

**Lifts – A Descent:**  
**The Gendering of Vertical Space**

&

***Higher Voices:***  
**A collection of linked short stories**

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## Abstract

This thesis in Creative and Critical Writing comprises two closely related parts which contribute to an understanding and discussion of the gendered nature of vertical space.

The critical thesis examines literary representations of the experiences of women and children who live in tower blocks built as social housing. My analysis draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey to investigate the production of the tower block as a gendered social space. I employ the lift as a lens to study the structuring and shaping of high-rise narratives and consider its role through a close reading of works by Alan Spence, Livi Michael, Alan Beard and Stephen Kelman. In four chapters – on liminality, disgust, mobilities and play – I argue that the tower block lift is represented as both a highly gendered space and as a mythologised space used to embody the narrative of the broken promise of the utopian solutions to the post-war housing crisis in the UK.

*Higher Voices* is a collection of twelve short stories – linked by environment, characters and events – set in a tower block in London over a one-year period which includes the Winter of Discontent and the election of Margaret Thatcher in May 1979. Each story is told from the viewpoint of a strong female or child narrator to give voices to those who can be marginalised in this setting. While themes of demolition and dereliction permeate, a sense of love, hope and justice is evident. The innovative use of twelve interludes set in the lift reinforces the importance of this conduit in the lives of the tower block's residents; it peoples the building through fractured conversations and glimpses of graffiti which inject humour and irony and allow revelations to be made.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	5
Epigraph.....	6
Part I Lifts – A Descent: The Gendering of Vertical Space.....	7
Introduction.....	8
Chapter 1: The Liminal Lift.....	16
Chapter 2: The Disgusting Lift.....	28
Chapter 3: The Stuck Lift.....	37
Chapter 4: The Playful Lift.....	49
Conclusion.....	61
Postscript – After Grenfell.....	68
Part II <i>Higher Voices</i> : A collection of linked short stories.....	<b>REDACTED</b>
Bibliography.....	71

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## Epigraph

*Brutalist* by Paul Farley

Try living in one. Hang washing out to dry  
and break its clean lines with your duds and smalls.  
Spray tribal names across its subway walls  
and crack its flagstones so the weeds can try

their damndest. That's the way. Fly-tip the lives  
you led, out past its edge, on the back field;  
sideboards and mangles made sense in the peeled  
spud light of the old house but the knives

are out for them now. This cellarless, unattacked  
place will shake the rentman off, will throw  
open its arms and welcome the White Arrow  
delivery fleet which brings the things on tick

from the slush piles of the seasonal catalogues.  
The quilt boxes will take up residence  
on the tops of white wardrobes, an ambulance  
raise blinds, a whole geography of dogs

will make their presence felt. And once a year  
on Le Corbusier's birthday, the sun will set  
bang on the pre-ordained exact spot  
and that is why we put that slab just there.

One by one the shopkeepers will shut  
their doors for good. A newsagent will draw  
the line at buttered steps. The final straw  
will fill the fields beyond. Now live in it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Farley, 'Brutalist' in *Tramp in Flames* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 10.

# Part I

## Lifts – A Descent:

# The Gendering of Vertical Space

## Introduction

This thesis explores the gendering of vertical space through an analysis of literary representations of lifts in tower blocks in British realist fiction.<sup>2</sup> The foundational premise of the thesis is provided by Henri Lefebvre's proposition that '(Social) space is a (social) product'.<sup>3</sup> While space has conventionally been seen as a passive container for social life, Lefebvre points out the social nature of space itself. He writes – drawing attention to the processual nature of space – that 'modern' spatial practice might be characterised by 'the daily life of a tenant in a government-subsidized high-rise housing project'.<sup>4</sup> My analysis is informed throughout by the feminist geographer Doreen Massey's argument that 'space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (and such related things as our degrees of mobility) are gendered through and through'.<sup>5</sup> Massey's work explores the complex ways in which space and place are connected to gender and emerging gender relations and as I consider the lift from this perspective, I examine its role in structuring and shaping the fictional narratives of female and child characters.

In my close readings of tower block texts, I analyse the dialectical relationships between characters and settings to understand the production of the lift as a mythologised space. I explore the 'coming-into-being and disappearance' of the codes associated with the lift through interactions between lifts and residents, as each is defined in relation to, and by virtue of its action on, the other.<sup>6</sup> As Lefebvre writes, 'Codes will be seen as part of the practical relationship, as part of an interaction between 'subjects' and their space and surroundings'.<sup>7</sup> I concentrate on the contents of these codes and the social practices inherent to them.

Sociologists Fuller and Low state that 'space is both a category and a lens'; the literary lift is a space with shared characteristics and the ways in which it is used provide a focus which allows insight into the characters' broader experiences.<sup>8</sup> Reflecting the tradition

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<sup>2</sup> Although I use the term 'realist fiction', the texts I analyse might also be defined as works of naturalism which 'has always lent itself easily to the expression of social causes because the typical naturalistic narrative depicts outmatched individuals fighting against an oppressive world order of some kind'. Lorna Sage, *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), p. 462.

<sup>3</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 186.

<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Martin G. Fuller and Martina Low, 'Introduction: An invitation to spatial sociology', *Current Sociology Monograph*, 65 (2017), 469–91, p. 472.

of Lefebvre, Fuller and Low provide a definition of space which captures the experiential and interactive relationship between the spatial and the social:

We define space as that which is concrete, multi-dimensional, lived-in and experienced. Spaces are relationally constituted, contestable and processual. They are constituted through the objects and bodies that are placed in the world and the modes of making-sense of the meaning of particular spaces.<sup>9</sup>

Although Lefebvre cannot be called a feminist, ‘his theoretical understandings of the dynamics of space have clear implications for gender relations’.<sup>10</sup> He discusses the violence and phallocentrism of the tower block but little work has extended his writing on the gendering and sexualisation of the spaces of modernity, even though it is central to his argument and politics.<sup>11</sup>

Massey describes space as ‘a pincushion of a million stories’.<sup>12</sup> Despite its position as an icon of post-war British architecture, surprisingly few authors have exploited the tower block’s potential as a fictional setting. As the social historian John Boughton writes:

The subject of public housing is hardly to be found on bookshelves. There is some good academic writing [...] but you’ll struggle to find anything in the mainstream. And in literary fiction, authentic interest in or real knowledge of the lives of the millions who have lived in council homes over the years is almost non-existent.<sup>13</sup>

As a consequence, critical studies of literature have only recently begun to engage with the tower block as an important urban location. Literary scholar Emily Cuming writes, ‘Although council housing is a burgeoning topic in the media and social sciences, it is less frequently encountered as a subject of cultural significance [...] housing estates form a ubiquitous part of the physical landscape, and this setting – in all its variations – needs to be considered’.<sup>14</sup> The existence, however, of valuable analogous research such as *Apartment Stories* – in which Sharon Marcus analyses discourses of nineteenth-century apartment

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<sup>9</sup> Fuller and Low, ‘Introduction’, p. 476.

<sup>10</sup> Yasminah Beebeejaun, ‘Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life’, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 39 (2017), 323-34, p. 325.

<sup>11</sup> Massey, *Space*, p. 184.

<sup>12</sup> Doreen Massey, ‘Doreen Massey on Space’, *Social Science Bites*, 1 February 2013, <<https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2013/02/podcastdoreen-massey-on-space/>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>13</sup> John Boughton, ‘Top 10 books about council housing’, *Guardian*, 25 April 2018, Books, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/25/top-10-books-on-council-housing-public-john-boughton-zadie-smith-lynsey-hanley>> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>14</sup> Emily Cuming, *Housing, Class and Gender in Modern British Writing, 1880-2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 175.



blocks and examines the intersections of domesticity and urbanism, public and private space and masculine and feminine spheres – provides a useful model for my work.<sup>15</sup>

In *Wigan Pier Revisited*, an exposé of poverty and politics in the 1980s, Beatrix Campbell describes tower blocks as ‘the symbol of all our disaffection’.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, when the tower block is used as a fictional setting it is overwhelmingly represented as an adverse environment in which the post-war hope of the utopian vision for social housing has dissolved into narratives which portray decaying buildings and societal breakdown. It is rare to find enthusiasm, affection or support for the project in fictional representations of high-rise life. The tower block was little used as a fictional setting until the late 1970s by which time its unfavourable image was entrenched in the public imagination.<sup>17</sup> As early as the late 1960s, the hope associated with the high-rise, once heralded as the solution to the post-war housing crisis, was rapidly crumbling; the unfavourable image was exacerbated in 1968 by the partial collapse of Ronan Point – a twenty-two storey block in East London – which has become mythologised as the death knell for the tower block in the UK.<sup>18</sup> Depictions of decaying tower blocks echo an artistic, fictional and dramatic tradition of ‘*ruinenlust*’.<sup>19</sup> In her discussion of ruin lust, Katie Beswick describes the Brutalist housing estate as an archetypal contemporary ruin, ‘with a fixed identity that is often evoked in discourses of social ruin and ruination’.<sup>20</sup>

As with the utopian promise of the high-rise in the 1950s and 1960s, the component spaces – the walkways, the balconies and the lifts – were also imbued with expectation. Without the lift the tower block could not have been built; in 1930, the architectural historian Francisco Mujica wrote, ‘the entire history of skyscrapers contains an homage to the

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<sup>15</sup> See Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories* (London: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Beatrix Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited* (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1984), p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> This unfavourable image inspired J.G. Ballard’s classic dystopian novel *High-Rise* which describes the disintegration of a luxury tower block and the descent into anarchy of its residents. J.G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975). Ballard said, in an interview, ‘events I described in that novel have taken place - - high rises [*sic*] all over the world been so vandalized, that in some cases they’ve had to’ve been blown up!’ Jon Savage, ‘JG Ballard’, *Search and Destroy Magazine* (1978) <[https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1978\\_reprinted\\_1988\\_search%26destroy\\_newspaper.html](https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1978_reprinted_1988_search%26destroy_newspaper.html)> [accessed 7 December 2018].

<sup>18</sup> Anne Power and John Houghton, *Jigsaw Cities: Big Places, Small Spaces* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2007) p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> ‘*Ruinenlust*’ can be defined as ‘the curious psychopathology of being drawn to that which we most fear’. Frances Stonor Saunders, ‘How ruins reveal our deepest fears and desires’, *Guardian*, 7 March 2014, Art, <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/07/ruins-exhibition-tate-britain-decay>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>20</sup> Katie Beswick, ‘Ruin Lust and the Council Estate’, *Performance Research*, 20 (2015), 29-38, p. 29.

inventors of the elevator'.<sup>21</sup> Le Corbusier, the Swiss-French architect who was a pioneer of modern architecture and internationally influential in urban planning, described the elevator as one of the three fundamental organs of a skyscraper and wrote, in 1947, 'I emphasize the question of the elevators because I consider it the key to all the urban reforms which will save our contemporary cities from disaster'.<sup>22</sup>

Today, in New York, the Otis elevator carries more people than any other form of public transport.<sup>23</sup> However, the lift, a 'paradigmatic space of urban modernity', is at least two thousand years old.<sup>24</sup> Slaves operated twelve winch-powered lifts in the Colosseum so that scenery, props, animals, and gladiators could be brought up from the hypogeum to the arena. The theatrical tradition was continued in the showmanship of Elisha Graves Otis' demonstration of his groundbreaking safety hoister at the New York Crystal Palace in 1854. Otis stood on a platform as an assistant axed through the rope by which the platform was suspended and reportedly uttered, 'All safe gentlemen, all safe', to the stunned audience after he dropped only a few inches.<sup>25</sup> Otis' macho demonstration of power and control was such an effective publicity stunt that it has been accepted in popular history – a narrative propagated by Otis (the company), still the largest manufacturer of lifts in the world – as the birth of the elevator even though there are examples of lift installations from the 1830s onwards and the demonstration was scarcely mentioned in the New York press at the time.<sup>26</sup>

For Le Corbusier, lifts were central to the future of the city. Dismissing criticisms of the unreliability of the elevator, he claimed, idiosyncratically, that the problem was a phenomenon curious to France:

France alone has a monopoly on the fatal notice printed on a placard set askew on the wall: *The elevator is out of order*. My American auditors roared with laughter when I told them that the obstacle always raised by European opponents against my suggestions for a "radiant city" was this: "Elevators don't work!" [...] It may be said that in New York the construction of elevators has reached a moving technical and

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<sup>21</sup> Franciso Mujica, qtd. in Andreas Bernard, *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals were White* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> Leo Hollis, *Cities Are Good For You: The Genius Of The Metropolis* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. 233.

<sup>24</sup> Niall Martin, 'The (Dis)Locative Effect of Noise: Globalisation, Disorientation and Noise in Marc Isaacs' Lift', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 57 (2016), 62-76, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> Hollis, *Cities*, p. 232.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 4.

plastic perfection. A conquest of modern times, a product of selection, of worthy architecture; a feast for the eyes and the spirit.<sup>27</sup>

This acclamation of the lift, written over fifty years ago, is echoed in more recent architectural discussion, ‘A good elevator user experience is more than just a ride – it’s an emotional experience that combines aesthetics, accessibility, comfort, safety, reliability and eco-efficiency’.<sup>28</sup> However, while a ride in the lift in the fiction of the tower block is often depicted as emotional, it is the antithesis, in every respect, of the experience described above.

Despite its significance to the history and representation of the tower block, geographer Stephen Graham writes that the lift has been widely neglected, by social scientists and architects as well as humanities scholars.<sup>29</sup> Even architectural historians, Glendinning and Muthesius, make scant reference to the lift in *Tower Block*, a comprehensive tome on the architecture and politics of the high-rise, informed by visits to every block in the UK.<sup>30</sup>

In *Fictions of the City*, an examination of mass housing in films and novels set in London and Paris, Matthew Taunton briefly uses the lift as a lens through which to consider the alienation and isolation associated with tower blocks in the films *Wonderland* and *Nil by Mouth*. By contrasting two lift scenes, Taunton explores the characters’ relationships not only with their immediate environment but also with the city beyond. He describes the lift in *Nil by Mouth* as ‘an inconvenient and perilous interstitial realm’, which neatly sums up three of the literary lift’s defining characteristics.<sup>31</sup> When a character uses a lift in a book or a film the interaction often facilitates an introduction to other common areas of the building also important in defining the setting; for example, in these two scenes Taunton describes ‘vaguely menacing corridors’, a ‘heavily vandalised hallway’, and ‘humdrum spaces’.<sup>32</sup>

The only extensive text on the cultural significance of the lift is *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator*, by Andreas Bernard.<sup>33</sup> Bernard comments that in literature ‘The doors of modern elevators open and close like the curtains of a theater’ and asks why the

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<sup>27</sup> Le Corbusier, *Cathedrals*, p. 62.

<sup>28</sup> Felix Mara, ‘Floors, Stairs, Lifts and Wayfinding’, *The Architect’s Journal*, 20 December 2012, <<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/specification/floors-stairs-lifts-and-wayfinding/8640623.article>> [accessed 28 June 2018].

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Graham, ‘Super-tall and Ultra-deep: The Cultural Politics of the Elevator’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 31 (2014) 239–65, p. 239.

<sup>30</sup> Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland* (London: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Taunton, *Fictions of the City* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 173.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173–74.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard, *Lifted*.

elevator is so important in the spatial structure of urban stories.<sup>34</sup> His response is that the lift acts as a tool for coalescing narratives in the socially diffuse twentieth-century city: as an intimate yet public everyday space, it is a setting in which relationships can be formed when characters and plotlines converge. He argues that when the lift breaks down mid-flight, the awkwardness of proximity gives way to solidarity and that the sealed box encourages confession – a century ago the beautiful and intricately designed wooden cabs in buildings such as the New York Public Library were often compared to confessionals. Bernard states that no other public space can be as secluded which means it has been exploited for clandestine romantic encounters. He also presents the lift as a site of transformation and suggests that the privacy allows an individual to ‘let his guard down’ or, for those leading a double life, the opportunity for a change of costume. Finally, Bernard suggests that the lift can play a symbolic role. He draws on Arthur Hailey’s novel *Hotel*, the story of an independent hotel in New Orleans in which the management is fighting to save the business. The main narrative function of the lift is to bring the characters of four separate plotlines together but the second function is symbolic: the unreliable and dilapidated lift is mentioned throughout the novel as an indicator of the state of the hotel. Nevertheless, the lift to which Bernard refers – in fiction set in apartment blocks, hotels, offices and department stores – is a different kind of space to lifts located in local authority tower blocks.

In British realist fiction set in tower blocks we learn more about the common areas – corridors, lobbies, stairwells and walkways – than the flats in which the characters live.<sup>35</sup> It is the lift, however, which is established as a mythologised space and is integral to depictions of the fragmented nature of high-rise life. It is the synecdoche used to represent the broken promise of the utopian vision: the perceived failure of the high-rise used as social housing, a stance taken, for example, by Peter Hall who writes that ‘Ideas, forged in the Parisian intelligentsia of the 1920s [...] [are] at best questionable, at worst catastrophic’.<sup>36</sup> Kim Duff, in her discussion on British literature and urban space, writes that ‘the high rise concentrates

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<sup>34</sup> Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 243.

<sup>35</sup> There is no perfect word to describe the internal space – that which is inside the building but outside the flats – of the tower block but throughout this discussion I use the word ‘common’. Critical authors writing on high-rise space use a range of terms including ‘public’, ‘semi-public’, ‘shared’ and ‘communal’ but each has its inaccuracies. I think that ‘common’, defined by the OED as ‘Of or belonging to the community at large’ most closely describes a space that is for the use of and belongs to the whole community in some sense. I am aware of the potentially deprecatory class connotations of the term but I treat it as a neutral descriptor which does not have the associations derived from social use and meaning which underpin distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ tower block space. "common, adj. and adv." *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], Oxford University Press, December 2018, <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/37216](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/37216)> [Accessed 8 February 2019].

<sup>36</sup> Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), p. 219.

the social discontent of the city into the smaller container of the tower block'.<sup>37</sup> I compress this further and argue that the social discontent of the tower block is concentrated into the lift.

In this thesis the lift provides a powerful lens through which to focus my exploration into the gendering of vertical space. As the social anthropologist, Hazel Andrews, writes:

Spaces can be read in relation to how they are encoded with ideas of masculinity and femininity. As such gendered space arises not only in the assignation of meaning but also in the practice and embodiment of sociocultural identities. The intersection between space and gender therefore reflects existing beliefs and practices related to sexually differentiated practices and allows for the production and reproduction of gender relations.<sup>38</sup>

Through my analysis of the fiction, I argue that the lift is represented as a highly gendered space and that men and women use, experience, and shape it differently. This has important implications – for example when it is vandalised or out of action, as the lifts in the fiction of the tower block often are, the repercussions for women and girls are far greater than the repercussions for men and boys.

