Mid-century gothic : the agency and intimacy of uncanny objects in post-war British literature and culture

Mid-Century Gothic: The Agency and Intimacy of Uncanny Objects in Post-War British Literature and Culture

by Lisa Mullen

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reassesses the years 1945-1955 as a hingepoint in British culture, a moment when literature, film and art responded to the wartime hiatus of consumer capitalism by resisting the turn towards conspicuous consumption and self-commodification. This resistance can be discerned in a gothic impulse in post-war culture, in which uncanny encounters with haunted, recalcitrant or overassertive objects proliferated, and provided a critique of the subject/object relationship on which consumerism was predicated.

In the opening chapter, the ubiquity of bombsite rubble is brought into dialogue with mid-century mural painting both in literature and at the Festival of Britain. In the second chapter, Barbara Jones's *Black Eyes and Lemonade* exhibition of ephemera is considered alongside the work of the Independent Group. The third chapter examines how the period's new media and computing hardware further complicated the status of the subject, through an analysis of the work of George Orwell, Alan Turing and William Grey Walter.

In the fourth chapter, haunted furniture and domestic ephemera threaten to become rival subjectivities, in works including Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* and Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise Longue*. The fifth chapter considers the ways in which mid-century clothes and apparel enabled or restricted the autonomy of their wearers, through a comparative analysis of the Coronation, the British Everest expedition, and Britten's coronation opera *Gloriana*. Finally, the onset of atomic anxiety is explored through stories about bombs, prosthetics and bodily penetration including Powell and Pressburger's *The Small Back Room*.

The thesis concludes that the intimacy and agency of these unruly objects remain as half-submerged cultural signposts offering an alternative understanding of twentieth-century materialism.

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> The new human type cannot be properly understood without awareness of what he is continuously exposed to from the world of things about him, even in his most secret innervations.
>
> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*.[1]

This thesis reassesses the years 1945-1955 as a hingepoint in British culture, a moment when literature, film and art responded to the wartime hiatus of consumer capitalism by resisting the turn towards conspicuous consumption and self-commodification which threatened to be – and arguably would become – definitive of the later 1950s and 1960s. This resistance can be discerned in a gothic impulse in postwar culture, in which uncanny encounters with haunted, recalcitrant or overassertive objects proliferated, and provided a critique of the subject/object relationship on which consumerism was predicated. A sense of otherness connects the objects collected here: it is found in the rubble and detritus of wartime bomb sites; in mass-produced items reappreciated as art; in media hardware that commands and undermines the subject's autonomous physical existence; in haunted junk invested with glamour and value; in costumes and equipment which enable access to heterotopic forms of existence; and in bombs with compact, inscrutable interiors that contain a vast zone of emptiness and devastation. Such disorderly objects evade or complicate the smooth workings of economic and libidinal exchange, and even when they are bought and sold, their value and meaning is disturbingly fluid, either because they are wrecked, salvaged or repurposed, or because they are ritualized, intangible or unobtainable.

This research developed out of a Masters dissertation on the Festival of Britain, called 'Lost and found: disorientation and misreadings at the 1951 South Bank Exhibition'. That summer-long theme-park of British postwar identity has sometimes been dismissed – or nostalgically celebrated – as a mere exercise in kitsch, or an attempt by the establishment to distract the masses, but I argued that the uncanny dissonance between its futuristic agenda and its grimy and battered surroundings summed up the ambiguous quality of the mid-century as a threshold

[1] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 40.

moment. The South Bank was a gothic space in which a sanctioned story about national identity and optimism could be disrupted by the unruly interplay between the visitors and the exhibits; it was haunted by both the past and the future – visited by the sighing spectres of the blitz and the chain-rattling spectres of modernism's suddenly superannuated promises of the world to come. And while the guide-catalogue claimed that it 'develop[ed] its themes by means of things you can see and believe',[2] it proved surprisingly difficult to codify the meaning of its haphazardly curated displays and objects in order to align them with a pre-planned message. One anecdote, recalled by the exhibition's Director of Design, Misha Black, summed up the way a spirit of resistance and liberation could be invested in and expressed through the thing-world within this liminal space. Black describes a dinner laid on in the giant Dome of Discovery just before it opened, given for the disgruntled workers who were labouring in difficult conditions to complete it on time:

> A few naked bulbs gave illumination, the dark areas were greater than the lit, braziers glowed with minimal warmth. The speeches of exhortation to greater effort and fewer trade-union disputes were dreary and misconceived. The atmosphere became as frigid as the night, when suddenly one man sent his paper plate (food eaten) whizzing across the void. In a moment a thousand plates were spinning, until the whole volume of the Dome was alive with white discs, as though invaded by flying fish. This was a magical moment.[3]

These humble plates, repurposed as playthings and sent across the dark void, became animate and uncanny in their moment of flight: an image of the liberated potential of the mid-century thing, which had more resonance than any of the carefully placed and exhaustively explained exhibits which would later fill the Dome. This thesis seeks out similar objects which, as Adorno points out in the quotation above, offer a secret insight into what was new about the people of the mid-century, and the ways in which the things around them demonstrated the powerful agency, and the suffocating intimacy, of a different kind of materiality.

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[2] *South Bank Exhibition London: Festival of Britain* (London: HMSO, 1951), p. 9.
[3] Misha Black, 'Architecture, art and design in unison', in Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), pp. 82-85 (p. 85).

The mid-century moment

The middle of the twentieth century was a time that seemed, to some contemporary cultural commentators, dangerously indistinct and contingent on the past, and urgently in need of a defining identity. Cultural forms which had developed in the interwar years had been in hiatus since 1939; at the end of the war there was a clear sense that modernism had become stale and new ideas were needed, but not much clarity about what they would be or where they would come from. In her 1953 essay, 'English Fiction at Mid-Century', Elizabeth Bowen considered postwar literature in terms of the uncomfortable and almost embarrassing persistence of what she felt were juvenile modernist tendencies. 'A century halfway along its course may be considered due to declare maturity,' she suggests:

> The twentieth century's development, however, has been in some directions so violently forced, in others so notably arrested as to seem hardly to be a development at all or at least to be difficult to recognize if it is one. […] Life and art are still seeking their footing in their actual time – both have the stigmata of an over-long drawn-out adolescence.[4]

Describing the development of modernism after World War I, she notes that the conflict had produced 'a cracking and splintering of the social mould' which

> accounted for a shift, as to the subject, from outer to inner – from man as a public being, in public play, to man as a seat of isolated, and in the main suffering, private sensibility. For the greater part of the interwar years, subjectivity hazed over the English novel […] The intellectually respectable English novel for some time concentrated upon, insisted upon, the victim-hero.[5]

