'I'm Talking But No One Is Listening': Sounding the Hauntology of Thatcherism in *I, Daniel Blake*

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Abstract

Even though Margaret Thetcher's term as Prime Minister ended
in 1990, the reverberations of her policies have lingered on in
British politics, culture and social life. This paper discusses the
legacy of Thatcher within the soundscapes present in the 2016
social realist film *I, Daniel Blake* (dir. Ken Loach). By looking at
the effects of Thatcher's policies and how they are made audible
in working class communities, this paper ultimately questions
whether her presence has truly disappeared. In employing
the fields of hauntology and sound studies as an approach to
Thatcherism, this study sonifies the voices of the past, and
questions how they will echo in the future.

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As Daniel spray paints his manifesto against the unemployment service in the conclusion of the social realist film *I, Daniel Blake* (dir. Ken Loach, 2016), another man yells amongst a cheering crowd that the current political era is 'just like Thatcher', and that working-class people 'will never be free' from government marginalisation in Britain. Since Margaret Thatcher's term as Prime Minister, this feeling of being trapped by her policies has been heard and echoed throughout British cinema. Films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (dir. Stephen Frears, 1985), *Brassed Off* (dir. Mark Herman, 1996) and *Billy Elliott* (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2000) capture how those of working-class backgrounds coped with the impacts of her neoliberal policies.[1] Indeed, we often return to these works to define how Thatcherism affected the working-class British person, and use their characters' tragedies and triumphs to assess how the era will be remembered. But the legacy of Thatcher is not strictly limited to her term in office and films set in the 1980s and 1990s. As this example from *I, Daniel Blake* demonstrates, the social effects of Thatcherism are deeply felt in various parts of the country today, with the economic crash of 2008 and resulting austerity creating further divisions amongst people.

Although Thatcherism and the economic crash appear to be disparate events, sociologist Bob Jessop believes Thatcher's gov-

[1] See Quart 2006, Kalpakli 2012 and Tinwell 2013.

ernment to be responsible for the problems of New Labour at the turn of the twenty-first century and the following coalition government, as the policies of Thatcherism continued 'not merely in terms of [the Prime Minister's] weakened role as a representative of organized labour and champion of the welfare state but also in terms of [their] unashamed adoption of [Thatcher's] neo-liberal agenda'.[2] Economist and social historian Ben Whitham agrees, positing that Thatcher's policies set the course for the increasing neoliberalism in the succeeding New Labour and Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition governments, as they all followed 'the trajectory of [Thatcher's] neoliberalism' through the acceptance of globalisation in the economic market, the stripping of welfare, and the promotion of austerity.[3] Even after her resignation and death, she affects the way policies are shaped.

Like a ghost, she continues to be seen and heard throughout the political turmoil of the present day. Some politicians, such as Prime Ministers David Cameron and Boris Johnson, have argued that the era of Thatcher has completely passed and the public should not worry about further individualist policies returning to the United Kingdom.[4] Although they insist that she is gone, she is still somehow present in contemporary British society. If her ghost haunts British society, how can we interact with it and understand it? Films were able to aid us in understanding the impacts of Thatcher during her tenure as Prime Minister, so film again can help us in understanding the current political age, and the events to come. Understanding all these timelines together through film, we can then, as Katy Shaw writes, understand 'the dual directions of [her haunting]—the compulsion to repeat the past, and an anticipation of the future.'[5] As films catch sights and sounds in a sort of time capsule, we are able to hear this ghost and predict how this spectre will haunt Britain in the decades to come.

While we can no longer physically see Thatcher, her echoes clearly register on film. It is at this point that sound studies becomes invaluable. Sound studies, broadly defined, is the field of study whose 'challenge is to think across sounds, to consider

[2] Bob Jessop. "Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism: Dead but Not Buried." British Politics 10, no. 1 (2015): 29.

[3] Ben Whitham. "Post-Crash Neoliberalism in Theory and Practice." Political Studies Review 16, no. 4 (2018): 257.

[4] Andy Knott. "The New Moving Right Show: Can Stuart Hall's Notion of Authoritarian Populism Help Us to Understand the Current Turn to Populism?" Soundings (London, England), no. 75 (2020): 121.

[5] Katy Shaw, Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature / by Katy Shaw. 1st ed. 2018. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018, 2.