In the four chapters of this thesis, I consider the intersection and co-production of space and gender in the tower block through a close examination of the role of the lift in the production and reproduction of gender relations. In each chapter, I close read one fictional text alongside a wider body of fiction and theory in order to elucidate four distinct, yet overlapping, themes in the gendering of the lift: liminality, disgust, mobilities and play.

In Chapter 1, I consider the liminality of the lift and its role as a public and a private space, concentrating on Alan Spence's short story 'Greensleeves' (1977) through a reading of Marc Augé's work on non-place and supermodernity.<sup>39</sup> I argue that the ostensibly liminal non-places of the high-rise – lifts, corridors and stairwells – are actually coded as public space, particularly for women, in the fiction of the tower block. Characters interact with coded spaces in distinctly gendered ways: male characters' navigation of the space is largely unimpaired; women, however, experience immobility and confinement. In Chapter 2, I analyse the lift as a site of disgust with a focus on Livi Michael's novel *Under a Thin Moon*

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<sup>37</sup> Kim Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space After Thatcher* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Hazel Andrews, 'Gendered Space', in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* ed. by Wai Ching Angela Wong, Maithree Wickramasinghe, Renée C. Hoogland and Nancy A. Naples (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016) <doi:10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss326>.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Spence, 'Greensleeves', in *Its Colours They Are Fine* (London: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1977); Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2006).

(1994) in relation to Sara Ahmed's work on the performativity of disgust.<sup>40</sup> I posit that it is primarily male characters who shape the material space of the lift; this reflects the gendering of agency in the tower block as a whole. The gendered appropriation of the lift makes the space less welcoming, as its disgusting and vandalised nature discourages and restricts its use. Chapter 3 considers the impact of the lift on mobilities in the context of the 'new mobilities paradigm' and the inequality of mobility, primarily using Alan Beard's short story 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky' (1997).<sup>41</sup> I examine how the stuck lift is used as an important, recurring narrative device in the fiction of the tower block. The broken-down lift has a far greater impact on the mobilities of women than men. The stalled lift is also used metaphorically to illuminate the representation of the confinement and atrophy of tower block residents, both male and female. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine the lift as a playful site in Stephen Kelman's novel *Pigeon English* (2011) using Caillois' work on the sociology of play and returning to the writing of Lefebvre and Massey on play and childhood.<sup>42</sup> I consider the dialectic of social space and social practice and show how the paidic use of the lift in high-rise fiction extends the questions of gender discussed in the previous chapters. Although boys enjoy playing in the lift and the other common spaces of the tower block, their actions can contribute to the production of a disgusting and frightening social space for others. In considering how child characters use common spaces differently, I argue that the appropriation of the spaces by boys results in the exclusion of girls and women.

I close with a postscript on Grenfell Tower in which I reflect on the changing and future narratives of social housing and the tower block and the relationship between fiction and prevailing media and political discourses.

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<sup>40</sup> Livi Michael, *Under a Thin Moon* (London: Minerva, 1994); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Alan Beard, 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky', in *Taking Doreen out of the Sky* (Birmingham: Tindal Street Fiction Group, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Kelman, *Pigeon English* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

## Chapter 1: The Liminal Lift

The lift – when it is in order – is freely used by all. [However] [...] if it should happen that Madame Marquiseaux gets into the lift at the same time as Madame Orłowska, she will make some tiny and perhaps unconscious gesture signifying that it is her lift, of which she condescends to share the usufruct for a short moment.

Georges Perec, *Life A User's Manual*<sup>43</sup>

Le Corbusier and subsequent modernist architects such as the Smithsons in the UK aspired to create 'streets in the sky'; in contrast to a street on the ground, the tower block and its common spaces trouble distinctions between public and private space.<sup>44</sup> In relation to a terrace of houses, for example, the street is manifestly public but how public is a walkway, stairwell or lift that runs through a block of flats? The ambiguity of such space is illustrated in the interaction between Madames Marquiseaux and Orłowska and captured in Niall Martin's suggestion that the lift is, 'Neither public nor private, inside nor outside', and Bernard's argument that it is of 'indeterminate status' and 'semi-public'.<sup>45</sup>

The unclear status of tower block space is reflected in Marc Augé's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, in which he argues that place is conducive to social life but that non-place, 'the opposite of utopia', does not contain any 'organic society'.<sup>46</sup> One of the sites he considers is the housing estate of the French *banlieue* 'where people do not live together and which is never situated in the centre of anything'.<sup>47</sup> Many of the suburbs of French cities are marginal sites, associated with high crime, poverty, and unemployment; the residents – large numbers of whom are immigrants – face both physical and social isolation.<sup>48</sup> Unlike the estates of the peripheral *banlieues*, the UK's development of tower blocks aimed to build high-density housing centrally, on land made

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<sup>43</sup> Georges Perec, *Life A User's Manual* (London: Collins Harvill, 1988), pp. 215-216; Perec was a friend and colleague of Lefebvre and *Life A User's Manual* is described by Peta Mitchell as an 'architext', in which 'architecture and literature are so thoroughly imbricated that book and building become one.' Peta Mitchell, 'Constructing the Architext: Georges Perec's *Life a User's Manual*', *Mosaic*, 37 (2004), 1-16, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Le Corbusier's influence was apparent in the Smithson's design of deck access housing. 'The concept of "streets in the sky" [...] [was] first identified in the unsuccessful entry by Alison and Peter Smithson in the 1952 Golden Lane housing competition.' Ian Colquhoun, *The RIBA Book of British Housing: 1900 to the present day* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2008), p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Martin, (Dis)Locative Effect, p. 66; Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 177.

<sup>46</sup> Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 112.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

<sup>48</sup> See Loïc Waquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008).

available through slum clearance and the destruction resulting from the Blitz. However, despite this apparent centrality, as Cuming writes, ‘even when they [estates] are situated in inner-city areas, their construction and design has often resulted in a boundedness and segregation from mainstream metropolitan life’.<sup>49</sup> I suggest that the isolation and lack of community Cuming identifies is germane to fictional depictions of the inner-city high-rises of Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham and London.

‘Greensleeves’ is a short story from the Scottish writer Alan Spence’s *Its Colours They Are Fine*. The collection of thirteen loosely-linked stories, set in Glasgow, recounts fragments of the lives of the working-class people of the city. Spence writes with compassion about the difficult circumstances of everyday life and there is a powerful political undercurrent to his work. ‘Greensleeves’ is a poignant reflection on the place of elderly people in society but in addition to her old age, the unnamed protagonist is disempowered by gender, class, poverty, and through her interaction with the 22-storey tower block itself. John Burns argues that the paralysis prevalent among Spence’s characters is likely to have been inspired by James Joyce’s *Dubliners*.<sup>50</sup>

‘Greensleeves’ is set over the course of one evening and through backstory and the mundane events which take place, the protagonist reveals a deep sense of isolation and loneliness. The tower block and the lift are far more than background in this contemplative piece. The setting, which has a strong physical presence and impacts greatly on the protagonist, is fundamental to the narrative and is predominantly experienced as non-place, a place of transience in which human beings operate in a state of anonymity. Augé’s examples of non-place include ‘the mobile cabins called ‘means of transport’ (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airport and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets’.<sup>51</sup> Many of these non-places can be defined as ‘inherently liminal’.<sup>52</sup> In this chapter, I consider how it can be useful to examine the lift – as well as other common spaces of the high-rise such as stairwells, corridors and walkways – as non-place. Despite the intentions of architects such as the Smithsons, these spaces are primarily thoroughfares: their function

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<sup>49</sup> Emily Cuming, ‘Private Lives, Social Housing: Female Coming-of-Age stories on the British Council Estate’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 7 (2013), 328–45, p. 330.

<sup>50</sup> John Burns, *Alan Spence’s Its Colours They Are Fine And Way To Go* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 79.

<sup>52</sup> Kathryn Bird “‘Weren’t all true nomads at their happiest in limbo?’: Hauntings in Non-Places in Hilary Mantel’s *Beyond Black* and Nicola Barker’s *Darkmans*’ in *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* ed. by Dara Downey, Ian Kinane and Elizabeth Parker (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, Ltd, 2016), pp. 111–34 (p. 111).



is to allow people to move from one place to another; they are thresholds between public space and private space.<sup>53</sup>

Whereas Bernard writes of relationships formed in lifts, in ‘Greensleeves’, Spence represents the lift as a space in which people will not even make eye contact:

Nobody would utter a word, all lost in themselves [...] everyone staring straight ahead or looking down at their feet, anything rather than catch another’s eye. Sometimes it was just surliness, like the young man from the seventeenth floor with his neat suit and his newspaper and his rolled umbrella [...] More often though, the people who didn’t talk just seemed too tired or preoccupied to make the effort.<sup>54</sup>

Spence’s lift is a space of frequent encounter but infrequent interaction – the protagonist knows fellow residents only by sight. The lift expresses the loneliness and discontent of the tower block and both spaces are depicted as places of transience and anonymity. In ‘Greensleeves’, and the other texts I discuss here, high-rise living is characterised by its impermanence: residents often want to relocate – the tower block is temporary ‘housing’ rather than ‘home’.<sup>55</sup> As cultural commentator Lynsey Hanley writes, ‘Council homes were never intended to be holding cages for the poor and disenfranchised, but somehow, that’s how they ended up.’<sup>56</sup> Characters are unable to move up and down the block when the lift is broken and they are unable to move out of the block itself, a space often portrayed as broken too.<sup>57</sup> The anonymity the protagonist experiences when using the lift illuminates her isolated existence; it draws attention to the magnitude of the building and the number of residents and also questions the presence of community:

The lifts were about the only place she ever saw her neighbours. It was like passing through a strange town and just catching glimpses of the people who lived there. Descending or rising through layer after layer, and every layer a few more lives she would never know.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> In 1952 the Smithsons asserted that ‘streets would be places and not corridors or balconies, thoroughfares where there are shops, post boxes, telephone kiosks’. Colquhoun, *RIBA Book of British Housing*, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.

<sup>55</sup> In ‘Taking Doreen out of the Sky’, Mark says, ‘I’d seen Peacock Towers go up when I was a kid [...] Ever since, people have been queuing to get out’. Beard, ‘Doreen’, p. 57.

<sup>56</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta Books, 2007), p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Tories have always tended to see it [council housing] as compensatory and temporary: you use it when you can’t buy your own, and only *until* you can buy your own’. Lynsey Hanley, ‘Municipal Dreams by John Boughton review’, *Guardian*, 19 April 2018, Society Books, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/19/municipal-dreams-john-boughton-review>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>58</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.

The woman compares travelling in the lift not to walking along a familiar street, perhaps recognising people to say hello to or stopping to chat – as envisaged in the modernists’ ‘streets in the sky’ – but to passing through an unfamiliar, more anonymous place, a ‘strange town’.<sup>59</sup>

In high-rise fiction, lifts are often portrayed as cramped, claustrophobic and coffin-like. Spence, however, describes not only the lift’s interior but also its journey through the shaft and this creates the impression of a more capacious space, ‘Descending or rising through layer after layer’.<sup>60</sup> The use of the word layer – rather than storey or floor – conjures up the strata of the earth and the atmosphere. In another passage, the woman refers to the ‘empty bottomless feeling she sometimes got on the lift’, reminiscent of the bottomless pit associated with hell; once again the magnitude of the tower block is emphasised.<sup>61</sup> When we see large numbers of people in the lift, it serves to accentuate the publicness and anonymity of the space, ‘the lifts were always breaking down because too many people would crowd on at once. And there was always sure to be somebody loud and drunk’.<sup>62</sup> Spence’s portrayal of the lift and its shaft as large spaces highlights the protagonist’s isolation, ‘The lift would creak and shudder its way up and up and she would feel the emptiness below her, increasing as she got further from the ground, suspended, supportless, a sheer black drop into nothing at all’.<sup>63</sup> As Augé writes, ‘The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude’.<sup>64</sup> In the non-place of the lift, people become detached from their identity and are only identifiable as a mass group, in this case ‘neighbours’.<sup>65</sup>

Marc Isaacs’ *Lift* (2001) is a short film in which the residents of a UK high-rise block are recorded riding up and down in a lift. The location of the block is unspecified – the only external image of the tower is a brief close up shot at the start of the film – the remainder is filmed from inside the lift. The location of the tower block is ostensibly unimportant – this film could be shot in any lift, reflecting Augé’s comment on the similitude of non-place.<sup>66</sup> It

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<sup>59</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Revelation 9.1-12 or Dante’s Circles of Hell; Spence, *Colours* p. 170.

<sup>62</sup> Spence, ‘Greensleeves’, p. 162.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 103.

<sup>65</sup> Alex Arch, “Non-Places” – *The Theory of Supermodernity*, online video recording, YouTube, 27 March 2017, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1rivX0hi2w>> [accessed 28 June 2018].

<sup>66</sup> Marc Isaacs, *Lift*, online video recording, YouTube, 22 September 2009, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJNAvyLCTik&t=7s>> [accessed 28 June 2018].

is interesting, however, to consider how the film *is* located. In addition to accents from around the world, the younger residents speak Multicultural London English (MLE) and the older residents speak with cockney accents.<sup>67</sup> There is an interesting dichotomy in witnessing the vestige of a traditional working-class community in the dislocated non-place of the lift.

As does 'Greensleeves', *Lift* shows the complexities of forming relationships in liminal space and the impact that the space has upon them. Niall Martin writes that Isaacs' lift is 'the setting for encounters between strangers who are also neighbours, people who live on top of each other but signally fail to constitute the 'vertical community' idealised by the urban planners that once saw in high-rise residential blocks the replacements for streets of terraced housing'.<sup>68</sup> Isaacs' lift is narrow, cramped and claustrophobic and the discomfort of proximity is apparent: as in 'Greensleeves', eyes are often downcast. Neither the protagonist nor the tower block in 'Greensleeves' is named and the anonymity increases the sense of alienation; this character could be any elderly woman living in any high-rise development. The hostile environment and the protagonist's vulnerability as a single woman are reiterated in a scene in which a bullying salesman knocks at her door and attempts to sell her a mortise lock:

[Salesman] 'But ah hope ye don't mind me askin ye, d'ye live here [by] yerself?'  
'Well, yes ...' she said.  
'Aye well,' he said. 'Ye only huv tae read the papers these days tae see the kind a things that's happenin aw the time. D'ye know whit ah mean?'<sup>69</sup>

The dichotomy between the local and the supermodern seen in *Lift* is also apparent in 'Greensleeves'. The story can be interpreted as a comment on the lift and the tower block as non-place, yet the characters speak a dialect which is unequivocally Scots. This produces a collision between a form of speech firmly rooted in the local and the disconnected and displaced experience of supermodernity.

The high-rise in 'Greensleeves' is described as '22 storeys of concrete and glass. Boxes on boxes, and hers right on the top'. This block is portrayed as the converse of homely or characterful and the flat's location, 'right on the top', implies remoteness. The word 'box'

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<sup>67</sup> Sanjana Varghese, 'Big up MLE - the origins of London's 21st century slang', *New Statesman*, 26 August 2017, <<https://www.newstatesman.com/2017/08/big-mle-origins-londons-21st-century-slang>> [accessed 15 November 2018]; The London location is also revealed through residents' conversations.

<sup>68</sup> Martin, '(Dis)Locative Effect', p. 66.

<sup>69</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 168.

is often used as a disparaging term for both flats and lifts.<sup>70</sup> In ‘Taking Doreen out of the Sky’ (1997), Alan Beard’s short story about a family trapped in a tower block by poverty, flats are referred to as ‘clapboard boxes’ and in Kerry Hudson’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma* (2013), the lift is described as a ‘piss-stinking metal box’.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the association of the lift with another type of box, the coffin – an antithesis of hope and mobility but perhaps the ultimate in private space – is a recurring one in tower block narratives.<sup>72</sup> Will Self, in his short story ‘161’ (2002) written during a residency in a flat on the twentieth floor of a block in Liverpool, describes the lift as a ‘pock-marked steel casket’; the tower was soon to be demolished.<sup>73</sup>

Bereft of any sense of homeliness, describing a flat as a box conjures an image of a container into which people without agency are put. The protagonist of ‘Greensleeves’ has been evicted from her previous home in a tenement which she fondly remembers as ‘A decent red sandstone block, clean and solid and old’, so that the building could be demolished. In contrast to the extensive descriptions of the tower block’s common areas, there is minimal comment on the interior of the woman’s flat, although it is apparent that she has little affection for her new home. Ironically, once inside the flat, the thing she enjoys most is looking out, ‘And the view from these windows was one thing she was grateful for, some consolation for all the rest’.<sup>74</sup>

Research has shown that residents’ experiences of living in tower blocks are worse if it was not their decision to live there.<sup>75</sup> In a podcast, in which the poet Paul Farley – who was five years old when his family was moved to the Netherley Estate in Liverpool – discusses his poem ‘Brutalist’, he comments:

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<sup>70</sup> The French philosopher, Bachelard, wrote, ‘the inhabitants of the big city [Paris] live in superimposed boxes’. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> Kerry Hudson, *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma* (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 136.

<sup>72</sup> In *Our Fathers* – a novel about generational conflict surrounding the rise and fall of the tower block – when faced with his grandfather’s imminent death, Jamie Bawn comments, ‘even when they [the lifts] were working, you couldn’t fit a coffin in them. It was a design fault: you couldn’t fit a coffin’. Andrew O’Hagan, *Our Fathers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 227.

<sup>73</sup> Will Self, ‘161’, in *Dr Mukti and Other Tales of Woe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 163; Roald Dahl’s short story, ‘The Way Up to Heaven’ subverts the dominant portrayal of the gendered space of the lift when a woman leaves her husband trapped in a lift in their home and goes away for six weeks. Roald Dahl, ‘The Way Up to Heaven’, *The New Yorker*, 27 February 1954, p. 28, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1954/02/27/the-way-up-to-heaven>> [accessed 12 February 2019].

<sup>74</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 165.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Gifford, ‘The Consequences of Living in High-Rise Buildings’, *Architectural Science Review*, 50 (2007), 1-16.