For Bowen, modernism's self-absorption was akin to teenage angst. If the birth of the twentieth century had triggered an inappropriate fascination with the fragmented

[4] Elizabeth Bowen, 'English Fiction at Mid-Century', in *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 321-24 (p. 321).
[5] Bowen, p. 322.

subject, then, what theme was the century in middle age to pursue? For Bowen, who was born in 1899 and might have considered herself to have grown up alongside the century, this was a question that demanded a prompt answer. However, she frames the predicament of the age obliquely, in terms of the Festival of Britain and its demand for a grand, nation-defining public spectacle:

> The call for an exhibition may therefore be said to have taken us by surprise, and found us unready, in disarray. […] Individually, no potential exhibit is not expressive: how, however, is each so to be placed as to bring out its relationship with the others? The warrant for and point of an exhibition must be its overall significance and expressiveness. In this case, one is tempted to ask, of what?[6]

She answers her own question by concluding that the trauma of World War II must be the mid-century's primary subject, but that modernistic navel-gazing is no longer appropriate. The interwar novel, she writes, 'was somewhat "out" in its concept of what makes tragedy. It did not finally diagnose the modern uneasiness – dislocation.'[7] The sense of things being out of place was not just a matter of a generation of potential young writers being sent abroad to fight; Bowen was also interested in the gothic dislocation of things and people who appear as uncanny apparitions in the everyday world, out of place or out of time. The stream-of-consciousness approach adopted by novels of the psychic interior was not sufficient to convey this new disruption of the orderly boundaries between public and private:

> The salutary value of the exterior, the comfortable sanity of the concrete, came to be realised only when the approach of the Second World War forced one to envisage wholesale destruction. The obliteration of man's surroundings, streets and houses, tables and chairs, sent up, for him, their psychological worth. Up to now, consciousness had been a sheltered product: its interest as consciousness diminished now that, at any moment, the physical shelter could be gone.[8]

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[6] Bowen, p. 321.
[7] Bowen, p. 322.
[8] Bowen, pp. 322-23.

While the chaos and disruption of war robbed novelists of the time and space in which to focus on long-form literature, that very lack of a safe material space in which to work began to unpick the modernist subject and – which amounts to the same thing – the modernist subject-matter. The certainty that interior truth is the only expression worth striving for came to be replaced, Bowen argues, by 'moral drama' driven by 'plot, action'. 'A sort of aesthetic neo-conservatism may be found to have set in,' she suggests.[9]

This conservatism can be remarked, too, in the films of the period, which tended to forego formalist experiment in favour of dramatic momentum and moral hazard. Raymond Durgnat's influential 1970 study, *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence,* argues that, in the wake of the 1930s documentary movement which combined serious social commentary with expressionist visual flourishes – and before the advent of kitchen-sink realism – postwar British films suffered in critical terms from their unabashed desire to entertain:

> The 'documentary' school of critics was grinding an obvious axe […] The relationship between these Sunday school teachers with their sound civic pieties, and all the fleshpots, fake, fun and fiddle of show business too rarely was one of mutual understanding.[10]

He traces the development of British cinema from the successful populist fare of the late 1940s, including well-received war films, Ealing comedies and adaptations of the classics, to the early 1950s slump caused by the dominance of Rank, which lost money on expensive flops like 1949's *Christopher Columbus* and changed course to churn out cheap, commercial pot-boilers instead. Looking beyond these obvious currents, and going against the film-theory grain of the time, Durgnat championed Michael Powell, Terence Fisher and Roy Baker, but he also defended the films of less distinguished directors; to do otherwise, he writes, would be to conform to 'one of the principal distortions of film criticism': 'The impression is conveyed that run-of-the-mill movies never say anything, that vivid or insightful remarks or situations

[9] Bowen, p. 323.
[10] Raymond Durgnat, *A Mirror for England: British Movies From Austerity to Affluence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 2.

are a monopoly of a few prestigious individuals. In fact many fascinating moments occur in generally mediocre films.'[11]

The idea that 1950s culture didn't 'say anything' until the late appearance of a radical avant-garde ushering in 1960s counterculture, has for a long time been axiomatic in studies of the 1950s. Alan Sinfield's *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain*, for instance, makes a polemical distinction between the courteous and old-fashioned postwar years from the late 1940s to the early 1950s and the new era Sinfield identifies as 'a vivid phase of cultural and political challenge' which began in the middle of the decade.[12] He accounts for the supposed lack of vividness in the arts during the early 1950s by describing how modernism crossed the Atlantic after the war, leaving Europe a duller place:

> Economically, politically and militarily, the United States was taking over in the 1940s roles that had belonged to European states; cultural centrality followed. Its mode was Modernism, led by Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism […]. In other forms similarly, techniques of and affiliations to Modernism were developed [in the US] in the late 1940s: Beat and confessional poetry; novels by Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth and Thomas Pynchon; the music of John Cage and Morton Feldman; modern jazz.[13]

Although he critiques US late modernism's ideological timidity, he suggests that its influence was all that saved Britain from 'traditional mores and local structures of wealth, class and cultural capital'.[14] Sinfield's determination to construct a narrative which ends with the triumph of British social realism forces him to ignore or elide the original achievements of British writers, film-makers and artists between 1945 and 1955. It is certainly the case that British culture changed towards the end of the 1950s, but I would argue that this earlier postwar phase tackled a distinctive and equally lively set of questions, and was far from being exclusively a time of polite conformity among chinking teacups. Durgnat dismissed a prevailing critical narrative in film studies which wanted to assume that kitchen-sink drama somehow

[11] Durgnat, p. 4.
[12] Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 4.
[13] Sinfield, p. 185.
[14] Sinfield, p. 192.

arose directly from the 1930s documentary movement, miraculously avoiding contact with the films made in between; likewise, I will argue that the counterculture of late 1950s and 1960s was not simply the distant relative of interwar modernism and social experimentation, nor a British response to abstract expressionism, as Sinfield suggests, but developed out of the political concerns and aesthetic experiments of a wartime generation moulded by dislocation, deprivation and aspiration towards a better life.

