

ADDICT LIVINGNESS

by Waithera Sebatindira

In *John*, I see what it might look like to escape the double-consciousness with which all marginalised groups are familiar. That tiring awareness first cogently described in W.E.B. Du Bois’s ethnographic study, *The Souls of Black Folk*, of seeing yourself both on your own terms and again as society’s dominant groups see you. An awareness that can bring one again and again into the arena of representational politics, into a fight in which the oppressor’s gaze always seems to ultimately win.

Here, we see what might happen when a different path is chosen. Not “let me dictate to you how I am to be seen” or “let me acquiesce to how others demand I be seen”, but another option entirely. It is reminiscent of Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan’s attempt at finding that third option in her latest work, *Seeing for Ourselves: And Even Stranger Possibilities*, except here, Thomas Abercromby uses the agency in a working-class gaze to subvert narratives about who belongs in artistic spaces.

I see this most clearly in the two dancers who appear together throughout the film, moving across contrasting scenes in a pulse-like rhythm. They fix their gazes for the most part forward, towards something off-screen that cannot be seen, suggesting an indifference on their part as to whether or not the viewer understands where they have come from and where they are going. Their purpose is not to tell

a story or even to invite us to follow them. In their dynamism, they refuse objecthood. They dance in front of tall housing blocks and exquisite artworks in a gallery with the same intentionality and expression, demonstrating an equivalence between the value of both settings as their stage. They make the film bigger than the screen, and make of any middle-class viewer a witness rather than a voyeur.

Something of this third gaze is also seen in the way the camera treats the paintings in the gallery. As it silently zooms in towards the artworks, the footsteps of the film crew can be heard. The effect is that these paintings are newly objectified. Art of this nature is often described as speaking for itself, with limited recognition that it also speaks for the class that it privileges. It does communicate with its viewer, and when presented as something so beautiful as to transcend its political context, what it communicates is a wordless remaking of the status quo. As soon as we hear footsteps approach it, however, it becomes an object. Still powerful, still beautiful, but subject to a gaze that can be turned away and that regards it with an ambiguous, agentic perspective. Because the film cuts away at points to expose its working class crew, we know this perspective is working class. Thus, a subversion takes place. Historically marginalised subjects now have the power to determine whether to give meaning and



attention to cultural objects that are usually used to dictate what deserves attention, and what has meaning.

Yet the most moving gaze is the loving one cast first by John himself and then by Thomas over the environments in which they holidayed, lived, and loved. John’s paintings and Thomas’ painterly renderings of flats, fields, and beaches are love letters to the settings of their lives in which their perspectives are centred.

This intertwined gaze brings to mind an epistemological method I’ve previously described as “addict livingness”. In writing about addict livingness, I draw from Katherine McKittrick’s notion of “black livingness” as described in her book *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Black livingness is, amongst other things, an affirmation that we are more than the “abjectness that is projected upon us”. We are more than mere recipients of violence. Rather, we know more. “We know ourselves”.¹

Our bodies are not simply data points that direct one’s attention to the reality of racism and classism. In our engagement in the “aesthetic labour”² of liberation (and this is liberation not as a static endpoint but as a mode of living), a glimpse of our consciousness can be seen. And it is this consciousness that spills outside the boxes constructed by race science and any identity politics that is beholden to a biocentric order.

Addict livingness spills outside of the various categorisations of addiction

in a similar way, be they rooted in a medical or social model of disability, all of which envisage little more than death and immiseration for addicts under present conditions in spite of the fact that our lived experience can be far more expansive than that. I feel comfortable stealing from black livingness to describe an element of addiction experienced across identities, not simply because many addicts are black. Nor because, as T. Virgil Murthy would argue, the experiences of addicts are fundamentally rooted in structures of oppression.³ Not even because McKittrick herself encourages a breaking apart of discrete identity categories to instead recognise collective solidarities. But also because of how addiction is itself used to construct blackness.

As part of the global war on drugs – which has always been a war on marginalised peoples – black people have been constructed in part as drug users and sellers. Given that drug use is usually presented as solely the purview of addicts (and criminals), that these identities are mutually constitutive becomes clear. On top of this, addicts when seen as moral failures (and often even when seen as sick people) are viewed as embodiments of irrationality, which justifies our dehumanisation in a post-Enlightenment context in which humanity is bound up with a specifically patriarchal and racist conception of rationality. Black people, as subjects deemed incapable of attaining the rationality required for human status, thereby again easily smudge and blur into addicts in public consciousness.

And addiction plays its part in constructing class identity. Whether or not we live on the sharp edge of deprivation plays a large role in determining whether we will engage in chaotic substance use, and also the ways in which substance use is characterised will both describe and create our class position. The genteel middle-class alcoholic versus the Scrumpy’s-loving lout versus the affected sniff of the Notting Hill cokehead versus the man with a crack-pipe making everyone uncomfortable at the bus stop versus the revolving door at the Priory versus no recourse to public funds.

coercive, and even loving attempts to curb our compulsive behaviour. Recovery produces addicts who are newly alive again and therefore unwilling to kneel uncritically before capital. And, recovering or otherwise, addicts achieve unexpected triumphs every day. In short, addicts do not respond and conform to the controlling gazes on them whether they emanate from the state or from their communities more generally. Instead, we look outward, off-screen, to a new world. One which makes space for unconditional support for active addiction’s chaos and urgency. One shaped by recovery’s demands for new life.