I think a lot of harm was done then by moving those people out in that way and as I get older it's starting to come into focus as a horrible kind of urban clearance that happened in the 50s and 60s and into the 70s [...] Le Corbusier said that thing about a house being a machine for living in; I honestly have to say I think Le Corbusier houses are machines for dying in.<sup>76</sup>

Death is prevalent in the texts: in 'Greensleeves' there is a sense that the woman is trapped in a holding pen waiting to die; in *Under a Thin Moon*, a story of four women living on a council estate amid a debilitating cycle of poverty, one of the women commits suicide; in 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky' we see the demise of a job and a relationship; and *Pigeon English*, a coming-of-age story about gang violence, ends with the murder of the protagonist. Throughout Isaac's *Lift* we see a bluebottle, a metaphor for 'a fly on the wall' perhaps, buzzing loudly as it walks up the side of the lift. In the final image, however, the fly is dying, struggling on its back on the floor, and it is hard not to think of the association between flies and death.<sup>77</sup> The death of the fly perhaps alludes to the death of tenants who have spoken of serious mental and physical health problems, the death of a sense of community among this diverse population and the death of the utopian vision of the high-rise.

The social and physical isolation of the tower block in 'Greensleeves' is illuminated by the lack of local amenities, 'no Handy Stores or Indian grocers here'.<sup>78</sup> When the protagonist attempts to buy some milk from a van one evening she discovers that both lifts are out of order. She knows that even if she were able to walk down the stairs she would be too frail to get up them again, 'She was stuck here. Trapped. Twenty-two floors. All the twos. Two little ducks. Halfway to Heaven. Top of the house'.<sup>79</sup> When she hears the jingle of an ice cream van, she remembers the folk song 'Greensleeves' from her childhood, 'all sadness and grace, all minstrels and knights and ladies in high towers, imprisoned'.<sup>80</sup> The protagonist is powerless, and we are presented with a twentieth century twist on a classic theme of Gothic literature – the damsel in distress imprisoned in a tower and in need of rescue.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Paul Farley, "Paul Farley reads his poem 'Brutalist'", *Audioboom*, 24 March 2011,

<<https://audioboom.com/posts/311423-paul-farley-reads-his-poem-brutalist>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>77</sup> Flies are commonly associated with death and decaying matter and used to represent messages of death and disasters. For example in Emily Dickinson's poem beginning 'I heard a fly buzz when I died'; Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (USA: Start Publishing LLC, 2017), pp. 182-3.

<sup>78</sup> Spence, 'Greensleeves', p. 169.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>81</sup> See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Kerstin W. Shands, *Embracing Space: Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999).

Augé does not propose that supermodernity is all-encompassing, the perception of space is subjective. The woman in ‘Greensleeves’ has a more ambivalent relationship with the lift and her neighbours than in the other texts discussed in this thesis. As the only setting in which the woman sees her fellow residents, there are occasions on which she enjoys using the lift – at weekends for example when the atmosphere is convivial – although, ultimately, the fleeting periods of companionship serve to reinforce her customary solitude:

Sometimes it [the lift] was nice at the weekend, people coming home in the evening, glad for the moment to be free. She liked it then, everybody was happier, more relaxed, more ready to talk and joke and laugh. But the lift would gradually empty towards the top and by the time it reached her floor she was usually alone again.<sup>82</sup>

This is a rare example of an adult character expressing some affection for the lift, maybe because ‘Greensleeves’ was published in 1977, before the prevalent discourse had become quite so entrenched. However, even here Spence uses the lift and the presence, then absence of other residents to emphasise the protagonist’s loneliness. Isaacs uses the lift similarly; as Niall Martin writes, ‘Obviously inappropriate within a lift, this voice [Isaacs’] asks questions which are in every sense too big for this space’.<sup>83</sup> As the residents learn to trust Isaacs they reveal intimate details about their mental and physical health; they talk about love, death and religion and allow insight into their primarily unhappy lives. The confinement and the perceived privacy of the lift allows, or perhaps cajoles, residents into speaking openly. Isaacs himself comments, ‘it’s a very pure film because it’s a unique space in which to deal with those themes’.<sup>84</sup> Isaacs’ *Lift* echoes Bernard’s assertion that the awkwardness of proximity gives way to solidarity and that the sealed box encourages confession. However, in the fiction I analyse, the lift is portrayed as a public space, not a private space conducive to revelation.

Throughout ‘Greensleeves’, the lift and the tower block are represented as gendered spaces. For the protagonist, the physicality and technology of the lift are portrayed as frightening which provides insight into her anxious personality, ‘At first she’d been terrified of the lifts, the rickety way they clanked and jarred from floor to floor. But gradually she’d become used to it’.<sup>85</sup> The lift is also used to emphasise her solitude, ‘although sometimes the

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<sup>82</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.

<sup>83</sup> Martin, ‘Dis-Locative Effect’, p. 71.

<sup>84</sup> James Quinn, *This Much is True – 14 Directors on Documentary Filmmaking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 261.

<sup>85</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.

fear came back, especially if she was alone'.<sup>86</sup> Whereas the lift is often a formidable or lonely place for the woman and impacts greatly on her mobility, for boys it is a playful space, 'One of their favourite tricks was to press all the buttons so that the next one to use the lift would stop at every floor. That was one that seemed to annoy everybody, and the boys were always in danger of being thumped for it'.<sup>87</sup> The complexities of neighbours who are also strangers sharing the space of the lift, and the tension between community and isolation, are intimately connected with its history. Bernard points out the concerns surrounding established spatial orders when elevators were first introduced into the most expensive apartment buildings during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

The elevator cab intensified the problematic relationship between private and public space, intimacy and anonymity already evident in the stairwell [...] how great must have been the challenge to the order of communal life represented by an elevator whose passengers are forced to stand crowded together in a small space?<sup>88</sup>

The issues are further complicated when gender is taken into consideration. The mapping of gender and space has long been identified in classic codings between a masculine public sphere and feminine private, often domestic, sphere. Such distinctions have been considered as important – if idealised – aspects of social order, from the salons of eighteenth-century Europe to the restriction of women, characterised as reproductive labourers, to 'hidden' private space in classical Greece.<sup>89</sup> However, such clear distinctions between male public and female private space are not always evident in practice. As the social geographer Liz Bondi writes, 'not only do both women and men traverse public and private domains in their daily lives, but also many of the activities and interactions characteristic of daily life take place in spaces that are not unambiguously situated in either "public" or "private" domains'.<sup>90</sup>

The following extract, from Karen Campbell's novel *This Is Where I Am* (2014), demonstrates the gendered coding of the lift's space. The narrator is Abdi, a Somalian refugee who lives with his young daughter in a tower block in Glasgow:

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<sup>86</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>88</sup> Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 192.

<sup>89</sup> See Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>90</sup> Liz Bondi, 'Gender, Class and Urban Space: Public and Private Space in Contemporary Urban Landscapes', *Urban Geography*, 19 (1998), 160-85, p. 164.

The last time I took a lift, there was a teenage girl lying inside it. Her eyes were closed, and there was a needle protruding from the crook of her inner elbow [...] I knelt to check the girl was breathing, saw a spit-bubble at her lips [...] Her lips moved and I pretended she was fine. Left her there, sliding up and down in the metal cage, and crept inside and locked my door.<sup>91</sup>

The image of the helpless girl being transported repeatedly up and down the tower in the ‘cage’ is a disturbing one. We are presented with another damsel in distress, a passive female, and a man in control – although this unconscious young woman has taken opiates which numb any distress she experiences. This is an intimate space – the detail of the spit-bubble evokes the lift’s sense of confinement and the proximity of the characters – yet Abdi regards it as a public space, a space over which he has no responsibility or ownership and that he can dissociate from, a place for encounters with anonymous ‘neighbours who are also strangers’.<sup>92</sup> Abdi lives in the same block as the girl yet this is not impetus enough for him to help her even though he is, fundamentally, a good character. He can retreat to the private space of his flat and ‘pretend’ that the situation is not happening, although the use of the word ‘crept’ hints at his shame. Abdi’s response to the lift as a public space is unusual for a male character, perhaps because as a refugee and single parent he occupies a marginal social position. The final line of this quotation, when Abdi locks his door, can be likened to the final sentence of ‘Greensleeves’, ‘she closed the door and turned the key, locking herself in for the night’.<sup>93</sup> Both examples emphasise the delineation between the spaces of the tower block which are coded as public and private. Similarly, in *Species of Spaces*, Georges Perec describes an apartment’s front door as a threshold: ‘The door breaks space in two, splits it, prevents osmosis, imposes a partition. On one side, me and *my place*, the private, the domestic [...] on the other side, other people, the world, the public, politics.’<sup>94</sup> For the characters I discuss here, there is little or no ambiguity that the common space, that which is outside the flat but within the confines of the building, is anything other than public.

Doris Lessing’s ‘The Mother of the Child in Question’ (‘The Mother’), a short story about home, maternal love and the role of the welfare state, provides an excellent example of gendered representations of space which are coded and represented as ‘public’ and ‘private’ – particularly the latter which is relatively unexplored in the fiction of the tower block. A social worker, Stephen Bentley, attempts to persuade the mother of a working-class

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<sup>91</sup> Karen Campbell, *This Is Where I Am* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 27.

<sup>92</sup> Martin, (Dis)locative, p. 66.

<sup>93</sup> Spence, ‘Colours’, p. 170.

<sup>94</sup> Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 37.



immigrant family to send their disabled daughter to a special school.<sup>95</sup> ‘The Mother’ appears in *London Observed: Stories and Sketches* (1992) but the setting is not identified in the story and, contained within the footprint of the estate, it has a placeless feel which contributes to the sense of anonymity and isolation; this tower block, like the tower block in ‘Greensleeves’, is unnamed. The non-place of the block’s public space contrasts strikingly with the private space of the flat, which is narrated as intimate and feminine. The depiction is encapsulated in this definition of exterior and interior by the architectural historian Gerard Rey Lico:

So men are engaged in erecting grand and impressive edifices, skyscrapers [...] that “project” and leave a sore-thumb effect on the landscape. But these male erections are usually cold, oppressive, and inhuman. Yet, the confinement of women in the enclosed space of domesticity yields positive results: a domestic interior of women that is warm, rich, nurturing, and comfortable.<sup>96</sup>

Lessing uses the leitmotif of the lift as a shorthand or code to set the scene and to delineate the public and the private space in the opening paragraph, ‘The lift smelled bad: someone had been sick in it. He [Stephen] walked up grey urine-smelling stairs’.<sup>97</sup> These familiar elicitors of disgust – vomit and urine – conjure a grimy, hostile environment, a public environment. When Stephen enters the flat he is thrust into a soft world full of colour: a ‘red plush sofa’; ‘polished’, ‘shining’, ‘brightly coloured’ objects; the mother, Mrs Khan, wears ‘flowered pink silk’ and a ‘pink gauzy scarf’.<sup>98</sup> As Cuming states, ‘depictions of interiors and housing take on unique and imaginative forms in the context of a domestic environment that has sometimes been negatively associated with homogeneity and social marginalisation’.<sup>99</sup> The reader is taken from outside the block, painted as a filthy and deserted expanse, through the common spaces of the stairwell, lift and corridors and into the private interior which is small and claustrophobic, ‘overfilled overclean’.<sup>100</sup>

Mrs Khan is ensconced at home caring for her daughter, Shireen, while Mr Khan is out at work. The female characters remain inside when Stephen and Hassan (a young son) leave the flat at the end of the story. Only male characters are witnessed outside the block:

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<sup>95</sup> Doris Lessing, ‘The Mother of the Child in Question’, in *London Observed: Stories and Sketches* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

<sup>96</sup> Gerard Rey Lico, ‘Architecture and sexuality: the politics of gendered space’, *Humanities Diliman: A Philippine Journal of Humanities*, 2 (2001), 30-44, p. 39.

<sup>97</sup> Lessing, ‘The Mother’, p. 36.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>99</sup> Cuming, *Housing*, p. 167.

<sup>100</sup> Lessing, ‘The Mother’, p. 38.

Stephen, Hassan and an old man with a walking stick. In Mr Khan's absence, Hassan is the representative, even though he has older sisters, and when Stephen mentions a charge for the school, Hassan replies, 'My father has the money'. Neither female character has a voice: Mrs Khan's English is poor and Shireen cannot speak. However, when Stephen asks Hassan, 'Did your father tell you to be here?', Hassan replies 'No, sir. My mother said I must be here'.<sup>101</sup> The social worker realises that it is neither Mr Khan nor the state in control but Mrs Khan, 'That woman, that *mother*, would not admit her little girl was simple [...] Mrs Khan was watching him, proud she had won yet another victory against those busybodies'.<sup>102</sup>

The historical association of women and domestic space establishes the home as a place of feminine containment and oppression, a depiction which tallies with that of 'Greensleeves', *Under a Thin Moon* and 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky'. In contrast, in Lessing's story it also acts as a space of resistance and empowerment which contrasts with female experience of the public space of the tower block. This reading echoes bell hooks' description of the value of 'homeplace' as a refuge for black women, 'that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we heal our wounds and become whole'.<sup>103</sup>

In the fictional texts analysed for this thesis, I had expected to encounter an ambiguity in the depictions of the common, internal spaces of the high-rise, in line with Bernard who argues that such spaces fill 'an unstable intermediate position between the private space behind closed apartment doors and the public space outside the building'.<sup>104</sup> I have, however, established that the ostensibly liminal spaces of the tower block are clearly coded as public and that it is a flat's front door which is the threshold between private and public space. Characters interact with these coded spaces in distinctly gendered ways: male characters traverse the common space of the tower block and its environs whereas female characters are confined to their flats or, as in the case of the teenage girl in *This Is Where I Am*, trapped inside the lift. When female characters do use the lift, it is largely portrayed as fetid and frightening and a space of encounter rather than interaction. In Chapter 2, I develop this discussion to examine how the experience of disgust associated with the lift contributes to the gendering of vertical space.

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<sup>101</sup> Lessing, 'The Mother', p. 40.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>103</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 49.

<sup>104</sup> Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 177.

## Chapter 2: The Disgusting Lift

The goal of civilizing manners is to repress the disgusting, to put it out of mind or at least out of mind in public spaces.

William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*<sup>105</sup>

In Zadie Smith's novel *NW* (2012), the narrator mentions, in an off-hand manner, 'lifts that were to be avoided almost as soon as they were built'.<sup>106</sup> This reflects an image of the lift which has become so entrenched in the imagination of readers that the space is now evocative with minimal description. The disgusting and defective lift, in which urine is as ubiquitous as graffiti, is a recurring trope. In *The Uses of Phobia*, a series of essays on literature and film, David Trotter examines representations of the urban phone box which, like the tower block lift, has become 'indelibly associated in the literary imagination with urine'.<sup>107</sup> This chapter examines the role of disgust in narratives of the lift, the tower block and its residents. Focusing on Livi Michael's novel *Under a Thin Moon* and drawing on work on disgust and affect, I argue that the disgusting nature of the lift 'sticks' to female characters, emphasising the role of the building in shaping their lives and the role of the residents in shaping the building. Developing themes introduced in the previous chapter, I explore questions around isolation, transience and agency. I suggest that in the works I analyse, the female characters' lack of power and exclusion from society derives partly from the social production of the space of the lift.

In literature, lifts and phone boxes are places where you can be private in public and are often out of order and vandalised. Indeed, as David Trotter argues, 'we don't fully recognise a phone-booth as a phone-booth until we've felt just a little bit sick at the sight and smell of it. The disgust is the recognition'.<sup>108</sup> He continues, 'the phobic object or scene is never unrepresentable. Far from remaining unconscious, phobia is informed throughout by a person's perception and beliefs about the environment'.<sup>109</sup> Consequently, Smith does

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<sup>105</sup> William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 182.

<sup>106</sup> Zadie Smith, *NW* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 301.

<sup>107</sup> David Trotter, *The Uses of Phobia: Essays on Literature and Film* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), p. 140.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

not need to mention the urine, vomit and excrement in the lift in *NW*, the reader brings that knowledge with them.

I draw on the work of Mary Douglas and other theorists of disgust as a way of understanding some of the factors at work in this literature. Douglas, in her classic anthropological text, *Purity and Danger*, in which she defines dirt as ‘matter out of place’, suggests that ‘as we examine pollution beliefs we find that the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load [...] I believe that some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the ‘social order’’.<sup>110</sup> In the literature of the tower block, the disgust associated with the lift is used to establish a space in which the social order – and indeed social order – is seen to have broken down. Indeed, one of the few works of high-rise fiction which does not reflect Beswick’s ‘social ruin and ruination’, is *The China Governess* (1963), a crime novel by Margery Allingham.<sup>111</sup> This novel depicts a London tower block, and council tenants, in stark contrast to later works and reflects the differing dramatic conventions associated with the ‘structure of feeling’ (to use Raymond Williams’ phrase) of the early 1960s, a time when the discourse around the tower block was less determined by the pessimism that has since established itself.<sup>112</sup>

*The China Governess* is unusual in that the author comments on the optimism associated with the high-rise – ‘This estate is called a Phoenix [...] it’s a social rebirth, a statement of a sincere belief that decent conditions make a decent community’ – and the squalid conditions of the slums which tower blocks were often built to replace.<sup>113</sup> Mr Cornish, a local councillor, focusses on the plight of women and children in this visceral description of slum life:

‘Children crawled over each other like little grey worms in the gutters,’ he said. ‘The only red things about them were their buttocks and they were raw. Their faces looked as if snails had slimed on them and their mothers were like great sick beasts whose byres had never been cleared. The stink and the noise and the cold and the hatred got into your belly and nothing and no one has ever got it out again.’<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>111</sup> Margaret Allingham, *The China Governess* (London: Penguin, 1967).

<sup>112</sup> Raymond Williams writes ‘it seems clear that the dramatic conventions of any given period are fundamentally related to the structure of feeling in that period. I use the phrase *structure of feeling* because it seems to me more accurate, in this context, than *ideas* or *general life*’. Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama Limited, 1954), p. 21.