More recent studies of mid-century culture have also tended to focus on its relationship with modernism and be pitched in terms of a trajectory of decline. Jed Esty's *Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*, for instance, is concerned with the question of 'what accounts for the apparently coterminous lifespans of high modernism and high imperialism in the British sphere', identifying a constellation of late-modernists including Woolf, Forster and Eliot who 'measured the passing of British hegemony not solely in terms of a vitiated imperial humanism but also in terms of a recovered cultural particularity' in order to 'actively manage the cultural transition between empire and welfare state'.[15] For Esty, it is European rather than American modernism which sets the agenda; his characterization of British 'semi-modernized modernism' which just about managed to 'inject some of the excitement of continental thought and art […] into the bloodstream of an otherwise conventional literary scene' paints a bleak picture of a cultural milieu which he only partially redeems by arguing than an 'anthropological turn' after the war enabled the more self-aware 'English intellectuals' to find a 'distinctive way to respond to the imminent collapse of British hegemony'.[16]

Marina MacKay's *Modernism and World War II* ascribes the prevailing sense of melancholy she finds in the work of Woolf, Rebecca West, Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Henry Green and Evelyn Waugh to the simultaneous 'realisation and dissolution' of modernism, and to the anxiety and trauma of the war.[17] More positively, Kristin Bluemel has attempted to redefine the literature of interwar, wartime and immediate postwar culture as belonging to a distinct period and style she calls Intermodernism. The collection of essays gathered under the title *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in*

[15] Jed Esty, *Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 1-2; p. 3.
[16] Esty, p. 5; p. 10.
[17] Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain focuses on the 'fascinating, compelling and grossly neglected writing' of George Orwell, Storm Jameson, William Empson, Elizabeth Bowen and Stella Gibbons (among others) in order retroactively to define a movement which encompasses the 'radically eccentric', the non-canonical and the middlebrow, and expresses ideological concerns ignored by high modernism, such as social and class conflict.[18]

Another critic who identifies a radical seam in the literature of the 1950s is Nick Bentley, whose *Radical Fictions: The English Novel in the 1950s* argues against the prevailing view of the decade as 'a period in which white, middle-class, middle-aged, heterosexual men still held sway, before the "barbarians" […] began to challenge the citadels of power.'[19] He contends that 'the dominant critical reading of fifties English literature as anti-modernist, anti-experimental and representing a return to traditional or conventional realist forms is a distortion of the actual heterogeneous nature of the novel produced during this period.'[20] On the contrary, he argues convincingly, the period produced 'radical' literature which experimented with narrative techniques and articulated the concerns of marginalised groups. However, his radical examples all date from the late 1950s: Muriel Spark's *The Comforters*, *Robinson* and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1957, 1958 and 1960 respectively); Colin MacInnes's *City of Spades* and *Absolute Beginners* (1957, 1959); and Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). He discusses Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) and John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953) only to dismiss them as 'aggrieved, but hardly radical' in their treatment of class.[21] This emphasis on the late 1950s is strange, given that he quotes Doris Lessing's pointed refutation (written in 1969) of the idea that 'everyone knows' 1956 was 'a watershed, a turning-point, a cross-roads' because it was the year of the Suez crisis and the Hungarian Uprising:

> It has become the year that everyone refers to: oh yes, that year of course! […] So that now, looking back, the people who lived through it say, for the

[18] Kristin Bluemel, *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 1.
[19] Nick Bentley, *Radical Fictions: The English Novel in the 1950s* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 12.
[20] Bentley, p. 16.
[21] Bentley, pp. 23-24.

> sake of speed and easy understanding: 1956, and what is conveyed is the idea of change, breaking up, clearing away, movement.
>
> Yet the air had cleared well before 1956.[22]

Bentley, Esty, Warner and Bluemel restrict their accounts of the mid-century to the literary sphere; by taking a more interdisciplinary approach, it is possible to perceive alternative currents in the intersections between writing and culture in the mid-century, and new directions which began to emerge as early as the 1940s. In *The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London*, for instance, Richard Hornsey provides a compelling account of the interactions between disorderly queer culture and the disciplinarity of 1950s urban life, through an examination of such disparate cultural products as the Festival of Britain, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, Francis Bacon's engagement with the photo booth and the collages of Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell.[23] Clearly, considering the postwar period simply in terms of a dialogue with declining modernism, or with later avant-garde experimentation, is to ignore the mid-century's own distinctive relationship with modernity, which found expression not only in literature but in visual art, film and material and technological culture. Taken as a whole, these postwar artefacts not only reflect the sense of crisis and liminality which characterized this historical turning-point, but also raise urgent questions about autonomy, self-determination and meaning. By considering these interlocking historical, aesthetic and philosophical concerns, I would argue that it is possible to illuminate a moment when culture problematized, and attempted to resist, the onrush of consumerism, reification and fetishization offered by the mass marketization of society.

Theories of objects and things

The mid-century's preoccupation with things reflected this new relationship of mutual commodification between the human and the inanimate, but of course the broader insight that things can tell tales was not new. Eighteenth-century It-narratives, for instance, such as *The Genuine and Most Surprizing Adventures of a*

[22] Doris Lessing, *The Four-Gated City* (London: Paladin, 1990), pp. 307-08.
[23] Richard Hornsey, *The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

Very Unfortunate Goose-Quill (1751), or Richard Fenton's *Memoirs of an Old Wig* (1815), instigated a craze for moralizing or comical object autobiographies, which has been acutely observed by Jonathan Lamb in studies such as *The Things Things Say*.[24] Over the following century the advent of mass production and bourgeois domestic accumulation allowed the Victorians to perfect the art of staging identity and status through elaborate displays of material accoutrements.[25] Gradually, in the twentieth century, things entered the academy and were reappraised as primary historical source-material, recognized by the archaeologist or the anthropologist as often the most suggestive – and in some cases the only extant – evidence of ancient, oral and folk cultures.

History's 'material turn' in the 1990s, heralded by the cultural anthropology brought together by Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986), by *The New Cultural History*, edited by Lynn Hunt (1989), and Christopher Tilley's *Reading Material Culture* (1991), exalted humble objects by insisting that ethnographic, anthropological, archaeological and even linguistic paradigms could be applied to them. But as cultural historian Harvey Green warns in a 2012 essay 'Cultural history and the material(s) turn' the rise of the triumphant object can lead to an anthropomorphizing fallacy. Such an approach

> usually relies on a linear narrative in which much of the complexity of history is brushed aside in favour of a heroic story of a humble substance. Often included are tales of determined individuals who persisted in the face of elite or bureaucratic opposition, a 'great man' (and, less commonly, woman) theory of the history of ordinary things.[26]

This is not the approach taken in this thesis. Rather than asking the objects of the mid-century to explicate their cultural contexts after the fact, the focus will be on the

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[24] Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Jonathan Lamb, 'Modern Metamorphoses and Disgraceful Tales', *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Autumn, 2001), 133-166.
[25] See for instance Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's 'Household Words': The Social Life of Goods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).
[26] Harvey Green, 'Cultural history and the material(s) turn', *Cultural History*, 1.1 (2012), 61-82 (p. 74).

period's own experience of things as culture, on the often uneasy interface between things and the people who owned, found, bought, collected or curated them, and on the various cultural practices which attempted to draw, or erase, the boundary between 'mere' things and objects of art, science and political power. This approach has to some extent been influenced by Bill Brown's 'Thing Theory', which states that 'Things' are distinguishable from objects when they resist disciplinary categorization, or when they fail to perform the function assigned to them:

