



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Villages Gone Wild

Death by Rural Idyll in The Casual Vacancy and Glue

Peeren, E.

Publication date

2018

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Rurality Re-Imagined

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Peeren, E. (2018). Villages Gone Wild: Death by Rural Idyll in *The Casual Vacancy* and *Glue*. In B. Stringer (Ed.), *Rurality Re-Imagined: Villagers, Farmers, Wanderers, Wild Things* (pp. 62-73). Applied Research and Design Publishing.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Villages Gone Wild:

Esther Peeren

Death by Rural Idyll in *The Casual Vacancy* and *Glue*

*"Those junkies and plebs streaming through our village;
we must raise the drawbridge and lower the portcullis"*

Howard (*The Casual Vacancy*, episode 1)

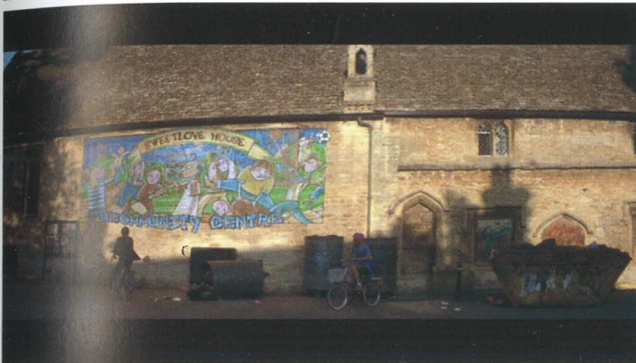
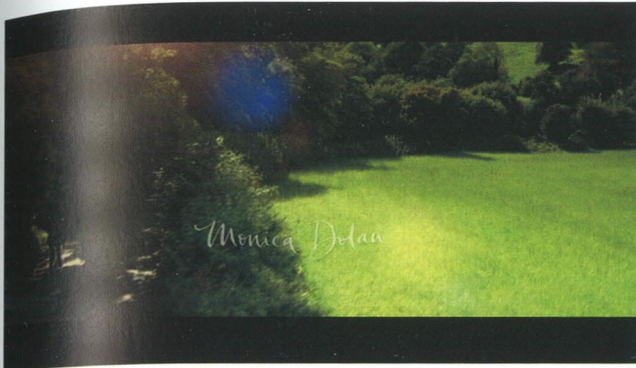
*"I used to think I was so lucky being brought up here, but, you
know, it's shit"*

Tina (*Glue*, episode 6)

The three-part BBC series *The Casual Vacancy*, based on the 2012 novel by J.K. Rowling and broadcast in 2015, opens with the camera panning across a green rural landscape from a bird's eye perspective, picking out two teenage boys on bicycles on a country road and following them as they ride through a picturesque village (Figs. 1 and 2).¹ The boys briefly stop to gaze at a scantily clad mannequin in the window of a lingerie shop before continuing to a large mansion that was clearly once grand but is now a dilapidated community centre, covered with graffiti (Fig. 3). After removing some gum stuck to a stone inscription indicating that the building was "bequeathed by Sir Phineus Sweetlove for the enjoyment and betterment of the people of The Fields" in 1865, the boys enter to find water leaking from the roof and a portrait of Sir Phineus disfigured by a crudely spray-painted ejaculating penis (Fig. 4). The ensuing story charts the aftermath of the sudden death from an aneurysm of Barry Fairbrother, who, as a member of the Pagford parish council, had been campaigning against a proposal by the council president, Howard Mollison, to end the community centre's service to the inhabitants of The Fields, a nearby council estate, in order to allow its redevelopment into

a luxury spa. Barry's seat on the council, the "casual vacancy" of the series' title, is eventually filled by Howard's son and the proposal passes, with the resulting suspension of addiction treatments and daycare services indirectly causing the death by drowning of Krystal Weedon, a teenager from The Fields.

The first scene of the eight-part series *Glue*, shown in 2014 on E4, shows a field of yellow rapeseed at night with a teenage boy crossing through it.² The boy stops, takes some pills and removes his clothes. After running through the field, startling a couple having sex in a car by the side of the road, he reaches a farm, climbs on to a grain silo and jumps into the grain stored there, sinking completely into it before being pulled out by his friends (Figs. 5-8). "That was mental, fucking mental!" he screams. The tight group of friends of which the boy, James, is part is thrown into disarray when, the next day, one of them, Cal, a 14-year-old traveller, is found murdered. The series focuses on the friends' responses to his death as well as on the police investigation, which is confronted with multiple suspects and two more victims. In the final episode, Cal's brother Eli, who became his guardian after their mother killed herself