<sup>113</sup> Allingham, *Governess*, p. 16.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Depictions of disgusting tower block common areas are missing from *The China Governess*, 'they entered the aluminium-lined passenger elevator which carried them up to the top floor. The convenience and neatness impressed him'.<sup>115</sup> Yet, within a decade or so, in fictional representations of the tower block, the slums are not mentioned and it is the tower block itself which has become disgusting.<sup>116</sup>

Livi Michael's novel, *Under a Thin Moon*, set on an estate in Manchester in the 1980s, is a passionate, political commentary on Thatcherism. In an interview in 2000, Michael said, 'I had experience of growing up on a council estate and this gave me a powerful sense of what [an] environment can do. This is what I wanted to communicate'.<sup>117</sup> She has also commented, 'I write from a female working class [*sic*] perspective. My politics are driven from where I come from. It is an emotional bias that stays with you all your life'.<sup>118</sup>

*Under a Thin Moon* is a painful portrayal of four marginalised women disempowered by their gender, class and poverty; each of the four interwoven narratives is told from a third person character perspective. I focus on the story of Wanda – a seventeen-year-old single mother who seems far older than her years – and the difficulties of bringing up her young daughter, Coral, in a highly unstable domestic and financial situation. The tower block in which Wanda lives, indeed the world in which she operates, is bereft of any sense of community or support network; Wanda becomes increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and is treated cruelly by men and women alike as she, in turn, is increasingly cruel to Coral. The quality of her unhappy life degenerates amid a destructive cycle of debilitating poverty. The homophone of her name is indicative of the path her life is taking, '*wander* [...] to be (in motion) without control or direction [...] to have no fixed abode or station'.<sup>119</sup> Initially,

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<sup>115</sup> Allingham, *Governess*, p. 13.

<sup>116</sup> Allingham is prophetic about the problems which high-rise blocks were destined to face. Mr Cornish infers a lack of community, perhaps referring to modernist architects' 'streets in the sky', 'It's not quite like a street. A lot can happen without the neighbours knowing'. Allingham, *Governess*, p. 11; Jane Stevenson wrote, '[Allingham] must have been one of the first writers to observe the alienating potential of tower blocks, even while the concrete was still setting in the first wave of postwar town planning'. Jane Stevenson, 'Queen of Crime', *Guardian*, 19 August 2006, Fiction, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/aug/19/fiction.shopping1>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>117</sup> Pat Wheeler, Sharon Monteith and Livi Michael, 'Interview with Livi Michael', *Critical Survey*, 12 (2000), pp. 94-107, p. 94.

<sup>118</sup> Bernadette Hyland, 'Livi Michael draws on her northern, working class [*sic*] roots to bring the Lancashire Witches back to life', *Guardian*, 11 September 2012, Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/the-northerner/2012/sep/11/blogpost-lancashire-witches-pendle-livi-michael> [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>119</sup> "wander, v." *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], Oxford University Press, June 2018, <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/225437](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/225437)> [Accessed 1 July 2018].

Wanda seeks to numb her pain through compulsive spending but as her debts escalate she is forced to take a job as a bar maid and has to leave Coral with Di, a neighbour who allows the young children she looks after to watch pornographic videos and later in the novel robs Wanda of her few possessions. Wanda's boss threatens to sack her and offers her substantial sums of money to have sex with him; eventually, utterly dejected, Wanda succumbs.

The lift, depicted as a disgusting space, plays an important role in *Under a Thin Moon* and central to this evocation of disgust is urine and excrement. There are few other public spaces in literature – exceptions being toilets and phone boxes – in which characters are confined in proximity with the bodily secretions of strangers. It is the combination of the disgusting and the public nature of the space which makes the symbolism of the tower block lift so effective. This is no new sensibility: echoing Mary Douglas' suggestion that 'dirt is matter out of place', William Miller quotes from a handbook on manners written in 1589, 'Let no one, whoever he may be, before, at, or after meals, early or late, foul the staircases, corridors, or closets with urine or other filth, but go to suitable, prescribed places for such relief'.<sup>120</sup> In *Under a Thin Moon*, the disgust is evident from the protagonist's instinctive reaction to the lift the first time we see her use it, 'Wanda holds her breath so she can't smell the muddy urine they are standing in [...] [She] is glad to get out of the lift so she can breathe'.<sup>121</sup>

The lift is not the only common space associated with the fetor of urine – stairs are often tainted too. In *In the Ditch* (1972) – a semi-autobiographical novel which examines immigration and the welfare state – in which the protagonist, Adah, is also a single mother, Buchi Emecheta uses the stairwell as a leitmotif. In a description of Adah's new home, Emecheta writes, 'The stairs leading to the top flats were of grey stone, so steep that it took Adah and her kids weeks to get used to them. They were always smelly with a thick lavatorial stink'.<sup>122</sup> The disgusting stairwell is mentioned again later in the novel: 'She [Adah] had to be careful over the wet slimy stairs (some teenagers had decide [*sic*] to make a toilet of them)'.<sup>123</sup> The adjective 'slimy' is a powerful one, loaded with visceral meaning. In her discussion on the performativity of disgust, Sara Ahmed quotes Jean-Paul Sartre on

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<sup>120</sup> Miller, *Anatomy*, p. 153.

<sup>121</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>122</sup> Buchi Emecheta, *In the Ditch* (London: Allison & Busby, 1979), p. 26; Adah lives in a ten-storey mansion block but many of the problems she faces are pertinent to tower blocks. There is also an interesting section later in the novel in which the council offers to re-house her in a flat in a high-rise.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

substances which are neither solid nor liquid, ‘I suddenly understand the snare of the slimy: it is a fluidity which holds me and compromises me [...] it clings to me like a leech’.<sup>124</sup> In Ahmed’s terms, the slime on the stairs is not only disgusting and dangerous, it also sticks – literally and symbolically – to Adah.

Although the stairs in *In the Ditch* are disgusting, as Michael effectively conveys in her description of urine in a lift, disgust is intensified when experienced in a confined, airless space: not only is the smell more potent, it becomes impossible to distance oneself and the desire to distance oneself is instinctive. As Winfried Menninghaus writes:

The fundamental schema of disgust is the experience of a nearness that is not wanted [...] the defence mechanism of disgust consists in a spontaneous and especially energetic act of saying “no” (Nietzsche). Yet disgust implies, not just an ability to say no, but even more a compulsion to say no, an inability *not* to say no.<sup>125</sup>

However, as in Wanda’s experience, when a character is inside a lift, it is impossible to say ‘no’; for the duration of the journey he or she is trapped in proximity to that which disgusts, in this case ‘muddy urine’. The ‘muddy’ could refer to the colour of the urine, conjuring a dark, strong-smelling liquid, or it could refer to mud itself, another elicitor of disgust, a ‘sticky’ substance which ‘clings’ – in this case to the pram, ‘The trolley wheels make muddy tracks across the floor as they leave’.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, in Hudson’s novel, *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma*, the narrator, Janey, who has lived with her mother in a succession of bedsits, bed and breakfasts, and council flats has no choice but to use the lift despite its repulsiveness, ‘Even if the lift was working, and it usually wasn’t, you had to get into the piss-stinking metal box full of shattered glass and baggy, milky condoms, trying to hold your breath until the nineteenth floor’.<sup>127</sup> Once again the lift serves as a shorthand, used to illustrate how Balfour Court is ‘the worst high-rise’ when Janey and her mother move into their new flat.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, the condition of the lift allows the reader to make judgements not only about the building, but about people who live in tower blocks because, as Miller writes, ‘Above all, it [disgust] is a moral and social sentiment. It plays a motivating and confirming role in moral judgement’.<sup>129</sup> The ‘disgusting’ lift thus becomes a

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<sup>124</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p. 90.

<sup>125</sup> Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>126</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, pp. 138-39.

<sup>127</sup> Hudson, *Tony Hogan*, p. 136.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Miller, *Anatomy*, p. 2.

synecdoche for the ‘disgusting’ tower block and the ‘disgusting’ residents who shape the space in which they live.

Echoing Wanda’s experience of stickiness, Campbell describes the tower block lift as ‘an aluminium cell sticky with spit and sweets’.<sup>130</sup> Ahmed writes, ‘the sticky and the disgusting have been linked, if not reduced to each other,’ and the word ‘sticky’ itself is used to convey disgustingness.<sup>131</sup> She continues, ‘To name something as disgusting is to transfer the stickiness of the word ‘disgust’ to an object, which henceforth becomes generated as the very thing that is spoken’. Identifying places and people as disgusting is thus performative and captures the damaging effect of the portrayal of the tower block as a hostile environment. As Ahmed argues, ‘to get stuck to something sticky is also to become sticky’.<sup>132</sup> We can see this on a number of levels in *Under a Thin Moon*: disgust sticks to Wanda and her baby when the muddy urine follows them out of the lift on the wheels of the pram.<sup>133</sup> The point is also pertinent on a larger scale; as Nicola Wilson writes, ‘*Under a Thin Moon* offers a powerful story of environmental determinism [...] and the links between gender, poverty and place’.<sup>134</sup>

It is apparent that the physical environment of the tower block and the people who live in it ‘stick’ to Wanda and contribute to her becoming increasingly ‘sticky’ or ‘disgusting’ herself. The verticality of the block is referenced in relation to Wanda abusing her daughter, ‘[She] knows there is no limit to the *downward* [emphasis added] slide. She used to think you could go no further than hurting a child,’ but her situation worsens when she accepts payment for sex, ‘She is overwhelmed by the ugliness of what has happened with Jim’.<sup>135</sup>

However, this deterministic interpretation, which privileges the role of the physical environment in shaping the lives, experiences and characters of those living in it, contrasts with the dialectic of society and space introduced by Lefebvre, Massey and other theorists of space. From this perspective, it is also evident how the physical environment of the block is shaped by social processes and particularly the actions of other residents. Wanda is not one of the disgusting residents who shape the lift or the other common spaces, the

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<sup>130</sup> Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited*, p. 35.

<sup>131</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p. 89.

<sup>132</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p. 91.

<sup>133</sup> A pram is also used in *Our Fathers* to juxtapose the innocence of a young child with the disgusting space of a lift, ‘The sliding door of the ‘Evens’ lift was trapped in a mangled pram’. O’Hagan, *Our Fathers*, p. 69.

<sup>134</sup> Nicola Wilson, *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 163.

<sup>135</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 204; p. 222.



protagonists of tower block fiction rarely are. She is one who experiences the disgust that others create or, as Trotter puts it in relation to the phone box, the ‘stickiness left behind by a previous user’.<sup>136</sup>

Wanda is acted upon by others through the spaces of the tower block and distanced from these spaces and the people who occupy them by Michael’s use of the medical term ‘urine’ as opposed to the scatological ‘piss’. As the novel progresses, a shift in the language, from the colloquial to the formal, is indicative of Wanda’s increasing desire to disconnect, to ‘unstick’, from her environment – which she does, ultimately, by ending her life. It is interesting to note that when the lift is mentioned in this earlier quotation, it is not ‘faeces’ or ‘excrement’ that is referred to but ‘shit’:

She [Wanda] can hear the groans and creaking from the lift shaft, the howls and shrieks of the lads who are messing about in the lift. Up and down the floors they go, banging on the metal doors, and in the morning MUFC, Gaynor is a slag, will be smeared all over the walls in their shit. And the lift won’t work. Again.<sup>137</sup>

In this quotation, men adversely shape the physical and emotional environment of the lift and Wanda has to deal with the consequences. Through urinating and defecating, and daubing tribal and misogynistic graffiti on the walls, men not only transform the lift into a disgusting and frightening space, they assert ownership of the space and ultimately, as a result of the vandalism, take usership away from others. These unseen men are not given the status of character. It is as though they form part of the setting or environment; their narrative purpose is to illustrate their impact and reveal the residue they leave behind.

In the majority of texts I analyse, the attribution of blame for the anti-social behaviour which causes disgust in the lift is explicit: the perpetrators are men and boys. In a few texts – such as in the example of Hudson’s lift quoted earlier, which is described as ‘piss stinking’ and filled with ‘shattered glass’ and ‘baggy milky condoms’, blame is not explicitly ascribed. The ‘baggy milky condoms’ could be the result of sex between a man and a woman, or indeed, two men. I have not, however, encountered examples in which blame is attributed to women or girls; females are always the victims. It is interesting to note that little or no attempt is made by the authors to understand or empathise with the reasons why men act in the way they do or to consider that their behaviour could be a form of resistance and subversion. This is a very different stance to that taken in the depiction of the antisocial

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<sup>136</sup> Trotter, *Phobia*, p. 140.

<sup>137</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, pp. 49-50.

behaviour of boys, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. When boys are the perpetrators of antisocial behaviour it is often framed as a form of subversive play, a reaction to the establishment and the conditions of the environment imposed upon them.

Wanda's experience of disgust in the lift is not dissimilar to that of the protagonist of 'Greensleeves' who comments, 'At times it could be really disgusting, with people being sick or even using the lifts as toilets'.<sup>138</sup> The lift is portrayed as a vital piece of infrastructure for women but a space that men and boys vandalise or play in. However, there is ambiguity in the elderly female protagonist's experience of disgust: she describes the urination in the lifts as 'really disgusting' but when the caretaker recounts how the perpetrator of the act was punished she feels a degree of sympathy for the boy:

Staunin therr bold as ye like,' he'd [the caretaker] said, 'pishin in the coarner! So ah took um bi the scruff a the neck and rubbed is bloody nose in it! Told um if they acted lik wee dug they'd get treated like them. Dirty wee tikes!'

She'd thought that was a bit cruel and maybe a bit coarse as well, but she couldn't help laughing with the others.<sup>139</sup>

In the texts I analyse in this thesis, female reactions to the lift and the acts which take place in it are passive: fear, awkwardness, embarrassment. This contrasts with the behaviour shown by a man, albeit a caretaker in a position of authority, who responds with aggression. Usually, however, if children are the perpetrators of antisocial behaviour there is a more considered response, from both men and women. In 'Greensleeves', for example, the protagonist overhears a discussion about poor behaviour in which two women allude to the role of the detrimental conditions in which the children live:

'You should see some of the children, running about wild. Like wee savages. And as for some of the language!'

'Mind you,' the other one had said, 'You can't really expect anything else. They're all just shifted out from Partick and Govan, and all these dirty old tenements are just falling to bits. It's not as if they've ever known anything better'.<sup>140</sup>

As introduced in Chapter 1, the lift is ostensibly a liminal space, a threshold between public and private. In the lift in *Under a Thin Moon*, as in the lift in 'Greensleeves', it is men and boys who create and control the impact of disgust and damage and this reflects the gendering of agency in the lift and the tower block as a whole. We see how the gendered appropriation

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<sup>138</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>140</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.

of the space affects its disgusting nature: it is a more private space for men than for women and girls, a space in which men are private in public and commit intimate acts such as urinating or defecating. It is also men and boys who transform and appropriate the lift through tagging and other graffiti. The protagonist of 'Greensleeves' notes this proprietorial male behaviour, 'The lifts were always marked with *their* slogans, strange symbols, *their* own names, the names of *their* gangs [emphases added]'.<sup>141</sup> In the previous chapter, I described how the space of the lift is narrated as public rather than semi-public or private space. Here, the reiteration of the word 'their' emphasises how the homosocial interaction of men with the material space of the lift asserts a dynamic of enclosure and exclusion which establishes the lift as a space in which the female narrator feels out of place. In the following chapter I move from a discussion of 'sticky' lifts to 'stuck' lifts, deepening my discussion of the interaction of the uses and materiality of the lift to consider how it enables or restricts the mobility of tower block residents.

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<sup>141</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.

### Chapter 3: The Stuck Lift

And stalled lifts generating high-rise blues  
can be set loose. But stalled lives never budge.

Edwin Morgan, *Collected Poems*<sup>142</sup>

The French cultural theorist Paul Virilio observed that the invention of each new type of transportation produced a new type of accident: shipwrecks, train derailments, aeroplane crashes.<sup>143</sup> Bernard adds, ‘The elevator, whose danger of falling was soon eliminated, produced at the end of the nineteenth century the new accident type “getting stuck”’.<sup>144</sup> Reflecting on ‘the mobilities paradigm’ which grew out of the spatial turn associated with the work of Lefebvre and Massey, sociologist Mimi Sheller emphasises the coveted value of mobility in contemporary societies. In doing so, she quotes Zygmunt Bauman’s suggestion that, ‘the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern time’.<sup>145</sup> As Sheller continues, this ability to move depends upon access to elements such as money, vaccines, or qualifications, but also ‘a capability to connect to others’, access to ‘technical systems’ including cars, lifts, aircraft and the like and, perhaps most importantly, resources to manage these when the system fails.<sup>146</sup> Moreover, as is clearly seen in the texts I analyse here, mobilities depend on, ‘lumpy, fragile, aged, gendered, racialised, and more or less impaired bodies, inhabited as people are intermittently on the move’.<sup>147</sup>

The stuck lift is ubiquitous in fictional representations of the tower block; it is not, however, used to display the range of tropes – most commonly sexual encounter and confession – found in literature, film, television and advertising set in other types of buildings. The stuck lift of the tower block does not form ‘group[s] thrown together by fate, a “closed society” par excellence’, as Bernard describes.<sup>148</sup> It is used as a plot device to drive characters to, and draw attention to, the stairwell and other common areas, or to keep

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<sup>142</sup> Edwin Morgan, ‘Glasgow Sonnets’, in *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 292.

<sup>143</sup> Paul Virilio, qtd. in Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 211.

<sup>144</sup> Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 211.

<sup>145</sup> Mimi Sheller, ‘From spatial turn to mobilities turn’, *Current Sociology Monograph*, 65 (2017), 623–39, p. 626.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 631.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 629.

<sup>148</sup> Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 246.

characters inside their flats. The impact of the broken-down lift in tower blocks has immediate and quotidian consequences for women and children. On a broader scale it also acts as a metaphor for the social, economic and spatial immobility of tower block residents.

In the fiction of the tower block, the lift is so often broken or takes so long to arrive that when it does work it is worthy of note as in Karen Campbell's novel *This Is Where I Am* when the narrator, Abdi, comments, 'Pressing the button, expecting the interminable wait, and instead – magic happens! The lift doors open. This is a rare good omen'.<sup>149</sup> The lift's role in mobilities is crucial, as Graham argues, 'the social isolation caused by the breakdown of lifts can impact just as deeply as that caused by the failure of transport systems such as trains or buses'.<sup>150</sup> Isolation is a recurring theme in the fiction of the tower block and, as Cuming observes, 'Many literary narratives of female experience on mass housing estates [...] are characterised by a defining sense of physical immobility, usually in the form of the protagonist's confinement in the domestic sphere, resulting in a paralysing sense of isolation and inwardness'.<sup>151</sup> Although Cuming's analysis includes literature and film set in high-rise blocks she does not mention the importance of the lift in her discussion of immobilities. In the texts I analyse in this thesis, it is not only the lift which is portrayed as stuck but also the residents. Ahmed writes, 'Some forms of stickiness are about holding things together. Some are about blockages or stopping things moving'.<sup>152</sup> The OED defines stuck as both, 'held fast or trapped in some place or position; unable to move or be moved' and 'unable to progress or develop; blocked, stalled'.<sup>153</sup>

'Taking Doreen out of the Sky' ('Doreen') is the title story from Alan Beard's collection of thirteen vignettes. The vignettes offer insightful snapshots of the difficult everyday lives of working-class people – all but two of the stories are told in the first person – and are set against the complex urban landscapes of the West Midlands in the 1980s and 1990s. 'Doreen', which takes place over the course of one evening, is the tale of a man who is made redundant, his sadness, and the trepidation he feels about breaking the news to his wife. Mark, the protagonist, lives with his wife, Doreen, and their son, Ian, in a tower block. They are desperate to move out of their flat but, as Mark says, 'With only one kid we're a

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<sup>149</sup> Campbell, *This Is Where I Am*, p. 27.