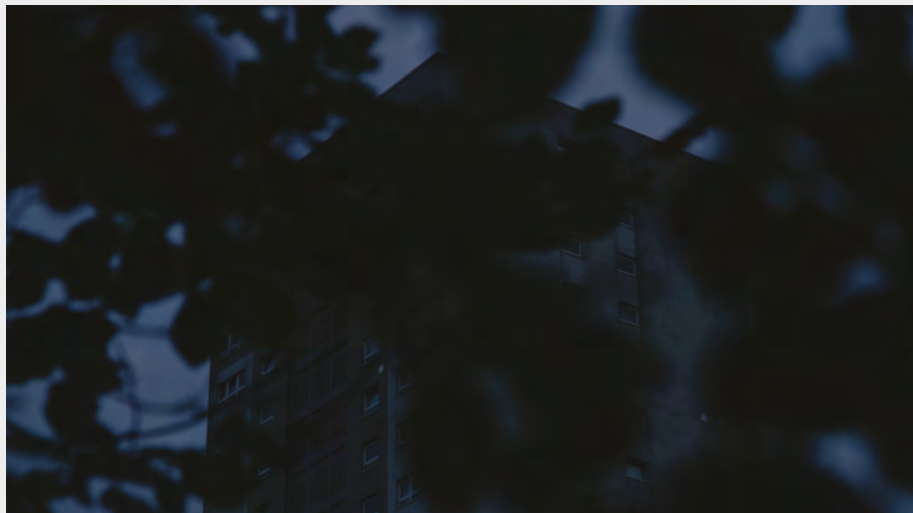


We see the relevance of addict livingness, even to the extent it does align with stereotypes, not just as a means of enhancing our understanding of social hierarchy but as a phenomenon that by its nature spills out of and into everything. It is a sociological lens and itself a source of embodied knowledges drawn out of experiences of addiction and recovery that resist the usual categorisations and insist that all struggles are connected. Thus, while it draws from theory that centres black life, it is an epistemological framework that naturally lends itself to thinking through and about *John* and any other work of art that raises political questions about the place of people struggling with their substance use in society.

For starters, there is something of the method of addict livingness in the rejection of a voyeuristic gaze in *John*. People in active addiction are consistently unresponsive to pleading,

But this livingness as something that exists outside imposed boundaries is clearest in Thomas’ inheritance of his father’s loving gaze over their environment. When we imagine what is inherited from people who struggled with their substance use, it’s usually trauma if not addiction itself. Here we see an example of something else. An inheritance not only of a love of art but of a class consciousness and radical desire to extend a father’s narrative in service of exploring what working-class artists can achieve absent limiting societal expectations. Grief is a natural method of exploring this inheritance and a particularly radical one where it is grief for the sort of people we are expected to throw away.

Amongst addicts, addict livingness is being surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. Many of us (most of us?) are pulled out of this life before our time, leaving the rest of us here, unsure whether we are the lucky ones who will



live out our time “in full” or if we have simply not left before our time yet. I wonder if these ghosts with whom we are in community think of us, too. Do they share memories of the living? Do they intercede on our behalf?

Addict livingness demands space to roam and to do so it thins the veil; makes the veil porous such that, long after his death, the memory of my grandfather’s trembling hands could communicate something to me about my own newly shaking hands that saved my life. In the same way, it pierces the veil in *John*; flashing points of orangy-yellow light that shimmer on the block of flats in the opening scenes, scattered blobs of light across



John’s painting and the blinking light-house in North Berwick communicate to Thomas that he is here.

Addict livingness spills outside time, defies all laws, shows that addict inheritances in this life are consistently more than trauma or more addiction, even when they are also trauma and more addiction. When engaged with politically, they raise the question of whether ongoing legacies of addiction are the fault of addicts or the structures that fail us all.

The newly empty chair at the AA meeting, the rehab spot that opens up unexpectedly like a sudden, quiet gasp in the dark; the intake of breath that is only just/that brings with it finally the beginning of understanding. From beyond the veil, the communication of people who died still or as a result of grappling with their substance use

“is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living”⁴. This communication is not always clear – there is uncertainty about the exact settings of John’s paintings, for example – but, particularly when intertwined with the lives of those still here to love him, this livingness communicates what is most important: that what John painted mattered. That there is meaning to his existence. That the places he visited and painted deserved immortalising. The still life fruit bowl in which he likely had to imagine the fruit he painted can raise class consciousness when juxtaposed with the fruit bowl as a common artistic motif symbolising of wealth and excess.

All of which helps makes possible the presence of a father’s painting in a gallery – the sort of place where a working-class voice battling addiction is not expected to be found.

Here, we also have the promise of Jodie, John’s great-niece and a young but accomplished dancer featured throughout the film. And the older dancers who refuse a gaze. Who become a gaze themselves, potentially moving outward into a new world, until the end of the film when where they look directly into the camera. Foregrounded in the sort of painting where working-class people, if they appeared at all, would be in the background. Their dynamism makes them more alive than the painting’s other protagonists. Their stark poses in the final frame, which fit in so seamlessly with the movement of the painting, highlight that their presence

there makes perfect sense. It is natural for them to occupy artistic space and be seen and heard. What is unnatural is their erasure from what should always have been a diverse historical and contemporary narrative told not from one (classist) perspective but from all of them.

1. Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, p. 46.

2. Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, p. 61.

3. T. Virgil Murthy, ‘Addict oppression: the carceral-clinical seesaw’, The Addict Collective, 15 May 2023, <https://addict-collective.substack.com/p/addict-oppression-the-carceral-clinical>, accessed 25 October 2023.

4. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, London: Faber & Faber, 2019, p. 46.

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Produced on the occasion of the exhibition *John* by Thomas Abercromby at Collective Gallery, 21 October — 23 Dec 2023