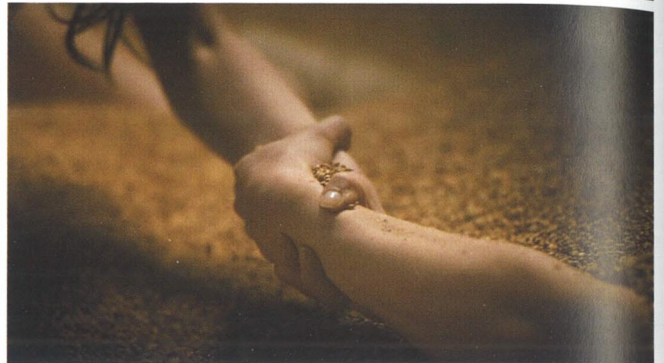
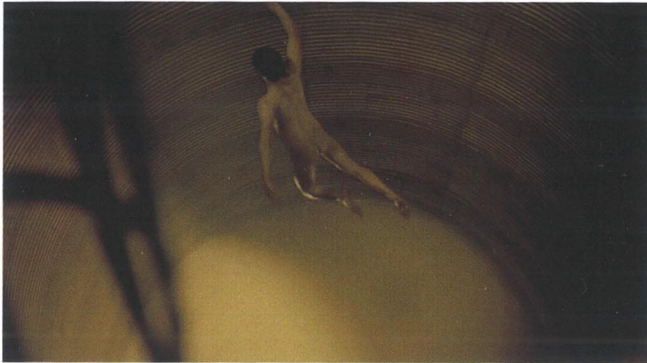
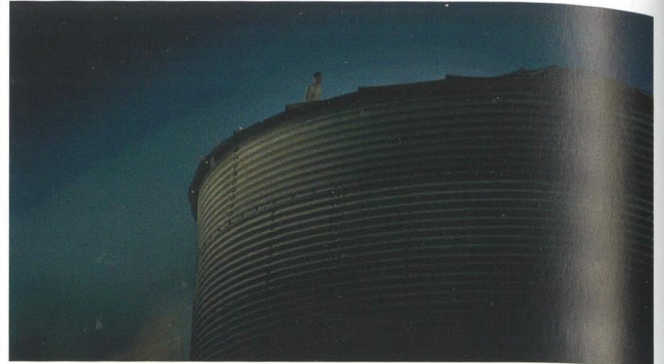


(top row) Figs. 1-2; (bottom row) Figs. 3-4: Opening scene *The Casual Vacancy*, episode 1 (screenshots)

and their father went to jail, turns out to have accidentally killed Cal during a fight after Cal told him he wanted to leave Overton, the small rural town where the series is set, for a new life in Argentina with his boyfriend. Eli murdered the other two victims because he blamed them for making Cal want to leave: one was responsible for putting Cal into care before Eli became his guardian and the other, a police officer, started sexually abusing him while he was in care.

Both of the series' opening scenes and ensuing narratives play with viewers' expectations. In the initial scenic images of the rural landscape, the village and the field, they invoke the genre

most intimately associated with the countryside, that of the idyll, which characterises it as a timeless, sedate, local realm cut off from the rest of the world and from cosmopolitanism in the sense of worldliness. Yet, by almost immediately introducing elements – drugs, dereliction, sexual experimentation, murder and a desire to see other places – that mark these particular countrysides as transient, wild, and emphatically situated in a larger world, the series also challenge the idyllic genre's appropriateness as a frame for the stories they will unfold and, by implication, for the overall imagination of the contemporary countryside in cultural imaginations and in life, in Britain and elsewhere.



Figs. 5-8: Opening scene *Glue*, episode 1 (screenshots)

Although over the course of its long history the idyll has taken different forms, all of these entail a certain “mystification” of rural activities that works to naturalise and legitimate particular social relations.³ Some of the idyll’s incarnations, most notably those originating in the classic Mediterranean (pastoralism) and 18th century England (romanticism), have proven particularly persistent and are said to “linger as ghosts” in contemporary perceptions and portrayals of the rural across the world.⁴ As a result, crucial aspects of 21st century rural life, from depopulation, poverty, and land grabbing to the emergence of mega farms and increasing environmental pollution, are obscured or overlooked.

While the tenacious hold of the idyll on the perception of the countryside may be explained by reference to the genre’s basis in “normative social convention” and people’s general hesitancy to let go of what is familiar,⁵ some critics have suggested that it results from a deliberate attempt

on the part of social élites to shape the contemporary countryside, in its material actuality and its social and cultural imagination, as an idyllic space of order and normativity in which anything considered “other” – which may even include farmers and their activities – is excluded or rendered invisible.⁶ The countryside thus forged is composed of tight-knit, homogeneous communities living in villages composed of traditional cottages and country houses offering the peacefulness, stability and wholesomeness thought to be lacking in disconnected, diverse and architecturally incoherent cities. Contemporary British popular culture reinforces this idyllic ideal-image of the countryside through a noticeable “editing out” of those elements deemed inconsistent with the countryside’s ascribed function of offering an alternative to or (imaginative) escape from the disorder and uncontrollability associated with the urban, the modern, the globalised and the cosmopolitan.⁷