"In listening to the soundscapes of Daniel's daily life, we can hear how he is swallowed by the noises of the past."

sonic phenomena in relationship to one another—as types of sonic phenomena rather than as things-in-themselves whether they be music, voices, listening, media, buildings, performances, or another other […] path into sonic life'.[6] While this field has many practical and physical approaches, it provides the ability to measure sociological trends while privileging the individual sensory experiences which accompany them. As sound scholars Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld suggest, speech and sound generally 'sensitized our knowledge about who was allowed (or not allowed) to speak or to make sounds and when and where this occurred'.[7] As the example above demonstrates, the soundtrack of *I, Daniel Blake* sounds the ways in which its characters communicate with each other—specifically, they are able to find connection because they are oppressed. Yet, sound operates meaningfully in this film in registers beyond dialogue. As sensory studies scholar David Howes posits, 'perception can only meaningfully be studied in context—that is, in some environment (a point which the embodiment paradigm tends to overlook), and that the senses "mingle" with the world'.[8] While the soundtrack of this film is worth exploration, the film uses only a minimal score and the sound design pays more attention to what Daniel is hearing in any given moment and gestures to how these sounds are politically oppressive in nature. Thus, it is crucial to understand how Daniel perceives his world, and what relationship this sensation has with his immediate environment—the environments dictated by his status as a working-class person in a post-industrial landscape.

In listening to the soundscapes of Daniel's daily life, we can hear how he is swallowed by the noises of the past, and the state which wants to silence him. This paper combines sound studies

[6] Jonathan Sterne, "Sonic Imaginations" in The Sound Studies Reader. Edited by Jonathan Sterne. London: Routledge: 3.

[7] Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld. "New Keys to the World of Sound." In The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies, Vol. 1. Oxford Handbooks. Oxford University Press, 2011: 6.

[8] David Howes, "Embodiment and the Senses" in The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies. Edited by Michael Bull. London: Routledge, 2019: 32.

with the emerging sociological study of hauntology. It will use the soundscapes present in the film *I, Daniel Blake* to present the idea that, although the state relies on making social oppressions invisible, these social oppressions are inevitably heard as they haunt. In performing this analysis, we can assess this legacy of Thatcher.

The soundscapes of *I, Daniel Blake* are an ideal object of study to understand the haunting legacy of Thatcher, as they are captured in a social realist film that portrays the daily struggle of individuals living in post-industrial conditions. Set in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (a city in the northeast of England that was heavily economically reliant on the coal and steel industry, and was drastically impacted by Thatcher's policies), it follows the life of the titular character, who retires from his job as a carpenter when he develops a heart condition. The film's plot follows his gradual entry into poverty, as he struggles to find employment and cannot apply for financial support from the government. He meets Katie, a single mother already struggling in poverty. He then makes it his goal to care for Katie and the family and teach her how to survive in a system that takes them for dead. Through this story of how kindness will always be present in times of extreme inequality, the film is deeply critical of austerity. Sociologists John Clarke and Janet Newman note that 'the contemporary politics of austerity combines an economic logic with a particular moral appeal (to shared sacrifice and suffering, to fairness and freedom, to a sense of collective obligation)'.[9] Thus, the notion that one must suffer for the good of the nation has become the prevailing ethos the government wants the public to follow. In this view, the only way to provide a kindness to the collective population is to suffer individually, and the only way to succeed is to work one's way up. Already the ghost of Thatcher can be heard in this neoliberal messaging from the government. Yet the enduring spirit of Daniel and his kindness to Katie is greatly overshadowed by the unliveable state of his social conditions. In a sense, no matter what action he takes, he will always be haunted by the spirit of Thatcher and the damage that her policies have done to him and his community. The soundscapes of the film reflect this, as mechanical noise and the

[9] John Clarke and Janet Newman. "The Alchemy of Austerity." Critical Social Policy 32, no. 3 (2012): 309.

anguished voices of others in his working-class community serve as a constant reminder of the de-industrialisation associated with Thatcher's term and that people continue to think about what things could be like in a world without her. However, as mentioned previously, Thatcher and her government are no longer present, and politicians insists that her policies are dead. Thus, we must find a way to study how her ghost lingers on. The emerging study of hauntology provides such an approach. Hauntology, a term coined by Jacques Derrida, concerns the study of spectres and how older political systems continue to be felt over time, even if they are deemed to be antiquated or dead.[10] Colin Davis provides a useful definition: '[h]auntology supports its near homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither dead nor alive'.[11] Following Davis' argument, hauntology is the study of objects that are somehow still existing societally, despite being believed to no longer exist. While hauntology has been applied to various fields of study, cultural theorist Mark Fisher suggests a useful relation of hauntology to British society. He writes that hauntology in Britain gestures to the idea that the advents of Thatcherism (specifically neo-liberalism and the privatisation of national industries) have greatly thrown Britain off its timeline of continuous economic expansion, as unemployment rose and government spending on social welfare fell in the 1970s and 1980s.

