

■ Claire Hooper

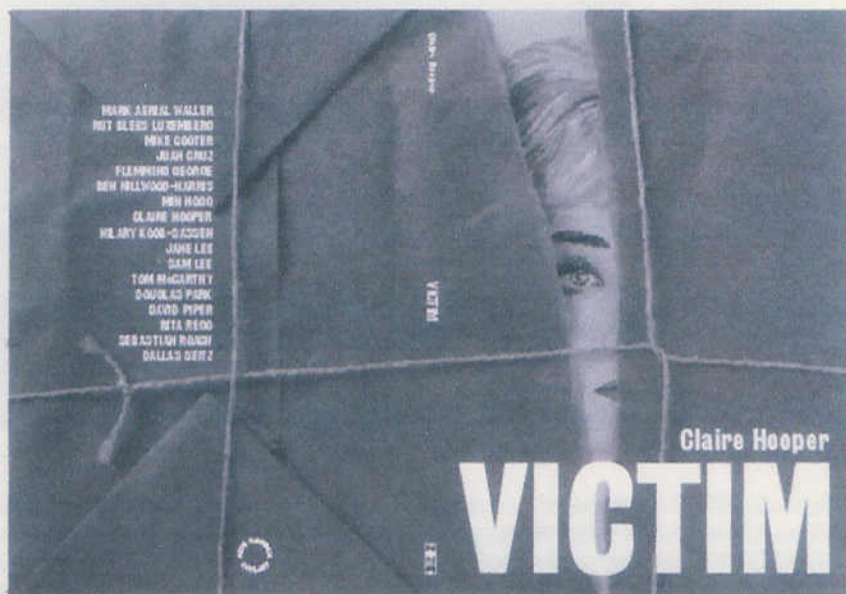
Sally O'Reilly

Claire Hooper, *Victim*, Zazie Press, London, 2005, 88pp, illus. £8.00, 0955122708.

Victim is a collective effort to locate the chimera of significance in insinuation. Claire Hooper invited a number of people, including writers and artists, to crystallise ambiguities into a prismatic meta-fiction. The point of departure was the film *Victim*, 1961, directed by Basil Dearden and starring Dirk Bogarde and Sylvia Syms, which deals with the then illegal practice of homosexuality. A barrister is implicated in a blackmail case when a young man commits suicide. The barrister, married but gay, pursues the young man's blackmailers, considering them his murderers, although to bring them to justice would disclose his own illegalities and jeopardise his brilliant career. The film is a rich agglomeration of characterisations and hints of clandestine lives, essentially a series of *mises en abyme* that reflect the overarching narrative.

The mechanics of the murder mystery and blackmail rely on the withholding of information, of secrets, gaps and the strategic reveal. Hooper's project focuses on these gaps, recentralising marginalia, reconstructing partial views or speculating on the blanks. Each writer was asked to select a gap within the film and write something from it. The form of the writing was not prescribed, and the range includes monologues, screenplay manuscripts and court case evidence. The content was implied by the film, but not delineated – for instance Rut Blees Luxemburg and Hilary Koob-Sassen wrote the blackmailer's letter and Tom McCarthy wrote a dialogue between the barrister and his wife, not only supplying imagined dialogue but also interstitial imagery with its own divergences and palimpsests of associations. Interestingly, by radiating from the central hub of the film, the principal gap in the book is the film itself. Besides a synopsis of the film on the first page of the book, there are few clues as to the outcome. These metafictional bound their fictional progenitor, creating a hollow core from which everything appears to tumble.

The emphasis on lacunae provides rich material for the culturally associative. Writer Sebastian Roach finds plenty of yardage in the character Paul Mandrake, a jaded soft-porn photographer. The plant mandrake is reputed to grow from the spilled seed of hanged men and purportedly can still be found between the paving stones of London's Centre Point,



the site of one of the mediaeval city's gallows. Roach's Mandrake inhabits the liminal spaces of nearby Soho, drinking with Dan Farson and Francis Bacon in the French House and the Colony Room. The scenes are classically tawdry and would have been considered risqué during the 60s; but it is often lamented that Soho has been colonised by cultural tourists, and these venues no longer denote the subversive behaviour of a counterculture. The gap between *Victim* the film and *Victim* the book demonstrates the changes wrought by 45 years of liberalisation. The reflexive aim of the film was to air the case for the decriminalisation of homosexuality, but the cultural landscape is now so altered that it is almost impossible to locate real transgression within the book.

The iconography of Farson's mid-century Soho pivots on the notion of a 'scene', of insider exclusivity, and the book adopts some of the characteristics of this. There are a number of insider jokes: Ben Hillwood-Harris, who writes from the perspective of fictional bookseller Harold Doe, is himself an art bookseller; Min Hogg, founder editor of *World of Interiors*, writes a letter from a gay couple in prison to 'Darling, Darling Mummy', focusing undue attention on the fripperies of decor. But these gags are not signposted; they are strictly for those in the know. Unlike the film, which withholds information to imply in no uncertain terms what is going on, the book creates yawning chasms that a reader's comprehension might fall down.

A previous collaborative book based in London, *London Consequences: A Novel*, 1972, edited by BS Johnson and Margaret Drabble,

was published to mark the Festivals of London. Johnson and Drabble wrote the first and final chapters together, with other writers, including Melvyn Bragg, Rayner Heppenstall and Olivia Manning, providing intervening chapters. What differentiates Johnson and Drabble's project from Hooper's is a final sense of completion. Each writer took up the previous writers' text and continued it from its present state, in the manner of exquisite corpse. For Hooper's project, on the other hand, each contributor worked independently, introducing a blindfold to the game, which in turn generates a setback to the reader. A lot of assumed knowledge is required to appreciate the fulsome of the book, without which it is somewhat indigestible. A different approach to framing may have ironed out this problem, but then, personally, I am all in favour of projects with small potential audiences. Some may label this as elitism, others might simply call it integrity and focus. ■

Claire Hooper is at Hollybush Gardens, London, to March 12.

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