This chapter contends that *Glue* and *The Casual Vacancy* counter this editing out by insistently portraying the countryside as also ugly, unruly, wild, and cosmopolitan. Importantly, they do this not by presenting a narrative of an initially idyllic realm corrupted by external influences, which leaves the idea of the idyll as the proper, authentic genre of country life intact. Instead, as the opening scenes demonstrate, they locate disorder, wildness and cosmopolitanism within the countryside from the very start. At the same time, the series do not fit the mould of the anti-idyll as a site of horror in which “isolation from modernity is both thrilling and threatening [and] the countryside is an arena for slavish adherence to superstition, primitive sexual practices and violent hatred of outsiders.”⁸ Although the anti-idyll appeals to a very different affective register, it relies on the same notion of seclusion as the idyll. In *Glue* and *The Casual Vacancy*, as I will show, the rural is not isolated and accommodates wildness without being pervaded by it, marking it as neither a paradise lost nor a realm of utter disorder.

By putting the normally disavowed social and spatial others to the rural idyll – the unsightly community centre and the troubled inhabitants of The Fields in *The Casual Vacancy*, and the traveller community that is home to Cal and Eli in *Glue* – at the centre of their narratives, the series highlight the idyllic genre’s inadequacy to contemporary country life. As such, they render perceptible what Lauren Berlant calls the “waning of genre,” which occurs when the “conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life” and the “depictions of the good life” associated with particular genres “now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life.”⁹ In both series, the waning of the idyll is seen to have tragic consequences, as certain characters prove unable to let go of the familiar comforts this genre promises and take out their frustration on those they view as standing in the way of these comforts. The quote from *The Casual Vacancy*’s Howard that serves as the first epigraph to this chapter exemplifies this stance in its invocation of “junkies and plebs” threatening to overwhelm a village

Howard claims ownership of and imagines as a medieval castle able to withstand outsiders by pulling up the drawbridge and closing the gate.

In what follows, I first explain the continued attraction of the idyll by turning to Mikhail Bakhtin’s account of its persistence as a literary genre and to work in rural studies that outlines its continuing force in the social realm. Subsequently, I elaborate on Berlant’s notion of the waning of genre and its association with the affective attitude of “cruel optimism.” The last part of the chapter features a close narrative and visual analysis of how the two television series mobilise elements of wildness to expose the idyll’s status as an actively harmful, even deadly “cultural fantasy.”¹⁰

The cruel promises of the rural idyll

The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualises the idyll as a chronotope, a historically and culturally specific combination of a particular construction of temporality with a particular construction of spatiality that “defines genre and genre distinctions” as conventionalised forms in literature and in life.¹¹ For Bakhtin, genres are relatively stable yet capable of changing or being discarded in response to social, historical, or cultural developments. This response, crucially, may be delayed to the point of certain literary genres “continu[ing] stubbornly to exist, up to and beyond the point at which they had lost any meaning that was productive in actuality or adequate to later historical situations.”¹²

With regard to the idyllic chronotope, Bakhtin distinguishes four “pure” types: “the love idyll (whose basic form is the pastoral); the idyll with a focus on agricultural labor; the idyll dealing with craft-work; and the family idyll.”¹³ He stipulates, however, that these types share features and are often mixed. Uniting them is the idyll’s fundamental relationship to a unitary, cyclical, pre-capitalist form of folkloric time that binds a small community to a fixed, familiar, isolated place

where its members follow in the footsteps of their ancestors. In this community, everyone engages in “the collective task of fostering the growth and renewal of the social whole,” which is accomplished through a limited series of repetitive activities: “love, birth, death, marriage, labor, food and drink, stages of growth.”¹⁴ Additionally, people are not yet individualised, there is no sense of a historical time enveloping and potentially influencing the community’s continuous renewal, and there are, crucially, no outsiders.

In response to the emergence of capitalism and particularly industrialisation, Bakhtin sees the “idyllic complex” develop in new directions, yielding different stories, of those who leave their community and return individualised (provincial novel), of the destruction of the idyll (*Bildungsroman*), of the idyll’s sublimation into the foundation for a romantic philosophy (Rousseau), of a confrontation with the dangerous world outside the idyll (family novel) and of the “man of the people,” who is of “idyllic descent” and as such retains an authenticity that allows him to expose corruption.¹⁵ What remains in these new forms and what allows the idyll to persist to this day, in literature and life, is a longing for the core idyllic notion of a “small but secure and stable little world of the family, where nothing is foreign, or accidental or incomprehensible.”¹⁶