This was further advanced by the New Labour project of capitalist globalisation, which caused Britain to be more involved in a transnational world, eventually causing 'the disappearance of space […] alongside the disappearance of time' through new worldwide innovations such as the presence of the internet and 'the gradual blurring of national borders'.[12] Since a concrete sense of space and temporality become difficult to assume, Fisher believes this 'points to an alternative temporality, another way in which time can be out of joint, a mode of causality that is about influence and virtuality rather than gross material force'.[13] Thus, the British people must always contend with the notion of a lost future that had greater potential, and the objects left behind from the era of Thatcher acquire a haunted quality. While

[10] Jacques Derrida. Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International. London: Routledge, 2006, 10.

[11] Colin Davis. Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 373.

[12] Mark Fisher. "What Is Hauntology?" Film Quarterly 66, no. 1 (2012): 19.

[13] Mark Fisher. "What Is Hauntology?", 22.

this lack of spatio-temporality can seem initially inspiring, as it invites escapism and the potential to imagine brighter futures, it can also become a bleak monument to what did not happen. In Fisher's explanation, he studies how this hauntology appears in Hollywood films such as *The Shining* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980), or science-fiction films such as *Quartermass* and *The Pit* (dir. Nigel Kneale, 1976). Thus, his analysis focusses on films of the 1970s and 1980s to explore the concept of the lost future. It then becomes worthwhile to see how this hauntology manifests in films of the present day and in more realistic contexts, such as that presented by *I, Daniel Blake.* While Fisher tends to reference visual cues in his original study, his approach is equally applicable to sound. Listening to the soundtrack, we can hear the ghosts of Thatcherism lingering and understand how they haunt Daniel and Katie with the notion of an alternate temporality.

When one listens to the film's soundscapes, it is clear that the ghost of Thatcher first appears in the haunting sounds of the industry that once thrived in the area. This is heard when Daniel gives his CV to various businesses. As he walks through the outskirts of Newcastle, he hears the rush of cars that pass on the road as well as the continuous sounds of people talking nearby. However, these sounds are all typical of modern urbanity and can be easily tuned out, as they have become regular.[14] These sounds are eventually replaced by the wind sound that dominates the film's soundtrack, fading all the other noise out. There is an evident haunting effect in this moment—the sounds eerily reflect the mechanised noise and sense of community that used to be so dominant in a factory like this, and the wind sounds emphasise its present emptiness. As Brian Marren notes, 'there is no doubt that the policies of the Thatcher government and the corresponding de-industrialisation of the British economy had an enormous impact on working class communities in [northern] British cit[ies]'.[15] This in turn caused a 'widening gap of inequality, the loss of basic heavy industries and jobs', and loss of a sense of community amongst people of the same class working in the same positions.[16] The rising inequality led to the 'increase in social alienation [and] the decline in social harmony' amongst working class people in the 1980s and 1990s.

[14] For more on the topic of the sounds of urbanity, see Bull, Michael. Sounding Out the City. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000.

[15] Brian Marren. We Shall Not Be Moved: How Liverpool's Working Class Fought Redundancies, Closures and Cuts in the Age of Thatcher. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, 9.

[16] Brian Marren. We Shall Not Be Moved, 15.

[17] What this scene highlights is that this effect is not limited to the Thatcher era, as Daniel struggles to find a job and a sense of community while a dilapidated monument to his once existing community—the factory—still stands.

"Daniel and Katie are haunted by the notion that their voices will never be fully heard by institutions that are designed to support them."

The hauntology of Thatcher is evident in this film not only through the representation of the industries, but also in the speech and the silencing of poorer communities when they mobilise. As Eric J. Evans describes, Thatcher's policies made it difficult for poorer people to organise and make their voices dominant: 'she believed in family as the basis of a secure, stable society. However, her economic and social policies [such as her cuts to social welfare, and the Poll Tax and the 1984 Trade Union Act] made it more difficult for poor families to stick together in adverse circumstances'.[18] Thus, Thatcher's policy was to use institutions to make it difficult for people to express dissent in a collective sense. But institutional silencing did not stop with the era of Thatcher. *I, Daniel Blake* reflects the hauntology of Thatcherism through its representation of the institutional silencing of voices, and the government's use of force to silence voices banding together. Sociologist Susan Jones studies the film's use of voice and justice in relationship to the 2016 Trade Union Act (which bore many similarities to its 1984 counterpart). She analyses the scene in which Daniel attempts to connect with Katie's children, which features a line that summarises the marginalisation of working-class communities. Katie's son, Dylan, is throwing a ball against a wall loudly while Daniel tries to connect with him. When Daniel cannot achieve a response, Katie's daughter, Daisy, explains Dylan's philosophy: 'if no one listens to him, why should he listen to them?'.[19] Jones believes that this shows how lower income earners are represented as not having a voice, as institutions such as schools, the