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.[27]

For Brown, Things have a special relationship with human subjects; the two exist in a dialectical balance of mutual production and definition. This analysis is useful in the context of mid-century culture and the debris of the postwar thingscape, when things were shaken out of their accustomed use and defamiliarized by fragmentation or dislocation. But his distinction between useful objects and dysfunctional Things is problematic, since an object's thingly agency can be manifested as much by an overabundance of utility as the lack of it; and the idea that Thingliness is a kind of dormant quality only activated by misuse ignores the conflict and resistance that can arise even when the object is fulfilling its predetermined purpose. In 'The Tyranny of Things', Brown developed his analysis of 'the dialectic by which human subjects and inanimate objects may be said to constitute one another', suggesting that objects imbued with too much metonymic and descriptive power take on a sinister aspect which he links to Marx's gothic descriptions of uncannily articulate and animate commodities.[28] Brown's analysis relies on the troubling unwillingness of these objects to 'abandon [their] physicality' in spite of their apparent abstraction into fungible units of value by the fetishization of the economic system. But by examining the relationship between mid-century subjects and objects, negotiated at the very point when that system was in crisis in the economic aftermath of a global

[27] Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (Autumn 2001), 1-22 (p. 4).
[28] Bill Brown, 'The Tyranny of Things (Trivia in Karl Marx and Mark Twain)', *Critical Inquiry*, 28:2 (Winter, 2002), 442-469 (p. 446); see pp. 447-50.

conflagration, we can draw conclusions about how this stubborn physicality and symbolic recalcitrance opened up a minatory, if fleeting, perspective on the workings of the new consumerist ideology which was to take hold in the later twentieth century.

Postwar consumerism differed from industrial-age economics in the extent to which it demanded that human subjects become more like things in order to participate in the process of exchange as buyers, and not just as workers. In 1923, Georg Lukács described, in *History and Class Consciousness*, the process of reification which the proletariat underwent when they were inculcated into the social relations required by industry, which treated them as functioning (or malfunctioning) units in a machine and robbed them even of the power to perceive their own reification.[29] After World War II, the rise of mass culture and advertising turned consumers, and not just workers, into things, by encouraging a kind of self-commodification through an endless cycle of identity-crisis, desire, and imperfect fulfilment. In 1954, J. B. Priestley coined the term 'Admass' to describe the society he found in Texas, and which he correctly saw was the future for Britain:

> This is my name for the whole system of an increasing productivity, plus inflation, plus a rising standard or material living, plus high-pressure advertising and salesmanship, plus mass communications, plus cultural democracy and the creation of the mass mind, the mass man.[30]

This new perception of the detrimental effect of mass consumption on individuality and personal agency coincided with the increasing sophistication of the new psychological techniques being used in marketing. In his 1957 book *The Hidden Persuaders*, Vince Packard identified the 'startling beginnings' being made in an ongoing quest to mould consumers into the custom-built products of the advertising industry.[31] What he termed 'the depth approach' aimed to overcome 'the apparent perversity and unpredictability of the prospective customers' by making them identify with products on a psychical level, rather than offering them a logical

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[29] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness,* trans. Rodney Livingstone <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/> [accessed 24 June 2015].
[30] J. B. Priestley and Jacquetta Hawkes, *Journey Down a Rainbow* (London: Heinemann/ Cresset Press, 1955), pp. 51-52.
[31] Vince Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 16.

rationale for purchase.[32] In one example, for instance, he described how a Chicago grocery chain decided to 'take on the traits "we like in our friends". Those were spelled out as generosity, courtesy, cleanliness, patience, sincerity, honesty, sympathy and good-naturedness.'[33] By identifying with the brand, consumers ratify and reinforce the norms it stands for, creating more and more pressure to conform and eliding the distinction between consumer and product. But if such theories aimed to enforce 'desirable' behaviour by flattening the distinction between subjects and objects, and ascribing personality, morality, autonomy and agency to the inanimate realm, then narratives about the recalcitrance of the thing-world offered a submerged revolutionary subtext: people, too, might stubbornly refuse to sit quietly in their place.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique of mid-century mass culture identified the gothic undertow to this commodity economy as early as the 1940s. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) they contrasted the instrumentality and rationalization of capitalism with older cultural forms which could never be completely repressed. They argued that independent thought and the idea of the self had been subsumed into a purist ideal of the Enlightenment subject, which could be understood and quantified by logic and economics:

> The technical process, into which the subject has objectified itself after being removed from the consciousness, is free of the ambiguity of mythic thought as of all meaning altogether, because reason itself has become the mere instrument of the all-inclusive economic apparatus.[34]

This modern subject has been cleansed of meaning, all the better to conform to the machinic regime of productivity and acquisition; and for Adorno and Horkheimer, ambiguity is the essential condition for meaning, because it disrupts the sterile purity of Enlightenment reason, which encourages the repression of the ambiguous self just as it strives to replace unruly things with objectively quantifiable products.

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[32] Packard, p. 17.
[33] Packard, p. 47.
[34] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), p. 30.

> For civilization, pure natural existence, animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger. One after the other, mimetic, mythic and metaphysical modes of behaviour were taken as superseded eras, any reversion to which was to be feared as implying a reversion of the self to that mere state of nature from which it had estranged itself with so huge an effort, and which therefore struck such terror into the self.'[35]

As Lamb's study of It-narratives shows, the impossibility of perfect objectification within a prescribed semantic framework was already apparent at the start of the Enlightenment, but for Adorno and Horkheimer mass culture posed an even greater threat in the modern world. The gothic return of a repressed allegorical fluidity of meaning can be discerned in mid-century attempts to resituate the self in relation to the thing-world: the auratic autonomy of newly re-mythologised objects such as antiques, ruins, and royal regalia on the one hand, and the technological mythology of televisual objects, nuclear bombs, mass-cultural pop objects on the other, reintroduces the autonomous self at the expense of the reified subject. The whole project of reification is endangered by objects which themselves stake a claim to selfhood and irrationality. Such objects offer – to use a phrase I borrow from Isobel Armstrong in Chapter 3 – a 'moment of difficulty', an impediment to the frictionless transit of the subject through the machine of economics.[36] If we accept Adorno's distinction between self and subject, and consider it in concert with Brown's distinction between Thing and object, we can see that, whereas the economic arbitrage of subject and object is an attempt by each to gain decisive mastery over the other, the fluidly ambiguous relationship between self and thing is liberatingly dialectical, and offers a way out of the self's eternal striving towards rational subjecthood.