<sup>150</sup> Graham, 'Super-tall and Ultra-deep', p. 256.

<sup>151</sup> Cuming, *Housing*, p. 189.

<sup>152</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p. 91.

<sup>153</sup> "stuck, adj.2." *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], Oxford University Press, June 2018, <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/192040](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/192040)> [Accessed 1 July 2018].

long way down the [council's waiting] list'.<sup>154</sup> Mark and his wife conform to traditional gender roles: Mark is the wage earner and Doreen stays at home to look after their three-year-old son. As the story's title suggests, Doreen's role is ostensibly passive, although we later see how Mark too has little control over a number of aspects of his life.

The story begins as Mark has just been made redundant without notice from his job on the production line in a factory which manufactures seals for steel rings. He is devastated by the news, 'It was a chunk of paradise to me – a big firm with big wages', as his ambition to escape from poverty and move out of the high-rise flat into a house with a garden has been thwarted; he meanders through the city as he makes his way home.<sup>155</sup>

References to verticality pervade this story from the title onwards. Mark comments on his ambition, 'Each seal supposedly getting us a ha'penny or so nearer the ground', to move into a house, 'three or four years and Doreen would be opening the front door on to the street, perhaps a garden'.<sup>156</sup> On Mark's way home from work an evangelist hands him a leaflet, 'Either you are on the DOWNWARD course which leads to destruction or on the UPWARD path which leads to life'.<sup>157</sup> When Mark arrives back at the tower he comments, 'I thought Doreen might be looking down at me – perhaps bringing in washing from that oversized flowerbox which is our balcony', a spatial metaphor for his apprehension that Doreen will despise him when she hears his news; this fear is later substantiated when she says, 'If you'd trained for something instead of drinking away your youth perhaps we wouldn't be here now'. When the couple discuss the redundancy, Doreen asks, "'Well, are we upward or downward bound?' 'God knows,' I said and laughed for the first time today. 'Downward, let's hope, out of this flat'".<sup>158</sup>

The stuck or broken-down lift is not only used as a metaphor for being trapped but, in addition, illustrates how its failure impacts more on the mobilities of women and children than men. When Mark discovers that the lift is broken he uses the stairwell instead, 'I hesitated outside our door, wheezing like Eric [a colleague] from the eight flights of stairs and the smell of piss'.<sup>159</sup> For Doreen, however, using the stairs has not been an option. Mark says, 'I asked how Ian had been ('Bombing around as usual'), if she'd been out (no – the lift

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<sup>154</sup> Beard, 'Doreen', p. 57.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

was out of order)’. Doreen has been stuck inside the cramped flat with an energetic three-year-old boy, immobilised by the broken lift. Mark reveals that this situation is not unusual, ‘I worry about Doreen cooped up with Ian inside that flat. Though she hardly complains, I can see her tightening with it; it’s getting to her insides, making her ill’.<sup>160</sup> The repetition of the word ‘inside’ – firstly in relation to the flat and then Doreen’s body, creates a sense of physical and mental confinement and the word ‘tightening’ suggests that the predicament is getting worse.

When the lift is broken – as it often is in the fiction of the tower block – the only option is the stairs. In a 1977 article about Greater London Council blocks, written during a maintenance engineers’ strike, Nikki Knewstub notes that ‘591 lifts were not working out of a total of 2,900’.<sup>161</sup> The article quotes a mother who says ‘When the lifts are out I just have to stay here. You can’t take a child of 17 months and a three-months-old baby up and down 21 flights of stairs’.<sup>162</sup> As this mother’s experience shows, and as is illustrated in ‘Doreen’, stairs are not equally accessible to men and women, because it is generally women who care for young children. Although Mark wheezes when he uses the stairs, men typically use them with little comment, as in this exchange in Smith’s *NW* when a resident speaks to his guest, “‘Press that [lift] button now, will you? Broken? Ah well, let’s take the stairs – better for you’”.<sup>163</sup> Stairs for women, however, are portrayed as more problematic: when Wanda uses the stairwell she is assaulted and Doreen and the protagonist of ‘Greensleeves’ stay indoors, unable to use it at all.<sup>164</sup>

When the lift was introduced into apartment buildings at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was seen as a technology that would benefit women and children. In a German history of the hygiene movement published in 1912, Wilhelm Gemünd commented that climbing stairs presented hazards ‘especially for the feeble, those suffering from cardiac and pulmonary diseases, convalescents, girls and young women especially during menses’.<sup>165</sup> Bernard states that the installation of the lift meant that the residents of top

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<sup>160</sup> Beard, ‘Doreen’, p. 51.

<sup>161</sup> Nikki Knewstub, ‘High on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor, fear lies in a lift shaft’, *Guardian*, 15 November 1977, Politics Past, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1977/nov/15/past.firefighters2>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Smith, *NW*, p. 112.

<sup>164</sup> In *Brick Lane*, the stairwell is depicted as a hostile environment when used by Nazneen, the protagonist, ‘The stairs gave off a tang of urine. She bunched the skirts of her sari with one hand and took the steps two at a time until she missed a ledge and came down on her ankle against an unforgiving ridge’. Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004), p. 54.

<sup>165</sup> Wilhelm Gemünd, qtd. in Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 114.

storeys no longer had to endure the difficulty of climbing stairs and that it would encourage children to spend more time outdoors.<sup>166</sup> Remarkably, more than a century later, when women use the stairwell in the fiction I analyse it is portrayed as tiring or dangerous or impossible to climb and is as much a site of fear and disgust as the lift. For example, in Emecheta's *In the Ditch* we see how the condition of the stairs impacts negatively on Adah's mobility, 'the light bulbs along the stairway had their own way of going out at night [...] you had to plan all your outings in the day when there was enough light.'<sup>167</sup> Stairs are not only portrayed as worrying for the women themselves, they are also anxious about their children playing on them. Adah voices her concerns, 'I'm thankful the kids spend most of their time at school and do not have to run up and down them [the stairs]. They're so dangerous'.<sup>168</sup> In *Under a Thin Moon*, Wanda reluctantly allows Coral to play in the stairwells and on the landings; she won't let her daughter play outside but can't keep her inside either, 'it [the flat] is too small and cramped and the neighbours complain if she is noisy'.<sup>169</sup>

*Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment* is a collection of critical essays which explores the relationship between women and the built environment, a publication which evolved from the meetings of a feminist architectural discussion group held in the late 1970s.<sup>170</sup> The image on the front cover encapsulates a theme in the gendering of vertical space often represented in fiction: a woman struggling up a flight of stairs carrying a pram with a baby in it. In her essay, Jos Boys writes that the design of housing can, 'exaggerate the distances of facilities from women at home [...] in the lifts, stairs and lobbies of high-rise flats [...] Physical space can add to the isolation of childcare and domestic labour'.<sup>171</sup> In her book, *Council Housing and Culture*, Alison Ravetz writes that one of the hardest things about living in tower blocks was 'getting up and down in lifts that [ ... ] often failed'.<sup>172</sup> The geographer Stephen Graham expands on this:

Unreliable, vandalised and poorly maintained elevators have long been an Achilles heel of modernist dreams of mass social housing in vertical towers [...] Without functioning elevators, these Corbusian blocks, rather than emancipating 'machines

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<sup>166</sup> Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 91.

<sup>167</sup> Emecheta, *In the Ditch*, p. 50.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 200.

<sup>170</sup> MATRIX, *Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment* (London: Pluto Press Limited, 1985).

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>172</sup> Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 109.



for living’ or modern spaces projected into the light and air of vertical space, quickly reduce to dystopian places of extreme isolation and enforced withdrawal, *especially for those with children* [emphasis added].<sup>173</sup>

Graham is not suggesting that it is only mothers who struggle with broken-down lifts – of course fathers have parenting responsibilities too, although day-to-day care is rarely evidenced in the fiction I analyse, perhaps partly due to the greater number of single mothers in social housing.<sup>174</sup> However, the psychologist Robert Gifford suggests that it is women and children who suffer the greatest mental strain from high-rise living. A Canadian study, conducted in the late 1970s, concluded ‘on higher floors, men experienced less strain, whereas women experienced more strain. The women in this study were all mothers, so the difference may well result from the difficulties of parenting from on high’.<sup>175</sup>

The difficulties of parenting from on high is often written about in the fiction of the tower block. The problems above identified by geographers, architects, and psychologists feature in fictional accounts of high-rise living and the impact of the broken-down lift on the lives of female residents and their children is a common preoccupation. The impact on women, and relative lack of impact on men, as shown in ‘Doreen’, is also conveyed in this passage from *In the Ditch*, in which Adah is advised by a female acquaintance not to accept the council’s offer of a flat on the fourteenth storey of a tower block:

We came here three months ago, but Jesus, it’s awful. The height’s enough to drive you round the bend, I’m so frightened. Are you coming to live here? Don’t take it. Whatever do they want you to do with all your kids when the lifts break down? It has broken down about six times since we came here. I leave everything to John to carry up for me. It’s killing.<sup>176</sup>

Once again, a woman’s response to the tower block and the lift is gendered: the height is intimidating, so much so that it impacts on her mental health – she later reveals she takes sedatives – and without her husband she is unable to cope with the broken-down lift. Adah is generally portrayed as an intelligent, strong and resilient character yet the broken lift frightens her too:

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<sup>173</sup> Stephen Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 145.

<sup>174</sup> Between 1970 and 2000 the proportion of children born to single mothers who lived in social housing in the UK grew from six per cent to twenty-eight percent whereas the proportion of children born to single mothers in home ownership remained unchanged. Ruth Lupton, Rebecca Tunstall, Wendy Sigle-Rushton, Polina Obolenskaya, Ricardo Sabates, Elena Meschi, Dylan Kneale and Emma Salter, *Growing up in social housing in Britain: A profile of four generations, 1946 to the present day* (Tenant Services Authority: London, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>175</sup> Gifford, ‘Consequences’, p. 7.

<sup>176</sup> Emecheta, *In the Ditch*, p. 128.

The thought of the lift breaking down and my having to carry my baby, push-chair and shopping up fourteen floors! Huh! What happens when I leave the children all alone in the flat to do my shopping? I'll go mad with worry.<sup>177</sup>

In the texts I analyse, if the lift is broken and a man is not available to help – be it because the woman is an isolated single mother such as Adah and Wanda, a widow like the protagonist of ‘Greensleeves’ or, as in the case of Doreen, their husband is out at work – women and their children are immobilised.

The gendered experience of lift immobilities is elaborated in a further important element of its dominant representation: namely that it is broken because it is vandalised. In *Under a Thin Moon*, the lift is put out of action by men and boys and this impacts greatly on Wanda. Her reaction to the broken lift illustrates her fragile mental state and reiterates the inconvenience and frustration of the recurring situation, ‘[Wanda] yanks the trolley through the swing-doors to the lift. She presses the lift button several times and smacks the metal door when it does not come’.<sup>178</sup>

In *Making Space*, Jos Boys argues that the spatial arrangement of tower blocks did not create ‘high-rise blues’ but ‘by worsening the difficulties in getting out with small children or transporting heavy shopping up steps around endless corners and ramps, these estates must sometimes seem the last straw’.<sup>179</sup> The idea of the ‘last straw’ is conveyed in this extract from a page-long scene in which Wanda goes to and fro as she attempts to get out of the building with her baby:

Wanda manoeuvres the trolley through three sets of swing-doors to the lift but Coral starts crying for her doll. When Wanda ignores her she begins to scream. Back they go through the three sets of swing-doors [...] Back she goes leaving Coral on the landing this time. But as they get through the first set of swing-doors there is a bubbling noise from Coral’s nappy [...] She has shit over everything she has on.<sup>180</sup>

In the disturbing section which follows, an exasperated Wanda physically abuses her daughter as she changes her nappy. When Coral is finally ready, Wanda attempts to leave the flat but is once again thwarted, ‘[she] pushes her way through the three swing-doors to the lift. Then she turns back again. She has forgotten her bag’.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Emecheta, *In the Ditch*, p. 128.

<sup>178</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 61.

<sup>179</sup> MATRIX, *Making Space*, p. 47.

<sup>180</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 32.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

If the lift is out of order male characters use the stairwell; it is, however, extremely difficult for Wanda to negotiate stairs with a pram and a baby. This brings us back to the theme of public and private space. In vandalising the lift, and disrupting tower-block mobilities, men are not only asserting ownership, they are taking ownership, indeed *usership*, away from others. As discussed in the previous chapters, while the lift is ostensibly a common space for men and women, male activity creates a space which is less welcoming for women.

A second incident in which the broken-down lift impacts on a female character is found in 'Doreen'. As Mark stands outside his front door – waiting for his wife to let him in – he sees a neighbour, Ma Yates, 'She went past in fur-collared coat and old-fashioned knee-length boots, heading for the lift, muttering. I could have told her the lift was out of order but didn't, just watched her press the button and wait'.<sup>182</sup> In this scene, Mark is knowing and has acted on his knowledge and climbed the stairs, but Ma Yates is unknowing and impotent. It is yet another example involving the lift where men are in control, even when the equipment is broken.

However, a passage in which Mark describes the view of the high-rise opposite highlights that men living in tower blocks also lack agency, albeit in different ways. Mark is aware not only of his own confinement and immobility, he recognises that he is one of many in a similar situation:

Those [flats] with curtains open showed scenes like ours – people grouped round TVs. I sometimes imagine the whole front being swung open on hinges, to reveal families in their sets of clapboard boxes, like those cages of rats you see in animal experiments on telly. I can just see some big hand coming in, picking on someone, putting them through tests.<sup>183</sup>

The boxes and cages – words also used to describe lifts – are uniform, there is no suggestion of individuality or homeliness.<sup>184</sup> In his essay on the uncanny, published in 1919, Sigmund Freud explored meanings of the German word for 'uncanny': *das Unheimliche*, the 'unhomely'.<sup>185</sup> Anthony Vidler suggests that buildings such as tower blocks are not inherently *unheimliche*, but are imbued with such qualities through their social role and

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<sup>182</sup> Beard, 'Doreen', p. 57.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>184</sup> Perce describes tower blocks as 'thousands of rabbit hutches piled one above the other'. Perce, *Species*, p. 89.

<sup>185</sup> Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (London: The MIT Press, 1992).

prevailing political sentiments.<sup>186</sup> The suggestion in ‘Doreen’ is that residents who live in uninspiring dwellings have uninspiring lives. The high-rise blocks evoke Cuming’s assertion that ‘housing’ equates to ‘poor housing [...] loaded with negative associations’, rather than home.<sup>187</sup> The ‘big hand’ implies Thatcher’s government, the ‘tests’ the high-rise social housing experiment.

In her tower block poem, ‘Unthinkable’ (2007), Frances Leviston uses a sink, as a variation on a box or a cage, as the container which traps. This could be a reference to sink estates, a derogatory term associated with high crime levels and social deprivation, a term described by Tom Slater as a ‘semantic battering ram’.<sup>188</sup> A sink is also a container associated with cleaning and washing away. Leviston writes, ‘I was afraid of the people inside, trapped like spiders in a sink | neither rescued nor put out of what I imagined to be | their misery’.<sup>189</sup> The image of a spider stuck in the sink, scuttling round and round as it slips down the sides in a futile attempt to climb out, is a powerful and poignant one. The assumption that the residents are frightening and wretched, and the comparison with spiders – creatures which commonly evoke disgust – reveals judgments which chime with the prevalent discourse. At the end of the poem, however, the narrator realises that the judgements are misguided.

Similarly, the stalled lift is used as a metaphor in Edwin Morgan’s *Glasgow Sonnets* (1972), a socio-political sequence which depicts the rehousing of tenants from the slum tenements of the Gorbals to the tower blocks of Red Road. In the final sonnet, x, Morgan takes the reader up the lift to the thirtieth floor of a tower block. In an analysis of the sequence, Nerys Williams comments that Morgan uses the lift to echo ‘Lefebvre’s belief that space is a contested site of power relations’.<sup>190</sup> She also argues that the tower block is represented as a space of ‘confinement, atrophy and immobility’. Its impact on the residents is conveyed in the last four lines of the poem ‘They linger in the single-ends that use | their spirit to the bone, and when they trudge | from closemouth to launderette their steady shoes | carry a word that weighs us like a judge’.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Anthony Vidler, qtd. in Berthold Schoene, *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 130.

<sup>187</sup> Cuming, *Private Lives*, p. 2.

<sup>188</sup> Tom Slater, ‘The invention of the ‘sink estate’: Consequential categorisation and the UK housing crisis’, *The Sociological Review*, 66 (2018), 877-97, p. 879.

<sup>189</sup> Frances Leviston, ‘Unthinkable’, in *Public Dream* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 15.

<sup>190</sup> Nerys Williams, *Contemporary Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 148.

<sup>191</sup> Morgan, *Collected Poems*, p. 292.

Ultimately, 'Doreen', *Under a Thin Moon* and 'Greensleeves' are tower block narratives which offer little hope. 'Doreen' is a tale of working-class families and the struggles they face: the trappings of instability, unemployment, poverty and poor housing. The metaphor of the broken-down lift reverberates in a discussion about Mark's redundancy. Doreen comments, "'And that's it then is it? Just like that you're out of a job'. She added – 'again.' She didn't say 'and we're stuck here', but that's what she meant. I said 'Happens all the time, love'".<sup>192</sup> Mark's response to his job loss attempts to brave the devastating news but also accepts the bitter inevitability. He is left feeling insignificant and insecure: he has neither job nor decent home and his self-doubt spills into concerns about his marriage, 'I missed Doreen's undressing: she was already in bed, sheets tight across her breasts, reading a library book when I came in from the bathroom. We lay separately'.<sup>193</sup> Towards the end of the story, Doreen says, "'we will get out of here, Mark, won't we?'"<sup>194</sup> Mark does not reply.