To maintain the fantasy that the rural can deliver this orderly, safe, sedate little world, even in the 21st century, it is necessary to exclude all elements considered disorderly, dangerous and exciting – or, in other words, anything wild – as well as all elements linked to what Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan in their article on rural cosmopolitanism define as cosmopolitanism’s “experience of living in a state of flux, uncertainty and encounter with difference,” an experience, they insist, which is “possible in rural, urban or metropolitan settings.”¹⁷ This need to exclude extends to certain groups of people. One group consistently viewed as out of place in the rural idyll, despite being deeply tied to the rural environment and forming close, familial communities, is that of travellers, who tend to be cast, mainly on the basis of their living in a state of flux, as “rural

demons.”¹⁸ *Glue* challenges this view by emphasising that the traveller community it focuses on settled near Overton a long time ago and by motivating Eli’s actions through his desire for a stable domestic life with Cal in the council house he secured for them after being told a caravan was not a suitable home.

Another group whose presence in the countryside is routinely disavowed in the cultural imagination, in the supposedly factual presentation of rural life in a magazine like *This England*¹⁹ and even in rural studies research, is that of young people. A study of children aged 9 to 16 in rural Northamptonshire conducted to shine a light on this “hidden geography” found that many experienced their lives not as secure but as restricted and frequently had their activities disapproved of for interfering with what adults considered the proper use of rural space.²⁰ Consequently, “rather than being part of an ideal community many children, especially the least affluent and teenagers, felt dislocated and detached from village life and there was a strong sense of alienation and powerlessness.”²¹ This sentiment is echoed by Tina, one of *Glue*’s central teenage characters, in the disillusioned statement serving as the second epigraph to this chapter.

The persistence of the rural idyll also causes the presence of crime in the countryside to be denied. Despite a recent rise in British rural crime figures, “idealised (and idyllised) notions of rurality” have installed a belief that “such practices would not occur within the rural domain, especially if committed by those who live or work in the countryside” and that if there is rural crime it will have a distinctly rural character rather than resembling urban crime.²² As I will show, in contrast to the popular ITV detective series *Midsomer Murders*, which features idyllic villages shocked by gruesome murders that are inevitably solved in order to facilitate the idyll’s reinstatement, both *Glue* and *The Casual Vacancy* portray non-sensational crimes such as drug dealing, cigarette smuggling, theft, and the fencing of stolen goods, which are also common in non-rural settings, as part of everyday rural life.

When it comes to what the rural is supposed to look like, the lingering of the rural idyll produces a strong sense that rural architecture should be picturesque (charming thatched cottages, elegant country houses with neatly designed gardens, small farm houses) and homogeneous in terms of style so that newer buildings match the older ones seamlessly and appear to have always been there. Material structures that do not fit the image of the rural idyll include industrial (farm) buildings, modern architecture and design, as well as any decaying or derelict homes, apart from ruins, which, like the one of an abbey featured in *The Casual Vacancy*, can be considered part of heritage. Unkempt gardens, rubbish or waste and modes of disfigurement associated with the urban, such as graffiti, are anathema to the rural idyll and, consequently, strictly policed or kept out of view. In *Glue* and *The Casual Vacancy*, these elements enter the visual frame in juxtaposition with those fitting the fantasy of the idyll. By mixing the sedate and the wild, the series suggest a shift akin to the one urged by Martin Phillips, following Nigel Thrift, from associating the rural with a “romantic version of complexity in which there is basic wholeness” that is closely aligned to the idyll to associating it with a “baroque view of complexity” that acknowledges the rural “as a set of elements or actants that whilst often connected to one another do not constitute some all encompassing coherent whole.”²³

While such a shift seems apposite given the manifest complexity of contemporary rural life, which, like urban life, is characterised by flux, uncertainty and encounters with difference, the narratives of both *Glue* and *The Casual Vacancy* also emphasise the difficulty of overcoming deep investments in long-established genres like the idyll. As Berlant has argued, genres “provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold ... in life or in art,” shaping people’s responses.²⁴ A “waning of genre” occurs when the event and the affective expectation conjured by genre no longer match. In this situation, a choice has to be made between continuing to see the event as if it still accorded with the affective expectation, thereby disavowing (part of) the event,

and adjusting the affective response to the event, so that the genre is reconfigured. For Berlant, the latter is the more constructive response, but the former the more common, as people are inclined to hold on to familiar genres, even when they can no longer deliver on their promised good lives.