Mid-century gothic

In identifying a gothic turn in mid-century culture, it is possible to reconcile its appeal to the mythologies and symbol-structures of the past with its historical specificity. The gothic mode is one in which the very persistence of the

[35] Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 31.
[36] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 12.

superannuated into the present and future is not only a defining trope but the essential problematic being explored; that it originally arose as a form of resistance to the Enlightenment indicates its provocative intransigence towards to the sterility of rationality. When Horace Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story* (1765) he was summoning a cultural ghost along with the castle's broken suit of haunted armour; his book's romanticized medievalism allowed him to scrutinize the fragmentation and generational anxiety of his modernity. And in fact, the uncanny revenance of gothicism itself, as a style or genre, is one of its prevailing characteristics. Later revivals featured other eructations of the ancient caused by a rift in the now; Mary Shelley's Frankenstein was a 'Modern Prometheus', Bram Stoker's Dracula was an ageless immortal, Robert Louis Stevenson's Edward Hyde was a dis-evolved throwback to man's animal origins. Nineteenth-century gothic called on an antiquarian mystique to illuminate the alienation of the human subject buffeted by the onrush of high-speed industrial progress, and indeed each successive era uses the gothic to illuminate itself.[37] To remark on the existence of a distinctive mid-century gothic is to observe merely that the undead had risen again. Each new manifestation not only enacts the persistence of superannuated objects, desires, and ideas, but attempts to console itself with just those gothicisms that previous modernities had reached for: themes of fragmentation, doubling, hauntings, uninhibited sexuality and psychic spaces producing and being produced by the troubled, dislocated subject.

The gothic helps to organise temporality through its simultaneous belatedness and freshness, and challenges realism without the need for avant-garde experiment. In his introduction to *Gothic and Modernism*, John Paul Riquelme argues:

> Stylistically, the Gothic has always been excessive in its response to conventions that foster the order and clarity of realistic representations, conventions that embody a cultural insistence on containment. The essentially anti-realistic character of Gothic writing from the beginning creates in advance a compatibility with modernist writing.[38]

[37] For an analysis of nineteenth-century gothic as a critique of industrialization, see for instance Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996).
[38] John Paul Riquelme, ed., *Gothic and Modernism: Essaying Dark Literary Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2008), p. 4.

The essays he collects to support this claim find traces of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gothic in modernist writers like Woolf and Beckett, as well as later twentieth-century texts including Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, but they pass over the mid-century in its entirety. A more coherent assessment of the imbrication of gothicism and modernism – along with Marxism – can be found in Margaret Cohen's *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*.[39] In a chapter called 'Gothic Marxism', she delineates 'the contours of a Marxist genealogy fascinated with the irrational aspects of social processes, a genealogy that both investigates how the irrational pervades existing society and dreams of using it to effect social change.'[40] The Enlightenment, she points out, was 'always already haunted by its Gothic ghosts, and the same can be said of Marxism from its inception.'[41] For Cohen, French surrealism was among 'the first efforts to appropriate Freud's seminal twentieth-century exploration of the irrational for Marxist thought', and Benjamin's contact with André Breton and the surrealist movement helped him to fuse psychoanalysis and materialism and spurred the revolutionary impetus of his work.[42] Her aim in accessing gothic Marxism as a critical practice is to rediscover 'the realm of a culture's ghosts and phantasms as a significant and rich field of social production rather than a mirage to be dispelled' and to valorize 'a culture's detritus and trivia as well as its strange and marginal practices'.[43] Gothicism marks the incursion of the dream into society and culture, and the recognition of the dream is what leads to its rupture. As Benjamin wrote in *The Arcades Project*, 'Every presentation of history [must] begin with awakening; in fact it should treat of nothing else.'[44]

The idea that the gothic is a revolutionary form, which externalises a dreamlike world of enigmatic, overdetermined symbols and psychological tensions in order to pathologise it and precipitate its rupture, concords with the mid-century gothic which

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[39] Margaret Cohen *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993).
[40] Cohen, pp. 1-2.
[41] Cohen, p. 2.
[42] Cohen, pp. 2-3.
[43] Cohen, p. 11.
[44] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 464.

this thesis identifies. The dreams of postwar Britain were founded on materialism; politically, socialism and the welfare state were pitted against a resurgent capitalism, and the things people needed or wanted were the battleground on which they fought. In this context, narratives about gothic objects not only expressed the psychological residues which attached to mid-century things, but carried political freight.

I have chosen to characterise such objects as 'uncanny', although my definition is not wholly derived from Freud. Freud's uncanny is explicitly linguistic and literary; his 1919 essay begins with a long lexicographical tour of the semantic terrain of the German word *unheimlich*, and turns on an idiosyncratic and highly selective reading of E. T. A. Hoffman's gothic tale 'The Sandman'.[45] Freud's essay performs its own disruptive and troubling self-reading, demonstrating the limitations of etymological insight, and the uncanny doubling of meaning, by proving that *heimlich* and its opposite, *unheimlich*, can share the same meaning. Freud then reframes this radically uncertain semantics as an opportunity for repressed truth to emerge, as Hoffman's story is reappraised through the Freudian spectacles of psychoanalysis.

It is important to note, however, that Freud has little to say about uncanny objects as such. Indeed, the opening of the essay defines its own subject matter as an 'aesthetic investigation' into 'emotional impulses'; he wants to circumscribe the 'affective nucleus' relating to this 'specific conceptual term', rather than enumerating material instances which trigger uncanny feelings.[46] He rejects Ernst Jentsch's contention, in his 1906 essay 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', that the uncanny primarily resides in the uncertainty about whether an object is animate or inanimate; the presence of the lifelike doll Olimpia in Hoffmann's tale is subordinated, in Freud's reading, to the repeated theme of eyes and their loss, which he firmly equates with the castration complex. However, if we follow his conclusion that the eye-stealing Sandman is the nexus of uncanny feeling in the story, we might interpret the extracted eyeballs as uncanny objects in themselves, which were once integrated parts of the human body but, having become detached from the subject, cross the divide into thingliness. In Hoffmann, the eyes 'start out bleeding from [the] heads' of naughty children who will not go to bed; they are then collected in a bag to

[45] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003) pp. 121-162.
[46] Freud, p. 123.

feed the Sandman's owl-like children. For the story's protagonist Nathaniel, fear attaches, not to an abstract threat, but to solid objects which remind him of eyes: telescopes, spectacles and even barometers – objects which access the real, mediate it and then output it in the symbolic realm.

