so is he." Vicente's movements across public and domestic spaces in Porto represent the anguish at being displaced from his own home with his family. As Teles explains in the press kit, "[s]uddenly they were faced with having to leave their space, the streets they knew like the palm of their hands, the urban choreographies that were inscribed in their bodies. The map of all the places they inhabited disappears. Everything crumbles."

At the same time, I want to suggest, these movements are an attempt to keep himself anchored to his rapidly changing city. They still inscribe him in the urban fabric and become a form of resistance, though in less explicitly political terms than similar movements across space in *Dear Babylon*. Normally, the teenager's explorations take place during the day, when the city is brimming with activity and people and showing a degree of chaos that leaves the boy uneasy and restless. His restlessness sometimes results in sleeplessness, and brings him around the city at night on his bike. These night scenes, which are undisturbed by the tourist crowds, evoke a greater sense of exploration and ownership of the environment.



Figure 3: Vicente riding his bike across Porto's streets at night. *Dogs Barking at Birds*. Uma Pedra no Sapato, 2019. Image courtesy of Agência – Portuguese Short Film Agency.

In the last of these nighttime explorations, the one that concludes the film, Vicente suddenly falls from his bike, a moment underlined by the abrupt ending of the music that had accompanied the scene up until then. This scene ultimately undermines the possibility ofholding one's place in the surrounding environment and shows how the city Vicente is trying to grasp is slipping through his fingers. As in *Dear Babylon*, non-diegetic music, here an instrumental soundscore by Portuguese band Sensible Soccers, conveys a strong sense of narrative unity merging more observational and narrative moments.

Similar to *Dear Babylon*, the movement between interior and exterior is crucial in *Dogs Barking at Birds*. Vicente's movements do not only entail wandering around the city with his bike but also going into and dwelling in interiors. The exterior space of the city exists in a state of porosity with two main interiors. The first is the home where the Gil family have lived all their life and which they are about to lose. This is the setting of several warm family interactions despite the impending eviction threat and the gravity of the situation. In one kitchen sequence, Vicente helps his mom Maria (Maria Gil) fold the laundry and the two dissimulate their tension about the family's struggle by joking about how they cannot demonstrate to have paid the rent because, despite having lived there for years, the family were never issued a regular contract. The indemonstrability of paying the rent is obviously a serious issue, both because this is now the core element of the eviction court case against them and because it does not reflect well on their credit history for renting a new flat. While Maria is obviously worried, she also tries not to overburden her son with her preoccupations and jokes lightly that she has spent the rent money on "Avon products". The kitchen is airy, and full of everyday objects. This sequence and others in which all the brothers and one sister, along with the family's dogs, share space, make jokes, and sleep close, depict the family home as a space of warmth and intimacy. This sense of the home as a space of protection is however interrupted as the reality of having to find a new flat kicks in. The second domestic space we see in the film is the new

flat Vicente and her mom go on to visit, trying to make a case they would be able to afford the rent. These two interior spaces are joined by an external sequence where we see Maria leading the way through Porto's streets and Vicente trotting behind her. This acts as a transitional sequence, and a transitional space, between the two different homes, one familiar, the other unknown, but also between a more relaxed state and a deeper tension, which is evident in Maria's determined pacing across the city centre crowd and her worried look, but also in Vicente's discomfort as he is struggling to keep up with her. Around them, the city is bustling and the crowds go about their day, ignoring their struggles.

This walk directly cuts to the flat visit, a recurring trope in housing precarity films. As Vicente's mom is shown around by the real estate agent and they discuss terms, the boy explores the flat on his own, so that the audio of the conversation next door is disjointed from its visual depiction. This, however, creates a porousness between the two environments, which emotionally binds rather than separate mother and son's experience of the potential new house. As the adults speak in the other room, we see Vicente's body responding to what is going on in the other room, in particular, the bias the estate agent has against Maria, a single mother of four children, unemployed, without a husband, though "at least Portuguese", which, it turns out, is an advantage, as the agent makes clear that he does not rent to foreigners. This scene, therefore, effectively shows how renting a house is a process that is often affected by racialised, gendered, and classed biases. As Maria is aggressively questioned, Vicente keeps an ear to the conversation in a protective move but, at the same time, struggles to find his place in the new space. Although the flat is relatively nice, it clearly feels unfamiliar. Moreover, in contrast with the open view of the neighborhood they can access from the kitchen balcony in their family home, here we do not see anything beyond the windows that Vicente tries to open. While resistance is not articulated explicitly as in *Dear Babylon*, where the community filmmaking project is conceived as a form of protest, it is nevertheless embodied by a series of microgestures. Vicente's body movements, as he is restlessly opening cabinets, clicking buttons and trying to push the windows open, are small, mundane gestures but also forms of resistance to the restrained mobility experienced by the characters in a space that clearly is not their own. Similar to*Dear Babylon*, the film becomes a way to to rewrite the bodies of the subjects represented in the urban environments from which they are being expelled. This rewriting takes place through Vicente's wider explorations of the city or by inscribing his presence within the domestic interior. Although the "urban choreographies" Vicente and his family have known all their lives are being erased, moving images powerfully show that they are still inhabiting these changing spaces and that, in this way, they resist.

Conclusion

In this article, I demonstrated that the selected films experiment between fiction and documentary to convey representations of restrained mobility in precarious housing conditions. Beyond capturing precarity on screen in a descriptive manner, both *Dear Babylon* and *Dogs Barking at Birds* envision film itself as a form of resistance to displacement and erasure. While Akingbade achieves this by placing the act of collaborative filmmaking at the centre of the fictional narrative, coproduction as method drives Teles' practice, as clarified in her interviews and director's statement. By their selective focus on the youth and their attempt to resist displacement, albeit to different degrees, these works mark a shift from a cinema of housing precarity to what I want to call a cinema of housing resistance. These films differentiate themselves from more traditional associations between forms of social realism, activist documentary, and political filmmaking by creating a space to renegotiate questions of housing

politics and the role that marginalised communities have in inhabiting but also representing the spaces of resistance to housing precarity and displacement.

Notes

[1] This research has been carried out through the MEDIAHOMES project with support from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska Curie grant agreement No. 101033615.

[2] As part of the activities of the MEDIAHOMES project, I included these two films in a public screening I collaborated to organise at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (ICS) on September 2021, titled Espaços Precários da Habitação na Europa – Precarious Homes Across Europe (Sborgi, "Screening").

[3] With some exceptions, for instance, Shola Amoo's *A Moving Image: A Film about Gentrification* (2016).

[4] See also Liz's article in this issue of *Alphaville*.

[5] One exception to this trend within the corpus of feature-length documentaries is represented by the above mentioned *Estate, a Reverie*, an essay film which merges different elements, such as observational and community-led performance sequences.

[6] The 1980s collectives—Black Audio Film Collective, Sankofa Film and Video Collective, and Ceddo Film and Video Workshop—were created with support from Channel 4 and the Greater London Council in order to bolster the production of alternative visions to mainstream representation of Black and Asian communities at a time of political unrest and heightened racism in British cities.

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