This holding on frequently takes the form of an affective structure that Berlant calls “cruel optimism,” arising “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” and when a “scene of fantasy” is revisited again and again in the hope that it will finally fulfil one’s desires.²⁵ While Berlant focuses on this affective structure’s cruelty to the one maintaining an attachment to the superseded genre, *Glue* and *The Casual Vacancy* suggest that the cruelty of optimism may also affect others, particularly those viewed as thwarting, in this case, the desire for the rural idyll to be confirmed as still a (potential) reality. Thus, a displaced cruelty is at play in the way children growing up in the rural come up against

the sharp disjunction between the symbolism and expectation of the Good Life (the emblematic) and the realities and experiences of growing-up in small, remote, partly serviced and fractured communities (the corporeal). Feelings of not belonging and that no one is listening become all the more discouraging in the constant flurry of imagery that presents rural places as harmonious, united and inclusive.²⁶

It is, then, precisely the continuing vitality of the fantasy of the rural idyll and the force of many people’s persistent investment in this fantasy that act cruelly upon those aware of the glaring discrepancy between the fantasy and their actual lives (like *Glue*’s Tina, who thinks her life is “shit”) or upon those who are thought to spoil the fantasy (like Howard’s “junkies and plebs”). As I will show in the final part of this chapter, the two television series highlight this mechanism by casting the idyll and its lingering influence as a destructive, even deadly force.

Death by Rural Idyll in *Glue* and *The Casual Vacancy*

As indicated, *Glue* edits back in the “wild things” usually excluded from portrayals of the rural that remain invested in the genre of the idyll, most notably teenagers, travellers, and crime. However, rather than doing away with the idyll altogether, the series invokes its continuing power to determine what is considered “emblematic” of the countryside. Shots featuring the picturesque village church (Fig. 9); birds soaring in blue skies; cows grazing in fields; horses galloping through country lanes; a village green; a village pub; and narrow streets with quaint cottages are not eschewed but contrasted with shots of elements of rural life that do not fit the idyllic mould, such as the disorganised traveller site (Fig. 10); a seedy snooker hall; a new development with cement council houses under construction; animals dying and being skinned; drug use involving “some sort of industrial agricultural effluent cleaner type of thing” (episode 1); criminal activities; and, most disturbingly, Cal’s dead body, discovered in the first episode by James, who later turns out to have been Cal’s lover, when he hits it with his tractor, initially taking it for a dead lamb.

Glue consistently emphasises that its story is not one of wildness unexpectedly invading an idyllic setting, but one of wildness being at the heart of the rural, rendering it incommensurable with the idyllic ideal. Thus, the teenagers are not recent in-migrants, but have lived in the village their whole lives, just like the traveller site has been in place for as long as people can remember. Wild behaviour occurs across the generations: the teenagers indulge in drugs and one of them has a child from an affair with Tina’s father, while Tina’s mother is an alcoholic and, as a result of divorce, affairs, abandonment, suicide, crime, and death, all the featured families are to some extent “broken.” In addition, the investigation into Cal’s murder brings to the surface a disturbing history of institutional child abuse and paedophilia. Even before Cal’s murder, then, Overton did not fit the idyllic ideal.

In *Glue*, the idyll is always already waning. Nonetheless, it lingers as a normative ideal and affective fantasy. In the first guise, it survives in the traveller community, which aspires to form an enclosed world with its own traditions and language in which everything is familiar and from which everything non-familiar is rigorously excluded. The travellers in *Glue* refer to outsiders as *gadjo* (men) or *gadji* (women), refuse to let anyone outside their community attend Cal’s funeral and are revealed to have banished Ruth (the teenage mother who has become a police officer) and her mother from the site when the latter became involved with a *gadjo* for the second time (after Ruth’s father). When one of the travellers is questioned about Cal’s murder, he states: “we believe that you have corrupted yourselves and we as a people have decided to keep our children and ourselves free of your soil, your crap” (episode 4). This image of travellers as pure, uncorrupted people separated from the rest of the world resonates with Bakhtin’s description of the idyll, putting into question the notion of travellers disrupting this genre’s good-life fantasy. As such, *Glue* signals the persistence of the idyll as a normative ideal, while simultaneously highlighting the genre’s versatility.

As an affective fantasy, the idyll lingers in the way the central teenage characters, despite turning to alcohol, drugs, and partying to combat feelings of boredom and confinement, are invested in the intense familiarity of their own little group to the point of being unable to acknowledge the possibility of change. Thus, Tina decides to ask her boyfriend Rob to marry her because “it’s the way the world has always been” (episode 6), even though she is in love with Eli and Rob has cheated on her. In Berlant’s terms, Tina displays an attitude of cruel optimism, believing, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, that if she keeps relating in the same way to Rob, Eli, her alcoholic mother and her own body (she is bulimic), then her vision of the good life, which cleaves close to the rural idyll,