Since Freud's definition of the *Unheimlich* depends on a kind of analogical glitch – in which something is both familiar and strange, close but not quite the same – then the analogy between the cultural objects of academic study and the material objects with which cultural output concerns itself (the latter nested within the former) represents a similar kind of troubling proximity. To say that any cultural study has an 'object' is to construct a binary relationship between a more or less enigmatic thing and the subject which seeks to grasp it conceptually or physically. Thus we can trace analogues between the processes involved in studying cultural objects, and the culturally mediated accounts of grasping – or failing to grasp – enigmatic things. The cultural critic, like the wakeful children in Hoffmann's story, may witness her own watchfulness metonymically transformed into a prosthetic mechanism of mediated apprehension. This is a violent and fearful process, as both the naughty children with the bleeding eye-sockets, and the deranged and ultimately suicidal Nathanial, can attest.

'The world of things': Chapter summaries

The six chapters of the thesis divide into two parts, with Part One focusing on the uncanny agency of aesthetic and technological objects. In the opening chapter, the ubiquity of bombsite rubble is brought into dialogue with mid-century mural painting through an analysis of Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* (1944), Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness* (1950). Murals, in their scale and *trompe l'oeil* quality, offer an uncanny portal into another space and time, but they depend on the continuing existence of the solid wall that holds them in order to do so. By examining the relationship between the artist and his or her materials, the chapter introduces the mid-century's preoccupation with objects which problematise human access to fetishized abstraction.

In the second chapter, the curatorial inclusiveness of Barbara Jones's *Black Eyes and Lemonade* exhibition of ephemera (1951) is considered alongside the archaeology of the Sutton Hoo treasure hoard and the work of the Independent

Group, in order to examine how found objects instantiated absent subjects through their charismatic presence. This helped to redefine modernity by suggesting a new sense that identity is created by fluidity and ambiguity, and that new ways of seeing things will enable new identities to form.

The third chapter examines how the period's new media and computing hardware further complicated the status of the subject, as images began to command and undermine its autonomous physical existence; the works discussed here delineate a technological uncanny based on the mediation and transmission of the self, and include George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), and the cybernetic research of Alan Turing and William Grey Walter.

Part Two traces the treacherous intimacy with which uncanny objects became involved with the bodies of their human subjects. In the fourth chapter, haunted furniture and domestic ephemera become rival subjectivities with the power to define and transform their owners, in Robert Hamer's *The Haunted Mirror* (1945), Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948) and Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise Longue* (1953). As objects change their value over time, they seem to offer new kinds of bourgeois self-determination; but these narratives show how the return of repressed attitudes and impulses make such transactions dangerous to the individual.

The fifth chapter considers the ways in which mid-century clothes and apparel enabled or restricted the autonomy of their wearers, through a comparative analysis of the Coronation, the Ealing comedy *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), and Britten's coronation opera *Gloriana* (1953*)*. Fantasies of power and control are exposed in Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948) and Terence Young's *Corridor of Mirrors* (1948), while the end of the British Empire is observed in attitudes to the synthetic fabrics and breathing equipment of the 1953 Everest expedition.

Finally, the legacy of wartime injury and the onset of atomic anxiety is explored through stories about bombs, prosthetics and bodily penetration including Powell and Pressburger's *The Small Back Room* (1949), the Boulting Brothers' *Seven Days To Noon* (1950) and C. P. Snow's *The New Men* (1954). The annihilating absence which nuclear weapons give birth to is set against the human sterility caused by

exposure to radioactivity; and a discussion of Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* signals the start of the 1960s and new ways of assimilating the thing-world into culture.

In all these examples, the mid-century can be seen as a time of inversion: inside becomes outside; old becomes new; modernity becomes historical; junk becomes treasure. But while this sense of topsy-turvy possibility conferred a freshness and novelty not otherwise available to an essentially conservative and cash-strapped nation, it brought with it a nagging anxiety. Would the norms of society survive? Would value and authenticity lose their meaning? Would codes become illegible? Would objects break free of the meaning ascribed to them and begin to bleed history?

In a *Vogue* article on the Festival of Britain, Marghanita Laski described the ubiquitous tapered shape that appeared in furniture, souvenirs, typography and the buildings themselves, and became its defining design emblem. She asked:

> What are we to deduce from the ubiquitous shape in the Exhibition, the top-heavy pillar, the triangle on its apex, the inverted cone? [...] Is it excitement at the possibility of achieving these shapes architecturally by means of new techniques? Since we have lately been told that its converse shape, the obelisk, is a phallic symbol, have we here its antithesis, an unconscious symbolism of the decline of the west? Or does it symbolise an airy indulgence in fancy, an aspiring imagination no longer earthbound?[47]

Her speculation ends on a warning note that the optimism of novelty will suffer its own reverse:

> Over everything hangs the shadow of the most important question of all – shall we remember the Festival as the beginning of the future it promises, or as the last pleasant dream before the nightmare?[48]

This thesis attempts to explore both the dream and the nightmare – and to answer the question of what happens after the dreamer wakes up.

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[47] Marghanita Laski, 'The Visionary Gleam: Thoughts on the South Bank Exhibition', *Vogue*, June 1951, pp. 73-78 (p. 78).
[48] Laski, 'The Visionary Gleam', p. 78.

PART ONE: AGENCY

CHAPTER ONE

Rubble, walls and murals: the threshold between abstraction and materiality in the novels of Cary, Waugh and Macaulay

> In the first days of bombing […] one marvelled at pure debris; but soon this became usual and to lift the human interest it took a bare tree gibbeted with hanging scarecrows from a blasted old-clothes shop, or an unbroken mirror hanging high-up on the façade of rooms disappeared.
>
> William Sansom, *The Blitz: Westminster at War* [49]

It is impossible to account for the material turn which characterized mid-century culture without examining how it developed out of the experience of World War II. The blitz, in particular, exploded people and things out of their familiar contexts: an arbitrary redistribution of the personal, the meaningful and the mundane blurred the distinctions between these categories, while the sudden and widespread visibility and banality of dead bodies, or body parts, meant that objects and human forms became uncannily interchangeable. The writer William Sansom, who worked as a fireman in Westminster during the blitz, ascribes such 'freakish effects' to the defamiliarized city, the 'strange light and strange textures' of the bombscape:

> [W]ith the pale plaster crumbled out on the street, with the puppety figures of rescue workers in their flat bowlerish hats covered also with pale dust, with the dead and wounded collapsed and unmoving – there was some of the atmosphere of the doll-shop, the shop for making plaster figures or people of wax.[50]

Just as clothes blasted into a tree might become quasi-human amid this strange new scenery — either as scarecrows or even the 'gibbeted' victims of an execution – so people here become uncanny simulacra of human forms which are only hazily

[49] William Sansom, *The Blitz: Westminster at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 12-13.
[50] Sansom, *The Blitz*, p. 75.

defined ('puppety', 'bowlerish'). Perhaps because Sansom was putting out fires in the West End, he found that bombed buildings conjured up a sense of gothic theatricality:

> Here a pantomime was afoot, in the empty street a sudden festival booth had been erected and the play was on. At the root of this appearance lies something of the sympathy between *grand guignol* and the clown. Both, though one may laugh, are festivals of the macabre, of torchlit, painted terror.[51]

Such descriptions as these suggest the limitations of considering World War II bombsites as spaces which fit comfortably into the cultural narrative of ruins; of what Leo Mellor, in *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* calls the 'ever-present interest in the ruin and the fragment, the incomplete or decayed structure that offers an implicit dialogue with the past through its very continued existence'.[52] Mellor's inclusion of 1940s bombsites within this wider category of ruins is modulated by his argument that such places had a unique double relationship with time:

> They are inherently both a frozen moment of destruction made permanent; as much as they capture the absolute singular moment, the repeated cliché of the stopped clock exposed, battered by blast but still affixed to a wall in a bombsite; yet they also act as a way of understanding a great swathe of linear time previously hidden or buried, offering history exposed to the air.[53]

The bombsites' ability to access both restless history and a frozen moment certainly accounts for some of their uncanny quality, but I would argue that their supercharged power also derives from the macabre pantomime that Sansom describes – the sense that these are transitional spaces where a transformation, or even an inversion of

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[51] Sansom, *The Blitz*, p. 75-76.
[52] Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 3.
[53] Mellor, p. 6.

normality, is performed. This chapter will argue that the interaction between bombsites and time becomes even more complex when one takes into account the temporal (and indeed socio-cultural) vertigo of the human subject who haunts these contemporary ruins.

Mellor's choice of the stopped clock as the paradigmatic bombsite image underscores his argument that bombsites are broken timepieces which no longer tell human time; yet when Sansom wanted to describe a similarly telling detail, he chose 'an unbroken mirror hanging high-up on the façade of rooms disappeared.'[54] Sansom's mirror is a subtly different metaphor, suggesting that these resonant bombsite objects offer to reflect back the plight of the subject, even while they appear to rise haughtily above human concerns in their 'unbroken' indifference. Later still, he suggests, even 'the unscathed mirror or picture hanging exposed on the wall became platitudinous – and it then took a row of ten grey Ascot toppers exposed in their open cupboard to raise an eyebrow.'[55] Sansom considered such objects, because they map so closely onto the particular idiosyncrasies of vanished individuals, more interesting than the 'pure debris' which was itself a marvel in the first days of bombardment; but in this chapter I want to place such metonymic personal possessions back, as it were, into the rubble, and look more closely at the thingly residue of the walls on which reflective objects – and in particular art-objects – precariously hung. A piece of rubble, I would argue, is the blitz's ur-object, utterly abject and empirically meaningless, yet nevertheless freighted with narrative; it tells the story both of the building from which it derived, and of the catastrophic moment of its transliteration from coherent wall to disorderly debris. Rubble, in its blunt materiality, contains within it a narrative of catastrophe and wreckage; yet it is also an abstracted form, blasted out of history into a pure and irreducible eternity, remote from its former spatial and personal meaning.

By accessing eternity in this way, bombsites became a refuge for those who wanted to escape from modernity, and so a theme of conflict with modernism often characterizes the cultural examples in this chapter. Modernism, with its enthusiasm for bricolage and fragment, seemed – as Mellor suggests – to have predicted the ruinscape of the 1940s, but I would argue that, as a way of looking at the world, it was put under strain by the sudden actualization of its metaphors. In the wake of the

[54] Sansom, *The Blitz*, p. 13.
[55] Sansom, *The Blitz*, p. 13.

First World War, high modernism had implied a promise to pull both the world and the word apart in order to make experience new, but for those who had lived through the blitz, World War II seemed to have completed only half the job. The dialectical machinery of historical renewal had malfunctioned: the kaleidoscope had been shaken, but no new picture had formed.

In this chapter, the search for this picture – for an aesthetic ratification of the suffering and destruction of the war – will be traced through six different cultural responses to rubble and the walls from which it derives. Murals, in particular, are evoked as a special category of art-object, one that had gained popularity under modernism but which now seemed to mark a point of conflict between implacable materiality and the fugitive abstract idea. Strikingly, the murals of the mid-century seem to presage or bring about the destruction of the very walls on which they are painted, and these tumbling walls become an image of revolutionary remaking instigated by the uncanny power of art.

'A wall will fall in many ways': William Sansom's war stories

For someone with William Sansom's experience as a blitz fireman, the idea that walls and buildings were possessed of both agency and animation was self-evident – under bombardment, they were not solid but moved, writhed, lashed out with deadly force at the human beings in their ambit. In 'Building Alive', Sansom gives an hallucinogenic first-person account of being inside a bombed building and knowing that another flying bomb is on its way.[56] He notes the arbitrary nature of these robot-bombs' deathly, machinic force – 'It could drop anywhere. It was absolutely reasonless. It was the first purely fatal agent that had come to man for centuries, bringing people to cross their fingers again, bringing a rebirth of superstition' – and contrasts it with the feral intent which he ascribes to the building's eerily inorganic ecosystem, with its 'creakings, a groan of wood […]A legion of plastermice […] pattering up and down the walls'[57]. In the devastated cityscape 'all the laborious metropolitan history had been returned to its waste beginning', but something post-apocalyptic and post-human was beginning to stir amid the tangle of broken pipework:

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[56] William Sansom, 'Building Alive', *Something Terrible, Something Lovely* (London: Hogarth Press, 1948), pp. 172-76.
[57] Sansom, 'Building Alive', p. 174; p. 173.

> Only the little sounds sucking themselves in hinted at a new life, the life of leaden snakes, hesitating and choosing in whispers the way to blossom. […] A new growth was sprouting everywhere, sprouting like the naked plumbing, as if these leaden entrails were the worm at the core of a birth, struggling to emerge, thrusting everything else aside.'[58]

The narrator survives this encounter with living architecture only by chance – he watches as the building opposite collapses instead, crushing a man on a stretcher who has only just been pulled out of a different bombsite.