In *Under a Thin Moon*, the stuck lift acts as both metaphor and catalyst of Wanda's own confinement and atrophy. It results in a harrowing scene in which Wanda is forced to lug the pram, with Coral inside it, up nine flights of stairs while being assaulted:

Mikey runs up the stairs to where Wanda is and grabs hold of her end of the trolley [pram]. Wanda holds on too, she will not let go. But more hands grab hold of it, heaving it over the stairwell. It is a straight drop, two floors down.

Stop it, Wanda screams, let go.

Rockabye baby, Pete yells, pushing the trolley, and Coral cries loudly.

Inside Wanda a voice is saying that they can't do it, they won't dare, but the rest of her is screaming. She hits out and tears at their hair. It is all she can do because the trolley is now out of her hands.<sup>195</sup>

In this stairwell scene, the verticality of the block, with the potential to fall to one's death from a height, is essential to the narrative. The impact of vertical living on Wanda becomes even more apparent when the themes of falling and death, in the setting of the lift, invade her nightmares. Falling can be regarded as mobility out of control and a nightmare which involves falling is a classic anxiety dream, a trope in popular culture which draws on psychoanalysis. Michael uses this nightmare as both a metaphor and a premonition:<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Beard, 'Doreen', p. 62.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 175.

<sup>196</sup> James, A. Hall, *Jungian Dream Interpretation A Handbook of Theory and Practice* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1983), p. 46.

She [Wanda] is in the lift and Coral is with her in the trolley. The lift is out of control. It is plummeting downwards so fast Wanda can hardly breathe or see. It passes all the floors, and the ground, and still it plunges down. Wanda presses all the buttons but there is no end to the falling of the lift. Then suddenly it stops but the doors stay shut.<sup>197</sup>

In this dream, as in Wanda's 'real' life, the lift is portrayed as a frightening, claustrophobic space over which she has no control. She presses every button but 'there is no end to the falling', which symbolises the lack of control she has over her destiny. The lift is likened to a coffin: its doors remain closed and the sealed box ends up deep underground. Wanda and Coral are buried alive.

At the end of *Under a Thin Moon*, Wanda kills herself by overdosing on tranquilizers and slitting her wrists in the bath. Close to the start of the novel, in a narrative told from the perspective of Coral as a young adult, Coral has a flashback to her mother's death. As in the description of Wanda's nightmare about dying, the lift and not being able to use the lift register in Coral's memory of her mother's suicide:

Up and up the stairs she [Coral] goes because she can't reach the lift button, and as she climbs higher and higher all the old anxiety returns. The stairs seem to go on and on but then she gets to the door and calls out mam, mam but no one answers [...] And there is her mother sitting up in the bath, staring at Coral. And there is the blood curling all around her like scarlet smoke in the bath-water. Mam, mam, screams Coral, but no one answers.<sup>198</sup>

Coral's failure to reach the lift button evokes pathos at the start of this paragraph; it sets the scene with a reminder of how young, how small and how helpless she is. Her inability to use the lift and reach her mother increases the narrative tension and shows how the verticality of the tower block impacts on the mobilities of girls as well as women. The use, or not, of the lift in negotiating the building is contrasted in the nightmare and flashback scenes: in the nightmare, Wanda cannot control falling *down* the lift shaft whereas in the flashback, Coral is unable to use the lift to climb *up* the tower. The flashback also raises the question had Coral been tall enough to press the button, could she have reached Wanda in time to save her?

Both scenes end in death. Wanda's nightmare, however, alludes to a descent into hell whereas Coral's flashback intimates an ascent into heaven, perhaps suggestive of hope. The

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<sup>197</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 129.

<sup>198</sup> Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 20.

notion of hope, amid this overwhelmingly bleak tale, returns on the last page of the novel when Coral sits at a typewriter with a blank sheet of paper to tell the stories of the main female characters in *Under a Thin Moon*. When asked in an interview why she chose Coral for this role, Michael replied, ‘Coral is the youngest person in the book and I saw hope as lying with the future generation’.<sup>199</sup>

In this chapter I have shown two important roles of the stuck lift in the fiction analysed. The first is as an important narrative device which affects the mobility of both female and male characters but has far greater impact on the mobilities of women and girls. This differentiation of freedom to move stratifies gendered experiences of the tower block. Secondly, the stuck lift plays a metaphorical role in illustrating the blockages which confine both male and female characters in a state of social and economic atrophy in tower blocks. In the next chapter I focus in more detail on the experiences of child characters, their play, and the gendered distribution of agency in the shaping of social space.

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<sup>199</sup> Wheeler, ‘Interview’, p. 106.

## Chapter 4: The Playful Lift

I used to change my piece of gum once a day. I used to do it in our lift on the way home from school. Why the lift? Because I liked sticking the gooey piece that I'd just finished with on to one of the control buttons. Then the next person who came along and pressed the button got my old gum on the end of his or her finger. Ha-ha!

Violet Beauregarde in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Roald Dahl<sup>200</sup>

In previous chapters, I have explored how residents' lives are shaped by the spaces of the tower block but have considered in less detail the actions through which the residents themselves shape the spaces. In this chapter I focus on Stephen Kelman's novel, *Pigeon English* (2011), to explore how residents shape and are shaped by the space of the lift and the tower block through play. Moreover, I argue that the ways in which children play and shape the lift, are – like the experiences discussed in previous chapters – highly gendered.

Lynsey Hanley writes that the continued presence of rules and prohibitions around play on council estates, such as the ubiquitous No Ball Games sign, suggest 'a long history of uncomfortable relations between children and adults on British estates'.<sup>201</sup> For Lefebvre, play is a central component of social life, and of the 'anthropological needs' and thus rights of human beings. 'The human being,' Lefebvre writes, 'has the right to accumulate energies and to spend them, even waste them in play'.<sup>202</sup> He argues that these energies must be expended productively and writes that 'The release of energy always gives rise to an effect, to damage, to a change in reality. It modifies space or generates a new space'.<sup>203</sup> The geographer Tara Woodyear elaborates this thinking, 'Playing is momentary in nature. It exploits the openness and circumstance of the everyday [...] In its spontaneity, playing can occur in any space or place, or the journey between them [...] It can also be productive or transformative of space'.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (London: Puffin, 2016), p. 39.

<sup>201</sup> Lynsey Hanley, 'Yes, let's get rid of 'no ball games' signs – but it won't solve our problems', *Guardian*, 2 July 2015, Opinion, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/02/no-ball-games-haringey-council-children-play-obesity>> [accessed 5 June 2018].

<sup>202</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 147.

<sup>203</sup> Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 177.

<sup>204</sup> Tanya Woodyear, 'Ludic geographies: not merely child's play', *Geography Compass*, 6 (2012), 313–26, p. 320.



Woodyer's description of play introduces its spontaneity, a characteristic feature of children's play which contributed to sociologist Roger Caillois' distinction between *ludus* – a regulated, rule-bound form of play – and *paidia*, which is chaotic, disruptive and unauthorised.<sup>205</sup> This latter form is the type witnessed in the fiction of the tower block and is productive of space in distinctive, at times challenging and destructive, ways. In this chapter I consider the shaping of the lift and other common spaces through *paidia*; *ludus* rarely features in the texts, perhaps reflecting the disrupted and chaotic lives of the characters and the prohibition on games to which Hanley refers. Caillois comments on the stark differences between the ways in which games are played:

At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature [...] I call this second component *ludus*.<sup>206</sup>

As Woodyer states, 'positioned as a counterpoint to the conventional, playing is couched in a framework of resistance'.<sup>207</sup> In Colin Ward's work on children in the city, he extends this discussion to consider the tower block lift. He emphasises that the lift is not a neutral mechanism to facilitate vertical living. Instead, it is a tool which shapes and is shaped by interactions between children and adults:

The striking thing is not that high density living in apartment blocks has killed off the ancient ploys of childhood, but that they have been adapted by children to the new conditions of living. When high flats with lifts were imposed upon the urban working class [*sic*] household in Britain, it was not anticipated that the lifts would become a weapon in the war of children against the adult world, or, perhaps simply a plaything.<sup>208</sup>

*Pigeon English*, a best-selling critically acclaimed novel set in an estate in Peckham, South London, explores themes including gang warfare, immigration and poverty. It draws on the tragic killing of ten-year-old Damilola Taylor in 2000 and illustrates Ward's idea that children's use of the lift – as well as other common spaces of the tower block – modifies its

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<sup>205</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>207</sup> Woodyer, 'Ludic Geographies', p. 316.

<sup>208</sup> Colin Ward, *The Child in the City* (London: The Architectural Press Ltd, 1978), p. 101.

conventional use and turns it into a weapon and a plaything.<sup>209</sup> Told in the first person by an innocent eleven-year-old narrator, *Pigeon English* is a coming-of-age novel which is both humorous and heart-breaking. It is the story of Harrison (Harri) Opoku who has immigrated to England from a Ghanaian village with his mother and older sister Lydia – leaving the rest of his family behind – to live on the ninth floor of a 14-storey tower block. The novel begins with a crime scene: a young boy, an acquaintance Harri describes as a ‘half friend’, has been murdered outside a fast food restaurant and as the novel unfolds, Harri and a schoolmate attempt to track down those responsible for the murder. As Harri navigates his way through his often perplexing and unfamiliar urban environment, he unwittingly becomes involved in the gang warfare which permeates the violent estate.

Although every user of space modifies it, *Pigeon English* is the only text I analyse wholly written from the viewpoint of a character who actively does so; Harri, for example, is the only character to admit farting in the lift, ‘Then the doors closed again and I let a woodpecker fart out. I dedicated it to God and all the angels. Adjei, it was too close!’<sup>210</sup>

A novel which opens with the chilling line, ‘You could see the blood’, is not an obvious one in which to explore play yet play is prevalent throughout the narrative.<sup>211</sup> Games such as chooking [stabbing], ‘X-fire was teaching us about chooking. He didn’t use a real knife, just his fingers’; suicide bomber, ‘when you run at the other person and crash them as hard as you can’; who can get the closest to a burning climbing frame, and jumping in piss puddles, are informed by a childhood which is far from idyllic.<sup>212</sup> As *Pigeon English* illustrates, however, this is unsurprising given that play is often imitative. Ward cites children in the US playing ‘Assassination’ after the death of President Kennedy, children in Berlin ‘shooting each other across miniature walls’ and Auschwitz children playing ‘Going to the Gas Chambers’.<sup>213</sup> There is, nonetheless, an incompatibility between Harri’s innocence and vulnerability and the disturbing nature of the games he plays – as an incomer from a Ghanaian village he does not have the cultural knowledge or experience of the children brought up on the estate.

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<sup>209</sup> Kelman, who grew up on a council estate said, ‘With *Pigeon English* I was lucky that a lot of the material came from my own experience, my own background, so I had that knowledge to draw on’. Interview with Stephen Kelman, Foyles, <[www.foyles.co.uk/stephen-kelman](http://www.foyles.co.uk/stephen-kelman)> [accessed 28 June 2018].

<sup>210</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 167.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14; p. 13.

<sup>213</sup> Ward, *Child*, p. 97.

In *Pigeon English* children play frequently in the common areas of the tower block and rarely in the playground. The lift functions as an important play space and although Kelman's representation of the lift as a disgusting, defective space is familiar from Chapter 2, when the lift is observed from a child's perspective it acquires a different valence: typical characteristics are subverted, new aspects of its use are revealed. As Stuart Aitken writes, 'if adults use space to contain children's activities and monitor their interactions, resistance may find form in new spaces and communities of creative play'.<sup>214</sup> Kelman's lift is a contested space, a depiction which illustrates the tension precipitated by the different ways in which adults and children interact with the milieu. As Aitken continues, 'adults almost always see the importance of creating spaces for young people but are often loath to let them do so themselves'.<sup>215</sup>

Harri is aware that the lift is disgusting but for him it is also exciting, his view of the lift as a playful site expunges the disgust, 'I love going in the lift, it's brutal, especially when you're the only one in there. Then you could be a spirit or a spy. You even forget the pissy smell because you're going so fast'.<sup>216</sup> When Harri is alone in the lift, he does not experience loneliness as the protagonist of 'Greensleeves' does. His perspective also overturns the unfavourable claustrophobic association of being stuck in a lift; when he deliberates on how the lift will be used when dealing with invaders, he imagines using its confinement to his advantage, 'While I'm fighting the invaders Lydia or Mamma are calling the police. I'd aim for the eye because it's the softest part. It would just make them blind. Then when they can't see anything I'd push them outside into the lift. *The lift is safe* [emphasis added]'.<sup>217</sup>

*Pigeon English* is the only text discussed in this thesis in which the disgusting lift is the result of the agency of characters present in the narrative and in which acts which cause disgust take place in the present action – for example when Harri's friend, Jordan, spits on the lift's buttons. In the other works, the deed has happened and we see the disgusted characters deal with the consequences. 'Greensleeves', *Under a Thin Moon* and 'Doreen' are not written from the perspective of characters who piss, shit, vomit, spit, graffiti or vandalise therefore we gain less insight into motivation.

In texts written from the viewpoint of adults who experience disgust or fear, it is often assumed that it is a lack of recreational space which drives children to use lifts and

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<sup>214</sup> Stuart C. Aitken, *Geographies of Young People* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 178.

<sup>215</sup> Aitken, *Geographies*, p. 169.

<sup>216</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 5.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

other common areas, and there is a begrudging acceptance of the reasons why children assert ownership through games, vandalism and graffiti. For example, in Smith's *NW*, a tower block resident says, 'Those lifts are really a disgrace [...] On the other hand they've got nothing else to do, have they, those kids? That's what gets me. That's what someone should say'.<sup>218</sup>

This fictional depiction of a dearth of play space contrasts with the programme of urban modernism which created the tower block. As the architectural historian Roy Kozlovsky writes, in England from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s, 'the architecture of childhood was at the center of architectural discourse in a way that is unique in architectural history' and 'the theme of the child in the city became for a short period a defining medium for theorizing urbanism'.<sup>219</sup> This emphasis was reflected in 'The Brutalist Playground' exhibition in 2015, which recreated large scale (1:1) fragments of three brutalist playgrounds in blocks of reconstituted foam.<sup>220</sup> The exhibition curators expressed their desire to draw attention away from the 'social and structural failures' of tower blocks towards 'the equally important playgrounds found at the feet of these structures'.<sup>221</sup>

Despite this recent attention, the lack of purpose-built play space in the fiction of the tower block reflects the fact that few playgrounds built as part of the brutalist landscape now exist. When the playground does feature in the texts, it is as an inhospitable environment. Harri comments, 'The swings are always broken from the dog bites [...] There's always drugs needles around the playground'.<sup>222</sup> In a passage about the climbing frame it is apparent that the decrepit condition of the equipment, due to its improper use, is one reason why the playground is rarely frequented. In this unusual instance, a child is upset by the inappropriate use of space by his elders (albeit only teenagers) and it is the fact that they are *not* playing which upsets him:

The best thing is the climbing frame but you never get to go on it because it belongs to the Dell Farm Crew. They're always on it. *They don't even play*, they just sit there

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<sup>218</sup> Smith, *NW*, p. 112.

<sup>219</sup> Erno Goldfinger emphasised the preservation of space for play and pleasure, writing that, 'The whole object of building high is to free the ground for children and grown-ups to enjoy Mother Earth and not to cover every inch with bricks and mortar'. Nigel Warburton, *Erno Goldfinger: Life of an Architect* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 142; In the design for Robin Hood Gardens, a ten-storey estate in Poplar, London, Alison and Peter Smithson hoped that access decks would encourage a community spirit, a space for neighbours to chat and children to play; Roy Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>220</sup> 'The Brutalist Playground' touring exhibition was commissioned by RIBA and curated by artist Simon Terrill and the architectural collective, Assemble.

<sup>221</sup> Royal Institute of British Architects, *The Brutalist Playground* (London: RIBA, 2015), p. 3.

<sup>222</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 98.

smoking fags and hooting the people when they go by. If you go on it after them it just smells of fags and there's too much broken glass everywhere. *I just don't bother anymore* [emphases added].<sup>223</sup>

However, despite the conditions, and that we only see Harri use the playground once during the novel, it is important to him. As the equipment burns after an arson attack, he adopts a metaphor of the playground dying, 'I just wanted to be there for when the playground died, so it knew I was there and that I loved it until the end'.<sup>224</sup> At this point, Harri rejects play and assumes a more adult-like responsibility amidst an increasing sense of helplessness:

Some smaller kids were playing a game to see who could get the closest. They all ran to the fire and the one who got closest before they ran away again was the winner. It looked brutal. I wanted to play but I had to show respect. When you're in Year 7 you have to set an example. Everybody just watched the fire [...] The playground was dying but nobody was trying to save it.<sup>225</sup>

This quotation is prophetic and poignant, made more so by the recognition that Harri is moving from boy to manhood; a few pages later it is Harri who is dying, and there is nobody to try to save him either.

Beyond the playground, the council estate is not represented as a place conducive to play.<sup>226</sup> Harri is conscious of restrictions, enforced by both regulation and an unsafe social environment, by which the space around him is governed. A notable constraint, POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS, is found in the opening paragraph when a murder scene is cordoned off, and throughout the novel Harri lists the prohibitive signs he regularly encounters: on the estate, in the playground, in the shopping centre and at school – despite living in an environment in which rules are routinely flouted. This disregard of and resistance to rules by children is similarly illustrated in 'Greensleeves':

They weren't allowed to play on the grass but they didn't usually pay much heed and the caretaker was forever chasing them. They were always up to something. If it wasn't trampling the grass it was banging about the drying-area upstairs, or running and yelling in the entrance-hall, or playing in the lifts.<sup>227</sup>

Troublesome relationships caused by the failure of children to adhere to rules of appropriate social behaviour in public and common spaces pervade the texts. Tracey Skelton, in her

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<sup>223</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 97.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>225</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 250.