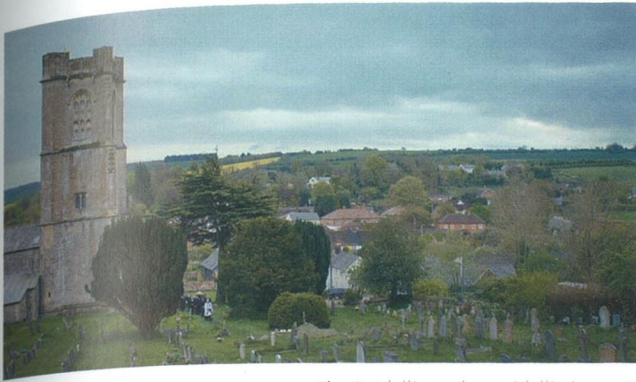


Fig. 9: Idyllic and non-idyllic images of the countryside in *Glue*, episode 1; and Fig. 10: episode 3 (screenshots)

will be realised, despite a wild streak that sees her use drugs, get drunk, and joyride. After Rob, knowing that she is in love with Eli, tells Tina “you don’t want to marry me” (*episode 6*), she finally sees that life cannot always stay the same. When Eli, after showing her the council house he was going to live in with Cal, asks her to leave with him because “this place is killing me,” she tells him “I’m ready to go with you” (*episode 7*) and waits for him at the railway station. Eli never shows up because, after discovering it was James who Cal wanted to leave with for Argentina, he has kidnapped him. Tina is convinced Eli will take James to the council house, telling Ruth: “He’s coming for his future, trust me” (*episode 8*). Ruth, however, correctly surmises that, unlike Tina, Eli remains bound to an idealised past: “He doesn’t give a fuck about the future, he’s going back to the past, he’s going where his mum went” (*episode 8*).

Eli and Cal’s mother committed suicide at the Uffington White Horse, a Scheduled Ancient Monument in Oxfordshire outlining a horse in chalk-filled trenches thought to date back to the Iron or Late Bronze Age.²⁷ It is there that Eli has taken James, telling him that he holds him responsible for his brother’s death and that Cal should never have given James a pendant with a carving of the white horse, as “these pendants they were about me and him and our mum, they weren’t about you” (*episode 8*). A flashback to the night of the murder shows Eli becoming enraged when Cal insists that their family “is a disease”; that

his mother, who wanted Eli to go away with her, leaving Cal behind, was “a cunt”; and that he is “leaving all this because it’s poison” (*episode 8*). Begging Cal to stop, as his words cut into the good-life fantasies he holds to with cruel optimism (about his mother, about family loyalty trumping all, and about Overton as a safe little world where time can be reset to erase any bad experiences), Eli pushes Cal face-down into the mud, suffocating him as he insists: “I’m not letting you leave me, I’m not letting you go” (*episode 8*). Cal, having suffered physical and sexual abuse in care, embodies the mismatch between the idyllic fantasy of rural life and its actuality, as well as the cosmopolitan desire to build a new life on the other side of the world – a new life that, in line with Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan’s notion of cosmopolitanism as “the art of deploying technologies from one world to potential advantage in another,” would have him using his talent for working with horses in Argentina.²⁸ Understandably keen to leave Overton for a new life with James on the other side of the world, he falls victim to Eli’s inability to acknowledge the waning of the rural idyll as something that cannot be remedied by turning back time and by revalidating the patriarchal idea of family central to its good-life fantasy,²⁹ according to which Eli owns Cal by virtue of being the elder brother. In the end, it could be said that the true killer in *Glue* is the seductive fantasy of the rural idyll.

A similar scenario of death by idyll plays out in *The Casual Vacancy*, which, like *Glue*, pointedly includes the wild elements that tend to be elided in idyllic portrayals of the rural, such as the run-down community centre (Fig. 3), the bleak council estate (Figs. 11 and 12) and the teenagers whose jaded perspective on rural life is privileged: Krystal, who struggles to take care of her addicted mother and little brother Robbie on the estate; Andrew or Arf, also from the estate, who has an abusive father and who posts as his uncle Barry's ghost on the online council message board in order to lay bare Pagford's underbelly; and Stuart or Fats, who lives in the village with his father, the school headmaster, and his mother, the guidance counsellor, and who, disgusted with the pretensions of his parents and the other adult villagers, starts having sex with Krystal as part of a "quest for authenticity" (episode 2).