legal system, and local councils consistently ignore their needs. Moreover, this line represents an institutional silencing to which Dylan has become accustomed. He is often told he is being too disruptive in public spaces, and that he must restrain his behaviour to appear normal to the middle-class people who dominate these spaces. Thus, in Dylan's character, it is evident that silencing exists on a level that is beyond institutions not caring, but institutions actively silencing him. This type of institutional silencing is seen in Daniel's experiences throughout the film, as he often tries to explain to state workers that he has a health condition and his doctor does not want him to return to work but gets constantly interrupted as they assume things about him based on the way he looks, the way he speaks, and the amount of time he has been out of work. Daniel insists that they are not listening to his needs but they continue to interrupt, prompting him to give up and follow their assumptions. One of the only scenes where Daniel raises his voice is when he meets Katie at the job centre, who is complaining to a security guard that she is being punished by the state for unintentionally being late for her unemployment support meeting and feels that she is not being heard. Daniel sees this and yells at the guard for being cruel, wanting them to listen to her. Other workers ignore him, while other unemployed people look at him in quiet shock. Soon, security guards physically block them in the scene and thus begin to muffle their voices. Both Daniel and Katie are promptly ejected from the building and left on the noisy street to fend for themselves. From these examples, we can hear the use of institutional force to halt individuals organising and raising their concerns, much like Thatcher did in her era. In the same manner that Thatcher haunts the political landscape, Daniel and Katie are haunted by the notion that their voices will never be fully heard by institutions that are designed to support them.

This haunting due to institutional silencing develops further as these characters are constantly reminded that there was the possibility for a better future. A key part of Fisher's definition of British hauntology is the fact that the British people will always be haunted by an 'alternative temporality'[20] that exists in opposition to Thatcher's campaign slogan—'there is no alternative'. [21] This 'alternate temporality' is heard in how the characters

[20] Mark Fisher. "What Is Hauntology?", 19.

[21] Mikkel Krause Frantzen. Going Nowhere, Slow: The Aesthetics and Politics of Depression. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2019, 18.

speak of wanting a better future and vocalise their goals to each other, but cannot seem to realise them, as they lose their motivation in contention with the endless bureaucracy of the social welfare system, being forced to silence their own desires. This stems from Thatcher's hate of 'welfarism' and her neo-liberalist belief that every individual should find their own occupation and income without help from the state.[22] Thus, the British people are left with dreams of success, but nowhere to manifest them. Throughout the film, Daniel talks with Katie about his dreams to return to work and do carpentry on his own terms, without 'the state' prying into 'all his health records.' Katie also tells Daniel that she desires to make some money cleaning so she can return to school and give her children 'the life they deserve'. They discuss their dreams in detail and talk about how they will help each other achieve the goals they desire. However, whenever they move to pursue these dreams, they receive letters and forms from the job centre, saying they must interact with the state in an urgent manner. They then quietly abandon their dreams and do what they must to survive. This is seen when Katie stops speaking about her dream job because she is informed that her welfare cannot provide for her and her kids, so she quietly pursues a career as a sex worker. This is also seen when Daniel stops speaking about his desire to return to work and the state tells him he must search for a job despite his failing heart, so he quietly sells all his furniture to survive. At the end of the film, Daniel strives one final time to achieve his dreams by going to the job centre, loudly complaining to his advisor that he cannot survive, and that he needs urgent help from the state. When they tell him they cannot help, he spray paints his demand to have an appeal court session 'before [he] starves'. Although many people applaud and cheer him, the police take him away and sanction him for his 'reckless speaking out against those trying to help'. Once he finally gets his appeal and is told he may have a chance at winning, he dies of a heart attack from the stress he has quietly taken on. This film again takes on a hauntology of Thatcherism, as it shows how people vocalise their dreams, yet cannot pursue them in the way they desire as the state does not deem them worthy of support. Both Daniel and Katie's voices are not heard by the state, and they are

[22] Eric J. Evans. Thatcher and Thatcherism, 71.

haunted by the sounds of what could have been.

Through the application of a sound studies approach to haun-tology, it becomes clear that Thatcher haunts Daniel's daily life and constantly reminds him that he may never succeed. Sound scholar Holger Schulze reflects upon Fisher's version of British hauntology and argues that, through the fact that one cannot 'close their ears' to sound, this haunting feeling might never end:

> This sentiment of being imprisoned in this present and having lost all utopia [represents] a bitter feeling of defeat: a defeat in which the anticipated glorious futures of the past, depicted and sonified, imagined and sculpt-ed […] is lost, is ridiculed and disregarded onto the ash heap of history'.[23]

[23] Holger Schulze. Sonic Fiction. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 110.

I, Daniel Blake uses its soundtrack to capture the ghost of Thatcher and demonstrate this haunting sentiment. While an individual like Daniel or Katie can vocalise their desires, the ghost of Thatcher represented in these institutions will find ways to silence them and stop them from forming a community. *I, Daniel Blake* sonifies the ways in which the individual then be-comes haunted themselves, as they are reminded of the alter-nate temporality they can never achieve.

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