<sup>226</sup> See also 'Greensleeves', 'Even downstairs, right outside the caretaker's office, where the sign said No Ball Games No Loitering, the walls had been daubed and sprayed'. Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

discussion on the geography of play writes, ‘there is often tension, anxiety and anger about children’s presence in particular spaces and places’, and *Pigeon English* provides an insight into how this conflict between children and adults emerges and how behaviours are experienced differently depending on how people interact with space.<sup>228</sup> The lift is a site of play for boys at the same time as it is a site of antisocial behaviour, violence, fear and disgust for women which illustrates the complexities of social interaction. Lefebvre writes:

Some would doubtless argue that the ultimate foundation of social space is prohibition, adducing in support of this thesis the unsaid in communication between the members of a society; the gulf between them, their bodies and consciousnesses, and the difficulties of social intercourse [...] in an ‘environment’ made up of a series of zones defined by interdictions and bans.<sup>229</sup>

Harri’s perspective on the tower block lift challenges some of its defining characteristics and offers an unexpected angle on others. Similarly, in Alison Irvine’s novel *This Road is Red* (2014), based on a history of the Red Road flats in Glasgow, a section told from the third person character perspective of a ten-year-old boy describes the lift as a site of joy and celebration.<sup>230</sup> This passage, in which a group of boys is on its way to watch Scotland in the 1978 World Cup, exemplifies Lefebvre’s arguments on the conventions of spatial and social behaviour:

A lift arrived and the boys surged in. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty boys squeezed themselves into the silver-walled lift that was meant to carry eight adult bodies at the most [...] The lift set off again and a cheer went up. Scotland! Scotland! The boys began to sing and bang the lift walls with their fists. More boys jumped up and down and the lift went on up.<sup>231</sup>

This lift is ‘a zone defined by interdictions and bans’, a space which the boys ‘enjoy and modify’ in terms of both the physical and emotional environment; later in the passage we are told, ‘The lift was hot and smelled of mud and sweat’.<sup>232</sup> We can imagine the sign referenced in the quotation, *Maximum Occupancy Not To Exceed 8 Persons*, an instruction ignored by the boys. In addition, by cheering, singing and banging on the walls, the boys disregard ‘unsaid’ rules of social behaviour in public space. Later in the scene, when a male

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<sup>228</sup> Tracey Skelton, ‘Children’s Geographies/Geographies of Children: Play, Work, Mobilities and Migration’, *Geography Compass*, 3/4 (2009), 1430-48, p. 1443.

<sup>229</sup> Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 35.

<sup>230</sup> Alison Irvine, *This Road is Red* (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2014).

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.102-3.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

resident tells the boys to let his wife into the lift, the woman – reluctant to enter – says, ‘It’s all right, we’ll wait for the other one’, illustrating the ‘difficulties of social intercourse’ and the dynamics of appropriation and exclusion discussed in Chapter 2.<sup>233</sup> These fictionalised narratives of tower block life echo the discussions of Hanley, Skelton, Aitken and others but draw attention to the specific role of *boys*’ rather than *children*’s presence in causing the ‘tension, anxiety and anger’ referred to by Skelton.

While the activities of boys clearly shape the common spaces of the tower block, the narratives also reflect the ways in which these spaces are coded as masculine. This echoes Doreen Massey’s reflections on becoming aware of the gendering of space when she was a child. Massey, who grew up on the Wythenshawe Estate outside Manchester, describes her childhood memories of taking the bus into town past acres of playing fields divided up into football and rugby pitches:

the whole vast area would be covered with hundreds of little people, all running around after balls, as far as the eye could see [...] I remember all this very sharply. And I remember, too, it striking me very clearly – even then as a puzzled, slightly thoughtful little girl – that all this huge stretch of the Mersey flood plain had been entirely given over to boys.<sup>234</sup>

While sports pitches – certainly at the time of which Massey writes – are clearly ‘given over to boys’, I would argue that the common spaces of the tower block, while frequented by boys, are not intentionally ‘given over to boys’ but instead have been ‘taken over by boys’ which reflects the use of space in Ward’s discussion of the lift. As Cuming writes, and is evident throughout *Pigeon English*, ‘things happen on estates for young boys in fiction and film; they are dramatic spaces for adventure and plot development’.<sup>235</sup> Ward echoes Massey and Cuming when he writes, ‘Certainly, whenever we discuss the part the city environment plays in the lives of children, we are really talking about boys. As a stereotype the child in the city is a boy. Girls *are* far less visible’.<sup>236</sup>

Harri plays physical games which take place outdoors or in the common spaces inside the tower block; for him the threshold of the flat’s front door is not apparent, the common space becomes an extension of the private space of the flat, ‘The floor outside my flat is perfect for driving my beach buggy. It’s proper shiny. It makes the car go superfast’.<sup>237</sup> As

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<sup>233</sup> Irvine, *This Road is Red*, p.102.

<sup>234</sup> Massey, *Space*, p. 185.

<sup>235</sup> Cuming, ‘Private Lives’, p. 331.

<sup>236</sup> Ward, *Child*, p. 152.

<sup>237</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 220.

with the lift, the only ambivalent perspective on the stairwell is from a boy's point of view.<sup>238</sup> Harri and his friends assert ownership of the stairs through their play, 'Our base is the stairs outside my tower, the ones that go to floor 1. We're safe there. Only the junkies use them and they're too sleepy to even see us'.<sup>239</sup> In the following quotation, he describes drugs paraphernalia as he demonstrates how the conditions of the tower block, perceived as disgusting and dangerous by adults, are assimilated into his childhood world of play:

People do ease themselves on the stairs, you can smell it from a million miles away. You have to be careful not to go in the puddles. If you jump in a normal puddle you're only a retard but if you jump in a piss puddle it means you're made of piss. If you land on a needle and it goes through your foot you'll get Aids.<sup>240</sup>

While the boys in *Pigeon English* incorporate the vertical nature of the space into their play, we encounter two female characters – Lydia, Harri's sister, and an elderly woman known as Fag Ash Lil – who experience the lift as a site of disgust, fear and violence. In these scenes, both characters are portrayed as classic gender stereotypes: a damsel in distress and a disgusting old woman.

When Lydia uses the lift she experiences it, according to Harri, as a site of fear, 'One time me and Lydia were in the lift when it broke down. It stopped for about one hour. It wasn't even hutious [frightening]. Lydia was screaming like a maniac. I had to stop her going crazy with rock, paper, scissors. I saved the day all over again'.<sup>241</sup> Harrison presents Lydia as a hysterical female and he, despite being the younger sibling, as the heroic male, the knight in shining armour who saves Lydia from the tower. Harrison is dismissive when his sister challenges his version of events,

Lydia: 'Advise yourself! I didn't scream!'  
Me: 'Yes you did. This was Lydia: Make it go, make it go! I hate being stuck!'<sup>242</sup>

Harri's response to his sister's reaction is consistent with his acknowledgment of the responsibility of traditional masculine roles. At the start of the novel he says, 'I'm the man of the house until Papa escapes. He even said it. It's my duty to look after everything'.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Stairs are perceived by women as physically dangerous in a number of texts. For example, when Harri's mother is talking to his Auntie Sonia, she says, 'Don't forget the lift's broken. Take care down those stairs, you don't want another accident'. Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 162.

<sup>239</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 153.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



Despite Harri's youth and innocence, he is aware that his environment is a dangerous one and he expresses a desire to care for his family. When he imagines how he will deal with invaders he says, 'I'll stand in front of Lydia to protect her. And Mamma as well if she's home'.<sup>244</sup>

The second encounter in the lift with a female character is with Fag Ash Lil. Jordan marks his territory and asserts ownership of the space with his saliva; he transforms the lift into a site of disgust and Fag Ash Lil becomes a victim of antisocial behaviour. Harri says:

Then I had to hold the lift door while Jordan did a big spit all on the buttons. When he got out Fag Ash Lil got in. We waited for the doors to close. We could hear her when she pressed the button Jordan did a spit on. She didn't know about the spit.<sup>245</sup>

The boys' play, albeit antisocial, contrasts with the extreme violence prevalent elsewhere in the novel but it is an uncomfortable scene: Fag Ash Lil has been targeted, and is the subject of an attack of which she is unaware; she does not have the opportunity to say 'no' to that which disgusts as she does not realise that the buttons are defiled when she touches them. As in the scene in 'Doreen' when Ma Yates doesn't realise the lift is broken, males are knowing and a female is unknowing and therefore impotent. The violence escalates when Fag Ash Lil uses the lift on a subsequent occasion; Jordan kicks a football at her – firstly into her legs and then into her face – just before the lift's doors close:

Me [Harri]: 'What did you do that for, she go kill us now!'  
Jordan: 'Don't be gay, if she comes after us I'll just shank her, innit.'  
Jordan showed me his knife.<sup>246</sup>

This incident in the lift, while focussing on children at play, is replete with ideas about gender and disgust. The lift is not inherently disgusting but has been made disgusting by boys, and Fag Ash Lil is not inherently disgusting but has been depicted as disgusting through the eyes of a prepubescent boy.<sup>247</sup> Menninghaus writes of her work on disgust, 'This book about disgust is thus, at the same time, a book entirely concerned with the (masculine) imagination of the *vetula*, of the disgusting old woman. Kant's *vetula*, Nietzsche's *vetula*, Freud's *vetula*, Bataille's *vetula*, Kristeva's abject mother,' and, in this case, Harri's Fag Ash Lil.<sup>248</sup> She is

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<sup>244</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 27.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>247</sup> This depiction of Fag Ash Lil is reminiscent of the depiction of Ma Yates, from 'Doreen', who is described by a young, male character as, 'Dog rough [...] nasty as a nailfile'. Beard, 'Doreen', p. 59.

<sup>248</sup> Menninghaus, *Disgust*, pp. 7-8.

presented as an old – ‘at least two hundred years’ – cannibalistic witch: ‘That’s why her eyes are all mad and watery, it’s from eating human meat’. The language used to describe her reduces her to the animal, ‘her legs are very skinny like a bird’; ‘She only has to scratch me with her claws and I’ll get poison [...] If I turned around she’d spit poison in my face and take me away to her den’.<sup>249</sup> This is ironic considering that it is a boy who does the spitting. It is also an inversion of the norm as it is often young men who are depicted in dehumanising terms in the fiction of the tower block, for example when the boys who urinate in the lift in ‘Greensleeves’ are described as dogs.<sup>250</sup>

Children’s gendered responses to the lift appear in a number of the texts I have read. Compare, for example, Harri’s evocation of the lift to that of Janey, the protagonist in Hudson’s novel *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma*: Janey is acutely aware of the stench of urine and describes, ‘trying to hold your breath until the nineteenth floor’.<sup>251</sup> Harri, however, can simply ‘forget the pissy smell’.<sup>252</sup> There is little play in the harsh, neglected lives of Janey and her sister but, when it does occur, it takes place not in the common spaces of the estate but within the confines of the flat, as it does with Lydia and her friends in *Pigeon English* when they stay indoors and do each other’s hair.<sup>253</sup> The common space we see Lydia play in is the block’s launderette, a gendered space predominantly used by women.<sup>254</sup>

However, later in the novel the boys’ use of the lift and stairwell changes when the spaces are transformed from sites of play into sites of fear and disgust. Harri endures an uncomfortable ride in the lift with Fag Ash Lil who thinks it was he, and not Jordan, who attacked her with the football:

I could feel Fag Ash Lil keep looking at me with her eyes all blue and hungry [...] I don’t even want to die yet [...] From today onward going I can never go in the lift again. I can only use the stairs. The stairs are safe. If I run fast enough the pissy smell can’t even catch me.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p.131; p.167.

<sup>250</sup> Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.

<sup>251</sup> Hudson, *Tony Hogan*, p. 136.

<sup>252</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 5.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51; Laundry in the UK continues to be done predominantly by women with 92% of recorded laundry half-hours reported by women in 1985 and 84% in 2005. Ben Anderson, ‘Laundry, energy and time’, *Energy, Research & Social Science*, 22 (2016), 125-36.

<sup>255</sup> Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 167.

The ‘pissy smell’, which earlier in the novel Harri could dismiss, has now become animated and active, it wants to chase him, to ‘stick’ to him; this illustrates Ahmed’s arguments on the stickiness of disgust and the trails of urine which follow Wanda in *Under a Thin Moon*. Any humour in this scene is tempered by the poignant irony – the trepidation Harri feels when faced with the harmless, elderly woman and his belief that, ‘the stairs are safe’. In the final chapter – echoing the death of Damilola Taylor – Harrison is fatally stabbed at the bottom of a stairwell by a teenage boy.

In this chapter I have considered the dialectic of social space and social practice through a discussion of play. Whereas ‘Greensleeves’, *Under a Thin Moon* and ‘Doreen’, are tower block narratives which offer little hope for female characters, who are often lacking in agency, the paidic use of the lift in *Pigeon English* uncovers the active production of gendered space. The social production of a space which is disgusting and frightening is a consequence of children’s play and the themes examined in this thesis are represented through the eyes of a child, be it the stickiness of the lift buttons or the unsympathetic portrayal of Fag Ash Lil. Harri’s experience of the lift differs from that of the female characters which reinforces the gendered nature of the space, while the characteristics of the lift itself contribute to the overall depiction of the tower block. In the conclusion, I consider how the fictional lives and narratives of characters discussed here contribute to and reinforce a mythology of the tower block.

## Conclusion

Through close readings of ‘Greensleeves’, *Under a Thin Moon*, ‘Taking Doreen out of the Sky’, and *Pigeon English*, and by reference to numerous other texts, I have highlighted a number of symbolic and structural narrative functions of the lift in tower block fiction. I have analysed the role of liminality, disgust, mobilities, and play to argue that the lift is a highly gendered and mythologised site used to provide a core structuring device for tower block narratives, mirroring the role of the lift shaft in a high-rise block. I argue that in the texts, the disgusting, broken-down lift is not only symbolic of the failure of the tower block but, in addition, indicative of *whom* the tower block is failing.

While Bernard suggests a range of positive roles of the lift in literature, realist authors writing on social housing tower blocks use the lift to depict and reinforce the perceived unpleasantness and difficulty of life within the setting and to prompt the reader to make judgements about residents, including those who are unseen. However, the lift also plays a material role: it shapes and impacts the experiences of those who live in the tower, predominantly negatively. My analysis of the lift, part of the quotidian infrastructure central to the possibility of high-rise living, has proved enormously enlightening in my consideration of the gendering of vertical space.

The fiction I have examined provides a critical perspective on how hard life in tower blocks can be and how these experiences can be gendered – particularly for mothers, girls and elderly women. Female characters are often depicted as having little agency and a sense of inevitability pervades the lack of control they have over their lives. It is evident that men and boys exert power, with degrees of intent, to adversely affect others’ experiences and that, furthermore, the broken-down lift disproportionately affects the mobility of women. Men and women use lifts differently: for women and men the lift is a functional space but for men it is also a space to play in, vandalise and appropriate. This points towards the ways in which we discuss and encode the spaces of gendered bodies and practices and how this contributes to the production and reproduction of gender roles.

The representations of the lift virtually always portray a hostile environment and the lift acts as a synecdoche for the failure of the tower block. The fiction suggests that the residents of social housing both shape and are shaped by the adverse conditions of the

environment in which they live. There is a surfeit of narratives – in fiction, media and popular discourse – in which the social housing tower block is characterised as inhospitable.

I have been surprised at just how gendered the behavioural and emotional responses to the lift are and how the portrayal of male and female use of the lift exhibits and reproduces stereotypes. To understand this, the lift can be considered as a mythologised space. As a component of a myth of the tower block, depictions of the lift act as a motif which contributes to understanding both the present and past situation of characters while providing guidance for the future.<sup>256</sup> Such myths are not, however, arbitrary – they are drawn from and reproduce elements of historically situated ‘structures of feeling’, the phrase coined by Raymond Williams which can be defined as historically situated, the ill-defined inferences derived from reading in ‘the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts’.<sup>257</sup> As Roland Barthes illustrates, myths rely on familiarity with a dominant discourse to convey their meaning.<sup>258</sup> Through his discussion, Barthes describes how myths underpin and naturalise taken-for-granted understandings of the world, acting as ‘an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation’.<sup>259</sup>

The texts I examine use the lift, in its role as a mythologised space, to embody broader gendered experiences in specific and tangible ways. The lift is a shorthand, an abbreviated form of reference, a narrative device used as a rapid means of representation and communication. The image of the tower block lift is so entrenched in the public imagination that it needs little description – although most authors furnish it with the familiar accoutrements of disgust. It is, in effect, a setting-turned-character, a stock character easily recognised by the reader.<sup>260</sup> It is a particularly useful setting in that it consolidates the social discontent of the tower block into a single, bounded, physical space.

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<sup>256</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Structural Study of Myth’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 68 (1955), 428–444.

<sup>257</sup> Ian Buchanan, ‘Structure of feeling’ *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-675>> [Accessed 7 December 2018].

<sup>258</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 115.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>260</sup> In a new 2012 introduction to her 1979 dystopian novel, *Benefits*, Zoe Fairbairns describes the tower block itself as an important character. Zoe Fairbairns, *Benefits* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2012), Amazon Kindle eBook.

In *Lifted*, Bernard explores the impact of the space of the lift on characters, focussing on how it shapes their interactions within the space. He does not, however, explore the impact of the characters on the lift, the effect of this impact on subsequent users of the lift nor the role of the lift in the users' broader experience of the building in which it is situated. In the realist fiction of the tower block, there is less direct interaction between characters in the lift than in the fiction analysed by Bernard: confined, staged interactions between characters are less important than the ongoing dialectic of different groups of characters and the lift, of society and space. Bernard states that as 'getting stuck' in a lift is such a useful literary device for forming relationships between strangers in urban settings, lifts malfunction far more often in fiction than reality; this frequent malfunctioning is apparent in the fiction of the tower block but only one of the broken-down lift's roles as identified by Bernard – its symbolism – is pertinent to high-rise fiction. The symbolic role is the most important narrative function of the lift and it is predominantly used to exemplify the difficulty, isolation and fear associated with high-rise living. The tower block lift is not a space in which positive, let alone romantic, relationships are formed nor confessions made, unless they are in the form of graffiti on the walls. Although the broken-down lift is a recurring theme in tower block fiction, when the lift breaks down people do not 'get stuck' together as the lift rarely breaks down when in use. On the contrary, when lifts break down, rather than being trapped with others, residents are kept apart, confined to their flats and therefore even more isolated.

The narratives examined here illustrate how mythologised depictions of tower block space have been naturalised. Similarly, Stephen Graham suggests that, 'myths about the inevitable failure of vertical public housing have been so widely generalised that they are endlessly repeated as accepted facts in many Western societies'.<sup>261</sup> In their exhaustive analysis of British tower blocks, Glendinning and Muthesius suggested that these mythologies played an important role in shaping the real-world meanings of the high-rise and its future promise, 'the fundamental message of our book: a plea [...] to step back from the endless clashing of Utopias of housing [...] we cannot hide our belief that the polemics of the seventies and eighties, however exciting their style, have had, all in all, a destructive influence'.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Graham, *Vertical*, p.185.