Over the course of the three episodes, wildness is revealed to be inherent to the community, belying the efforts of Howard and his wife Shirley to "put Pagford on the map" (episode 1) as a perfect English village capable of offering "decent people" (episode 2) a real-life rural idyll. Howard and Shirley believe that this idyll would be realised if only they could keep the people of The Fields out – through what Barry argues amounts to "herding people into ghettos because they don't fit the aesthetic" (episode 1). However, the idea of the village as a safe, sedate, simple little world offering happiness and comfort is most effectively disrupted not by those seen as outsiders, but by those firmly considered as "Pagford people" (episode 1): Howard turns out to be having an affair, Shirley almost destroys her son's marriage by belittling her daughter-in-law, their spoiled granddaughters turn out to be the ones spraying graffiti on village storefronts and almost all the adult villagers are permanently stressed because of work and other responsibilities. At the same time, some of the ostensible outsiders turn out to have deep roots in the community: generations of Weedons are, for example, buried at the church cemetery, leading Krystal to tell Fats: "we're part of history" (episode 3). As in *Glue*, therefore, there is an essential mismatch between the fantasy of the rural idyll, with

its strict conventions concerning who and what does and does not belong within it, and the much more complex everyday realities of contemporary rural life.

Interestingly, in an extra feature entitled "An Introduction to *The Casual Vacancy*" included in the DVD box-set, the director of *The Casual Vacancy*, Jonny Campbell, calls it "a snapshot of society today," adding that "the themes and issues are timeless and classic and recurring across generations" and that "it's the same everywhere, no matter where you live." These statements evoke the rural idyll in their references to timelessness, generations following in each other's footsteps and uniformity, expanding the genre's reach to contemporary Britain as a whole – according to Campbell, "Pagford is a sort of microcosm of British society." On the one hand, this can be seen to indicate how the lingering attachment to the rural idyll reaches far beyond the countryside, making it a national fantasy. On the other hand, in generalising what the series is about, Campbell glosses over the series' specific engagement with the rural environment and with the hold the idyllic genre has on its imagination. Although *The Casual Vacancy*, like *Glue*, suggests that many of the problems people in the countryside struggle with are the same as those faced by (sub) urbanites, against the notion that the rural offers a privileged realm immune from the negative effects of globalisation and modernity, it also highlights the specific pressure resulting from the expectation that the countryside will offer a better life.

For Howard and Krystal, this pressure produces cruel optimism. Howard believes that winning the vote on the community centre will curry favour with the Sweetloves, who live in the grandest house in Pagford and, as descendants of Phineus Sweetlove, will benefit financially from the conversion of the community centre into a spa. It is clear, however, that, for the Sweetloves, Howard and the other villagers are just as abhorrent as the people of The Fields are to him. Consequently, Howard's vision of a community of "Pagford people" that would include him and the Sweetloves on equal footing is and will always remain a fantasy. The cruelty of his misplaced



Figs. 11-12: Council Estate in *The Casual Vacancy*, episode 2 (screenshots)

optimism takes the shape of increasingly vivid hallucinations in which he is confronted by Barry's ghost and the figure of Death telling him: "you know what the real casual vacancy is? It's the grave. It yawns open briefly and it's filled by us" (episode 2). When Shirley finds out about his affair from a video of him having sex with his assistant posted on the council message board, it all becomes too much and Howard has a heart attack.

Krystal's cruel optimism consists of believing that her life could actually be getting better as a result of Barry offering her an apprenticeship at the community centre, the new social worker's commitment to supporting her family, her mother's enrolment in the methadone programme and Fats' interest in her. However, after Barry dies, the social worker is taken off their case, her mother relapses and Fats refuses to help her when she needs him, she realises that her optimism was misplaced. That Pagford ultimately is not a safe, familiar space of belonging for Krystal is driven home when, having been threatened by her mother's dealer, she plans to take Robbie to Fats' mother, who has promised to help, only to realise she does not know where in the village she lives.

Besides experiencing the cruelty of her own attachments to the good-life fantasy of the rural idyll as a supportive community of belonging, Krystal is also fatally affected by the cruelty of Howard's tenacious pursuit of this fantasy, which he sees as firmly excluding her. After the parish council vote is won and the community centre closed, Krystal's mother has to travel

by bus to a nearby town to attend a methadone clinic. When this turns out to be too much effort, she goes back to taking heroin. Robbie also loses his daycare place at the community centre, leaving Krystal to take care of him. Driven from her home by her mother's addict friends, Krystal gets into a fight with Fats and momentarily loses sight of Robbie near the local river. Thinking he has fallen in when she sees one of his shoes floating (in fact, he has been taken home by one of the villagers), she jumps in, gets entangled in the cables of a stolen television Arf's father dumped in the river after being unmasked as a thief by Barry's ghost and drowns. While many characters are implicated in her tragic death, in the end, as in *Glue*, the narrative points to the relentless pursuit of the unattainable fantasy of the rural idyll as a crucial factor in Krystal's death.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to show how, by portraying the rural as inherently but not completely wild, *Glue* and *The Casual Vacancy* move away from the familiar modes of both the spoiled idyll and the anti-idyll, which ultimately reaffirm the idyll's status as the proper genre of the countryside. Instead, the series present stories of death by idyll – where the idyll, in being pursued as an achievable ideal despite its waning as a genre adequate to the realities of contemporary rural life, itself becomes wildly destructive. This destructiveness is aimed in particular at the cosmopolitan elements of contemporary rural life, at the fact that it encompasses, in and of itself, flux, disorder

and difference, and at those who, because they expose the idea of the village as a safe little world of sameness and familiarity as an illusion, are seen as lacking humility and loyalty. Both series emphasise how the affective attitude of cruel optimism, which Berlant sees as characteristic of the refusal to face the waning of a genre, is not just harmful to the self but can also harm others, especially those drawing attention to the fact that the genre is waning (like Cal) or those seen to stand in the way of the realisation of the waning genre's good-life fantasy (like Krystal).

There is, however, an important difference between the series' endings. In *The Casual Vacancy*, Krystal's tragic death seems to have been quickly forgotten, without those implicated being held accountable: Simon's dumping of the television remains undiscovered, Fats is berated by his mother for not "being careful" with Krystal but believed by his father when he says he does not know anything about what happened, and the fact that it was the closing of the community centre that triggered the events is not acknowledged by any of the characters. Moreover, one of the closing scenes shows Barry's widow Mary letting a couple out after giving them a tour of her cottage, which she has put up for sale, and telling them: "you look like Pagford people to me" (*episode 3*). Despite Mary's

own disillusionment with Pagford, her words nevertheless suggest that the fantasy of the rural idyll remains very much in place, just like Howard, who survives his heart attack to see the community centre turned into a spa. The ending of *Glue*, on the contrary, insists that the fantasy of the rural idyll needs to be let go of. Thus, when Eli, as he is being arrested, tells Tina "I just want to go back to the beginning," she replies: "Haven't you got it yet? You can't stop" (*episode 8*). In combination with Ruth's decision to move back to the traveller site because she can now see it as offering not the good life or an utterly bad life but a good enough life and with the phrases "we never look back, no we only look forward" and "hearts broken from the start" featured in the Vaults song *Premonitions* that plays over the closing scenes, Tina's response indicates the urgency of leaving behind lingering attachments to waning genres and their good-life fantasies in order to prevent these attachments from turning cruel, in relation to oneself or others, and to enable the emergence of new genres more adequate to present-day village life.

Endnotes

- 1 *The Casual Vacancy*, DVD (Bronte Film and Television Limited/Warner Home Video, 2015)
- 2 *Glue: The Complete Series*, DVD (Eleven Film/EntertainmentOne, 2014)
- 3 Brian Short, "Idyllic Ruralities," in Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Mooney (eds.), *The Handbook of Rural Studies*, (London: Sage, 2006): 133-148, p.144
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.145. See also David Bell, "Variations on the Rural Idyll," in *The Handbook of Rural Studies*: 149-60; Michael Bunce, "Reproducing Rural Idylls," in Paul Cloke (ed.), *Country Visions*, (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003): 14-30; Raymond Williams, *The Country & the City*, (Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011)
- 5 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.7
- 6 E. Melanie DuPuis, "Landscapes of Desires?" in *The Handbook of Rural Studies*: 124-137, p.127
- 7 Rosemary Shirley, *Rural Modernity, Everyday Life and Visual Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), p.8
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.6
- 10 Short, "Idyllic Ruralities," p.144
- 11 M.M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Towards a Historical Poetics," in M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Michael Holquist ed.), (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 84-258
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.85
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.224
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp.211, 226
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp.235-236
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.232
- 17 Vinay Gidwani and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan, "Circular Migration and Rural Cosmopolitanism in India." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 37.1-2 (2003): 339-67
- 18 Owain Jones, "Little Figures, Big Shadows: Country Childhood Stories," in Paul Cloke and Jo Little (eds.), *Contested Countryside Cultures*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p.147. See also Keith H. Halfacree, "Out of Place in the Country: Travellers and the 'Rural Idyll'" *Antipode*, 28.1 (1996): 42-72
- 19 Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2002)
- 20 Hugh Matthews et al., "Growing Up in the Countryside: Children and the Rural Idyll." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 16.2 (2000): 141-153, p.142
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.151
- 22 Peter Somerville et al., "The Dark Side of the Rural Idyll: Stories of Illegal/Illicit Economic Activity in the UK Countryside." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 39 (2015): 219-228, p.219
- 23 Martin Phillips, "Baroque Rurality in an English Village." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 33 (2014): 56-70
- 24 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p.6
- 25 *Ibid.*, p.1
- 26 Matthews et al., "Growing Up in the Countryside," p.151
- 27 See Philip Schwyzer, "The Scouring of the White Horse: Archaeology, Identity, and Heritage." *Representations*, 65 (1999): 42-62
- 28 Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, "Circular Migration," p.351
- 29 Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," p.231; Jo Little and Patricia Austin, "Women and the Rural Idyll." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 12.2 (1996): 101-11