<sup>262</sup> Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, p. 326.

Glendinning and Muthesius' argument drew on the contrast between depictions of tower blocks in architectural critiques and the media, and their conclusions on visiting every high-rise in the UK, after which they 'were surprised to discover how few were in a state of serious dilapidation – in contrast to high flats' general "media image"<sup>263</sup> Writing twenty-five years later, Boughton echoes this sentiment, 'it is undoubtedly the case that estates are overwhelmingly now decent places to live. I've [...] been struck, in nearly all cases, by their essential decency'<sup>264</sup> Much of the evidence presented in this thesis can be thought of as part of the mythology and image of the tower block.

The argument presented by Glendinning and Muthesius pointed to the 'destructive influence' of the polemics but did not expand on this; however, in the last two decades a new concern has emerged.<sup>265</sup> As Roger Luckhurst writes:

By 2015, the London residential high-rise was the container for very different meanings. Newspapers charted the inexorable inflation of a London housing bubble with a paralysed mix of banality, horror and delight. This post-sub-prime zombie economics could be neatly condensed in the emblem of the luxury tower block, entirely transvalued from its associations with sink estates in the sixties and seventies.<sup>266</sup>

Stephen Graham develops the argument, suggesting that there is political and economic gain to be made from the 'prevailing mythology' of the 'abject failures' of tower blocks built en masse as social housing in the 1950s and 1960s. He believes that these narratives have 'produced one of the crucial 'manufactured realities' widely used to justify neoliberal policies for the systematic disassembling of public housing systems and their distribution into private hands'<sup>267</sup>

As Melhuish, an anthropologist of architecture and the built environment, suggests, 'Writers invent and evoke worlds of the imagination, but they also play an important role in constructing and defining the identity of the real-life, physical places they write about'<sup>268</sup> Consequently, the conclusions of Glendinning and Muthesius and, more recently, Graham,

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<sup>263</sup> Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, p. 326.

<sup>264</sup> John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2018), p.4.

<sup>265</sup> Polemicists include Jane Jacobs, the American activist who campaigned against urban planning in inner city neighbourhoods arguing that it destroyed the culture of cities. See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

<sup>266</sup> Roger Luckhurst, 'High-Rise 1975/2015', *Critical Quarterly*, 58 (2016), 63–9, p. 67.

<sup>267</sup> Graham, *Vertical*, p. 184.

<sup>268</sup> Clare Melhuish, 'Escape from mythologised space', *The Architects' Journal*, 17 June 1999, <<http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/home/escape-from-mythologised-space/772221.fullarticle>> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

point to the material consequences of the mythologised narratives of the tower block, that they are inhospitable places to live in, especially for women and children.

One perspective often missing from the dominant discourse on social housing is that the experience of high-rise living is varied; Boughton refers to ‘the bandwagon criticism of tower blocks’ and argues that they have provided, and continue to provide, decent homes for many.<sup>269</sup> Similarly, Ravetz comments, “‘innumerable tenants’ accounts show that the successes of the estates were in the personal and domestic spheres, and were nothing like as spectacular as its public failures”.<sup>270</sup> This echoes Lynsey Hanley’s recent comment that ‘there is a big difference between how estates are perceived from the outside and how they are seen by those who live there’.<sup>271</sup>

In contrast to the texts, representations of the lift in fiction based on testimony and oral histories offers a more ambivalent and nuanced image of high-rise space. Tenants’ accounts of life in tower blocks, in non-fiction and fiction directly inspired by testimonies, offer an ambivalence rarely seen in fiction or the media. Of her novel, *This Road is Red* (2014) – based on interviews with former residents conducted as part of Glasgow Life’s Red Road Flats Cultural Project – Irvine writes, ‘I wanted to be as truthful as I could to the stories I was told, but I was aware too that I was writing fiction’.<sup>272</sup> In *This Road is Red*, the lift is an important narrative feature of the novel but it lacks the symbolism found in the more clearly fictional work. Its main role is functional and it is mentioned frequently as people move up and down the tower. Although the lift does break down and get stuck on occasion, urine and graffiti are notable in their absence and the lift’s use is, at times, depicted as a communal experience, as in this example told from the perspective of a female character, May:

The lift was full of people when the doors opened. They seemed like her kind of people, happy and friendly and the folk that squeezed in with them seemed like her kind of people too, one man taking all the orders for the floors, pressing the buttons and calling out mind the doors.<sup>273</sup>

Using Irvine’s novel as an example, Cuming observes, ‘accounts that take into consideration the subjectivity and viewpoints of particular individuals in specific circumstances result in

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<sup>269</sup> Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*, p. 4.

<sup>270</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing*, p. 4.

<sup>271</sup> ‘Streets Apart: A History of Social Housing’, BBC Radio 4, 10 part series presented by Lynsey Hanley 28/08/17-08/09/17, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b092sx21>>.

<sup>272</sup> Irvine, *Road*, p. 23.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.



portraits of mass housing estates that, against the dominant narrative, reveal images of heterogeneity, ambivalence and difference'.<sup>274</sup> Such images are prominent in Tony Parker's *The People of Providence* (1983) – transcripts of fifty oral history interviews carried out on a South London estate.<sup>275</sup> Parker's work provides a valuable insight into the multiple narratives that coalesce around a single space: high-rise living is described by residents as both heaven and hell.<sup>276</sup>

As the distinction between literary and oral history accounts shows, the narratives of realist fiction are not necessarily more indicative of 'real' tower block life. As Raymond Williams describes, realism involves "a falsification – false distancing – of the 'fictional' or the 'imaginary'".<sup>277</sup> This does not invalidate realist fiction as a source – as Barthes points out, there is 'no antipathy between realism and myth', and realist literature is itself 'mythical' in terms of its language and narrative.<sup>278</sup> Nevertheless, it remains important to recognise that although authors who use the tower block as a setting and the lift as a leitmotif imagine a fictionalised construction of the space, this imagining rarely strays outside the discourse available to them within our cultural milieu.<sup>279</sup> As Williams writes:

A dramatist must win the consent of his audience to any particular means that he wishes to employ, and while he may often be able to do this in the course of a work itself, by the power of the effect which the method makes possible, he cannot entirely rely on this, for even if the audience is sympathetic, too great a consciousness of the novelty or strangeness of the means may as effectively hamper the full communication of a play as would open hostility.<sup>280</sup>

The contrast between oral histories and fiction based on resident testimonies, and the narratives of realist novels and short stories merits further exploration. However, it is a reminder that fictional representations of estates and tenants operate within and are limited

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<sup>274</sup> Cuming, *Housing*, p. 212.

<sup>275</sup> Tony Parker, *The People of Providence* (London: Pan Books, 1983).

<sup>276</sup> The Block Capital Project – twenty oral history interviews with people who lived or worked in tower blocks in the Midlands from the 1960s onwards – also provides more nuanced representations. Block Capital Project, *Sharing Storeys*, <<https://distinctlyblackcountry.wordpress.com/blockcapital/sharing-storeys/>> [Accessed 14 February 2019].

<sup>277</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), p. 147.

<sup>278</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 137.

<sup>279</sup> Consider, as an example outside the British 'cultural milieu', this description of a woman using a lift in an 'ugly and filthy' apartment block in Naples. 'It was the only place in that huge building I liked [...] this one had wood panelling [...] two elegant benches facing one another, a mirror, soft lighting [...] Feeling alone in the elevator cage I experienced a sort of quiet pleasure'. Elena Ferrante, 'Delia's Elevator' in *After the War: A Collection of Short Fiction by Postwar Italian Women* (New York: Italica Press, 2004), ed. by Martha King, Amazon Kindle eBook.

<sup>280</sup> Williams and Orrom, *Preface*, p. 20.

by the boundaries of the dominant discourse, the ‘structures of feeling’ of the times in which they are written. I suggest that this dominant discourse is reinforced through its mythologised reproduction in the fiction of the lift, the tower block and its residents, and, as it ‘sticks’ to both buildings and residents, shapes the ways in which they are seen by the public, politicians and the media.

## Postscript – After Grenfell

Those who were living now are dead  
Those who were breathing are from the living earth fled.  
If you want to see how the poor die, come see Grenfell Tower  
See the tower, and let a world-changing dream flower.

‘Grenfell Tower, June, 2017’ Ben Okri<sup>281</sup>

Seventy-two people – eighteen children, twenty-nine women and twenty-five men – died as a consequence of the fire at Grenfell Tower on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2017.<sup>282</sup> The tragedy realised one of the greatest fears of high-rise living: being trapped in a fire.<sup>283</sup> The horrifying images, broadcast live on television screens for twenty-four hours while the fire was brought under control, were reminiscent of a disaster movie; portentously, the film *Towering Inferno* was released in 1974, the same year that Grenfell Tower was completed.<sup>284</sup> The relevance of the Grenfell fire to this thesis and its conclusions is inescapable. However, given that legal and media discussions of the fire continue to unfold, it is not possible to examine its consequences in the detail they deserve. This postscript serves as the first steps towards this.

In *Concretopia*, John Grindrod describes Ronan Point as ‘the block that in effect ended the sixties high-rise boom’.<sup>285</sup> It was the architecture of the poorly-designed, system-built tower which took the brunt of the criticism when Ronan Point partially collapsed after a gas explosion in one of the flats. The majority of high-rise blocks built in the 1950s and 1960s were for use as social housing and it was easier, therefore, to dismiss the concept of the tower block as a failure. Four people were killed and seventeen injured in the Ronan Point incident and it played a major role not only in the thirty-year hiatus in the construction of tower blocks in the UK but also in shaping the discourses and narratives I have considered in this thesis.

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<sup>281</sup> Ben Okri, ‘Grenfell Tower, June, 2017’, *Financial Times*, June 23 2017, <<https://www.ft.com/content/39022f72-5742-11e7-80b6-9bfa4c1f83d2> [accessed 29 January 2019].

<sup>282</sup> Kevin Rawlinson, ‘The victims of the Grenfell Tower fire’, *Guardian*, 23 November 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/13/grenfell-tower-fire-victims-dead-missing-identified-named-so-far>> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>283</sup> Gifford identified that tower blocks evoke at least six fears: falling or jumping; fire; earthquake; terrorism (post-McVey and post-9 11); close proximity to strangers (i.e. crime etc.), and the rapid spread of communicable disease. Gifford, ‘Consequences’, p. 2.

<sup>284</sup> *Towering Inferno*, dir. by John Guillermin (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox & Warner Bros., 1974).

<sup>285</sup> John Grindrod, *Concretopia* (Brecon: Old Street Publishing, 2014), p. 342.

The narrative landscape which surrounds the tower block fifty years after Ronan Point has changed. As Owen Hatherly writes, ‘the association that tall buildings are where poor people live has faded’.<sup>286</sup> As investments built by private developers, tower blocks can no longer be so easily dismissed; in London alone, more than five hundred towers of more than twenty storeys are planned or under construction.<sup>287</sup> In the last year of Boris Johnson’s mayoralty, before Sadiq Khan took office, not a single home for social rent was built in the capital.<sup>288</sup>

Following the fire, the initial focus was on the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) and its administration of a £9.2 million refurbishment project which included the external cladding of the building. This cladding is alleged to have contributed to the rapid spread of the fire and its use has raised questions about the adherence to safety regulations, although the efficacy of the regulations themselves is also under scrutiny. Few have spoken out to criticise the architecture of the tower block itself. An exception was Sadiq Khan’s hasty comment, ‘Nowadays, we would not dream of building towers to the standards of the 1970s, but their inhabitants still have to live with that legacy. It may well be the defining outcome of this tragedy that the worst mistakes of the 1960s and 1970s are systematically torn down’.<sup>289</sup> Tearing down desperately needed homes would not help the housing crisis and it appears that it is not the 1970’s architecture that is to blame: concrete does not burn; cheap aluminium-coated cladding with a plastic core does burn although issues such as fire escapes and sprinklers must also be considered. Geraldine Dening, co-founder of Architects for Social Housing, quoted one of her member’s responses to Khan, ‘No, we wouldn’t dream of building to the standards of the 1970s, it’s far too expensive’.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Robert Booth and Owen Bowcott, ‘What we learned from day 8 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry’, *Guardian*, 4 June 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/04/what-we-learned-from-day-eight-of-the-grenfell-tower-inquiry>> [Accessed 21 November 2018].

<sup>287</sup> Julia Kollewe, ‘London’s skyline soars with record 510 tall buildings in pipeline’, *Guardian*, 18 April 2018, Construction industry, < <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/apr/18/londons-skyline-soars-with-record-510-tall-buildings-in-pipeline>> [accessed 7 December 2018].

<sup>288</sup> Robert Booth, ‘Sadiq Khan: London needs to build 66,000 new homes a year, up from 29,000’, *Guardian*, 27 October 2017, < <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/27/sadiq-khan-to-raise-target-for-affordable-housing-in-london>> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>289</sup> Kathryn Snowdon, ‘Sadiq Khan Says High-Rise Tower Blocks From 1960s And 1970s Could Be Torn Down In Wake Of Grenfell Fire’, *Huffington Post*, 18 June 2017, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/sadiq-khan-high-rise-tower-blocks-1960s-1970s-could-be-torn-down-grenfell-tower-fire\\_uk\\_5946344fe4b01eab7a2e39fd](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/sadiq-khan-high-rise-tower-blocks-1960s-1970s-could-be-torn-down-grenfell-tower-fire_uk_5946344fe4b01eab7a2e39fd)> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>290</sup> Richard Godwin, ‘Towers of strength’, *Evening Standard*, 14 July 2017, p. 20.

There is also the question of maintenance budgets; it is alleged that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was under pressure to use cheaper cladding as a cost-cutting measure due to a government cap on council spending on housing although this has been challenged as the council has usable reserves of £274 million.<sup>291</sup> Ravetz illustrated the importance of maintenance budgets in her discussion of the Housing Act 1980, which not only gave individual tenants the Right to Buy but also allowed councils to sell housing en masse. The dilapidation that resulted from inadequate maintenance is highlighted in the expenditure required to transform former council housing into homes which people wanted to own, 'It was usual for developers to spend more than the purchase price over again on refurbishment, and their improvements showed what was required to make them into desirable dwellings: lifts, central heating, full security systems, warm and inviting entrance foyers, perhaps a porter's lodge, efficient caretaking'.<sup>292</sup> The architect Neave Brown commented, 'High buildings should only be used for the very rich because they're the only ones that can be done with proper lifts, proper services, proper control, proper entrances and the proper environment'.<sup>293</sup>

The first hearing of the Grenfell Tower inquiry opened on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 2017 and is ongoing at the time of writing. Amidst a catalogue of safety breaches, evidence presented in June 2018 revealed that a feature designed to allow the lifts to be used in the event of a fire failed to operate; the firefighters' sole access to the building's twenty-three storeys had to be made via the stairs on foot and meant that some equipment could not be transported up the building. Richard Millett, QC, counsel to the inquiry, said the 'failure of the lift to perform as intended is a matter of very serious concern', and Dr Barbara Lane, a fire safety engineer, said that had the fire service not been delayed by the failure of the lifts it 'might have increased the chances of extinguishing the fire before it spread externally'.<sup>294</sup>

A notable narrative to emerge from the media response to Grenfell is the 'revelations' which have emerged about the type of people who live in tower blocks. As David Orr, the

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<sup>291</sup> Rajeev Syal and Harrison Jones, 'Kensington and Chelsea council has £274m in reserves', *Guardian*, 19 June 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/19/kensington-chelsea-council-has-274m-in-reserves-grenfell-tower-budget-surplus>> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>292</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing*, p. 203.

<sup>293</sup> Jessica Mairs, 'High-rise buildings should only be used to house the very rich, says Neave Brown', *dezeen*, 5 October 2017, <<https://www.dezeen.com/2017/10/05/neave-brown-interview-high-rise-buildings-only-for-very-rich-social-housing/>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>294</sup> Booth and Bowcott, 'What we learned' from day 8 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry', *Guardian*, 4 June 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/04/what-we-learned-from-day-eight-of-the-grenfell-tower-inquiry>> [Accessed 21 November 2018].

Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation said, ‘I think we’ve created an environment where people in social housing have been Othered’.<sup>295</sup> However, an article in the *Evening Standard* pointed out, ‘It wasn’t long before the survivors themselves began to challenge the narrative that they were representatives of the ‘dispossessed’, living in some sort of high-rise slum’.<sup>296</sup> Tower block residents knew their neighbours, ‘The collective effort of the survivors also defies the common image of tower blocks as engines of social isolation’.<sup>297</sup> There was a strong sense of community, ‘It’s quite obvious from the residents’ response to the Grenfell disaster that there’s an enormous amount of social cohesion there’.<sup>298</sup> There was an eclectic social community, ‘It’s facile to say that tower blocks are full of poor people – they are full of all sorts of people who reflect the mix of contemporary inner London’.<sup>299</sup> Stories about a Blitz spirit abounded amidst slight incredulity: residents loved their homes and had lived there for years, residents tried to save one another, residents had survived the fire because they were out at work doing second or third jobs, residents sat GCSE exams while their homes were burning. Residents had also formed an association which had repeatedly warned of their fears of a major incident. A 2016 blog post, ‘*Playing with Fire*’ stated, ‘The Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring to an end the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders’.<sup>300</sup>

The fire at Grenfell Tower has impacted on the narrative of tower blocks and social housing; how this will pan out in the longer term remains to be seen. The tragedy raises a multitude of moral, economic and political questions beyond the scope and focus of this thesis. I leave the final word to John Boughton, who asked in his *Municipal Dreams* blog, ‘Can this awful event please put an end to the demonising stereotypes so frequently and so crudely applied to our fellow citizens who live in social housing?’<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> ‘Streets Apart: A History of Social Housing’, BBC Radio 4, 10 part series presented by Lynsey Hanley 28/08/17-08/09/17, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b092sx21>>.

<sup>296</sup> Godwin, ‘Towers of strength’, p. 20.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Grenfell Action Group, ‘KCTMO – Playing with Fire!’, 20 November 2016, <<https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2016/11/20/kctmo-playing-with-fire/>> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>301</sup> John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*, ‘Grenfell Tower’, 17 June 2017, <<https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2017/06/17/grenfell-tower/>> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

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