The horror of being buried by rubble is a frequent theme of Sansom's wartime stories, and is a submerged presence even in those which do not feature the blitz directly. In 'The Wall' – a story written during the blitz and published in Sansom's 1944 collection *Fireman Flower*, his fireman narrator finds himself entranced by the pattern of symmetrical rectangles in a wall which is suspended over him, on the brink of falling. Like the flying bombs, walls are awesome in their inhuman arbitrariness:

> A wall will fall in many ways. It may sway over to the one side or the other. It may crumble at the very beginning of its fall. It may remain intact and fall flat. This wall fell as flat as a pancake. It clung to its shape through ninety degrees to the horizontal. Then it detached itself from the pivot and slammed down on top of us.[59]

The fireman is transfixed by the moment, 'hypnotized, rubber boots cemented to the pavement' with 'ton upon ton of red-hot brick hovering in the air.'[60] He finds himself 'immediately certain of every minute detail' of the wall and its windows, where 'alternating rectangles of black and red […] emphasized vividly the extreme symmetry of the window spacing: each oblong window shape posed as a vermilion

[58] Sansom, 'Building Alive', p. 175.
[59] William Sansom, 'The Wall', *Stories* (London: Hogarth Press, 1963) pp. 13-18 (p. 16).
[60] Sansom, 'The Wall', p. 14.

panel set in perfect order upon the dark face of the wall.'[61] Sansom's characters frequently experience a kind of sensory bleed at such moments of extremity, a dreamlike merging of distorted vision, haptic sensation and emotion:

> The oblong building, the oblong windows, the oblong spacing. Orange-red colour seemed to *bulge* from the black frame-work, assumed tactile values, like boiling jelly that expanded inside a thick black squared grill.'[62]

Yet these bulging fiery rectangles are what save him when time finally moves again and the wall 'detache[s] itself from the pivot and slam[s] down on top of us'. Although buried under rubble, he and two colleagues survive because they have 'been framed by one of those symmetrical, oblong window spaces'; it is the wall's Victorian patterning, its manmade, cultural symmetry, that provide a hiatus in its merciless material force – a recess in which the men can shelter.[63] The firemen can slip between the chunks of masonry because, at the moment of their most dangerous agency, such walls prove porous. In chapter six we will see that, later in the postwar period, bombs would be the archetypal technological object capable of exploiting the porosity of the human subject; here, while the war was still being fought, Sansom's stories show the human subject exploiting the porosity of the bombed object.

'A good wall will paint itself': Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth*

In Joyce Cary's novel *The Horse's Mouth*, published the same year as *Fireman Flower* in 1944, walls problematize the primacy of materiality in a different way. Although set just before the onset of war, it responds to the frightening instability of the fabric of London's blitzed cityscape with a fable about mural-painting, the commodification of art, and the uncanny agency of the thing.

The narrator of Cary's novel is Gulley Jimson, a painter whose artistic vision constantly threatens to overwhelm his grip on the material world. Whereas Sansom's characters experience the aloof materiality of the objectworld as a threat to the bodily materiality of a vulnerable, mortal human, Gulley has little interest in his own

[61] Sansom, 'The Wall', p. 15.
[62] Sansom, 'The Wall', p. 15.
[63] Sansom, 'The Wall', p. 16.

physical form, and indeed strives towards the condition of pure abstraction that exists inside his head. But an artist must make art, and he struggles constantly to realise these concepts, and not only because of the gap between idea and expression; he is forced to steal or swindle goods or money simply to live and work. Gulley's madness, Cary implies, originates in his belief that such recalcitrant materiality can express the transcendental.

Despite enjoying critical success early in his career, Gulley is, in old age, a liminal character, unable to function according to the codes and rules of society. Frequently arrested and jailed for petty crimes, he is pushed to the spatial margins too, working first in a derelict boathouse by the Thames in west London, and then being forced to move to a doss house and paint on any surface he can access. Through his eyes, the reader finds everyday life receding to a dull background roar, as his imagination intuits the world as a series of sublime shapes and colours and converts them into wildly ambitious visual compositions. He processes the natural world platonically; he conceptualizes his paintings in the first instance as pure, eternal form, then struggles to understand what they might represent:

> [I] knew what I wanted to do. That blue-grey shape on the pink. The tower. The whatever it was, very round and heavy. Something like a gasometer, at full stretch without its muzzle. Or possibly an enamel coffee-pot. And chrome-yellow things like Egyptian columns or leeks or dumb-bells or willows or brass candlesticks, in front.[64]

As he works, however, he finds these shapes demand to be expressed figuratively, as animals, plants and human flesh which aspire to live and breathe. He is only satisfied when they manage both to exceed life and to embody it; when their thingly aloofness from petty human frailties combines with a vigorous sense of agency and vitality.

His self-image as a Romantic seer is backed up by his obsession with William Blake, whom he quotes incessantly as part of the internal monologue of his imaginative practice; but unlike Blake, Gulley has no social or revolutionary philosophy underpinning his spiritual visions. He is unmoved, for instance, by the political arguments of his friend Plantie, who organizes anarchist meetings; Gulley

[64] Joyce Cary, *The Horse's Mouth*, published in the collection *Triptych* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 652.

only comments drily that 'I don't like converters. You never feel safe with them. They've always got some knuckleduster up their sleeve.'[65] In the end, however, it is Gulley who uses violent force against others: when he kills his former wife and muse, Sara, because she won't give him back a sketch he did of her (which he wishes to sell in order to fund his next project), the once-charming mystical aesthete is revealed as a narcissistic psychopath who sees Sara, finally, as just another material obstacle in the way of his totalizing artistic vision.

The book continually reiterates the tension between abstraction and materiality; Gulley's artistic practice is both enabled and confounded by the thing-world through which he moves. The book's enigmatic title is reflected in a metaphorical motif which runs through the narrative, with Gulley using horse imagery whenever he encounters a problem with the authenticity of art and its ability to materialise abstract form. Early in the book, for instance, when he is working on a depiction of the Fall of Adam and Eve and groping towards representation as the conduit of meaning, the equine image comes at the epiphanic moment:

> I can do something with the foreground now, it's as empty as a beer jug with the bottom knocked out. […] And all at once I made a thing like a white Indian club. I like it, I said, but it's not a flower, is it? What the hell could it be? A fish? And I felt a kick inside like I was having a foal. Fish. Fish. Silver-white, green-white. And shapes that you could stroke with your eyebrows.'[66]

However, Edward H Kelly, in 'The Meaning of The Horse's Mouth' has argued convincingly that the title is a reference to the story of the artist Apelles (which Horace attributed to Petronius) 'who, when in despair because he could not satisfactorily paint the foam on Alexander's horse's mouth, angrily dashed his brush against the canvas, and by mere accident or luck achieved that which had eluded his painstaking care'. [67] In Kelly's reading, Cary's novel thus becomes a meditation on

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[65] Cary, p. 558.
[66] Cary, p. 533.
[67] Edward H. Kelly, 'The Meaning of "The Horse's Mouth"', *Modern Language Studies*, 1:2 (Summer, 1971), 9-11 (p. 10). The story derives from an account by physician and philosopher Sextus Empiricus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism,* trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 19.

the role of luck, or divine intervention, in the creative process; yet, given that the Apelles anecdote depends as much on the intervention of the brush as it does on the will of the gods, it could just as easily be seen as a gloss on Gulley's fraught relationship with the thing-world.

Critics in the two decades after the novel's publication tended to read it in terms of questions about free will and the author's attitudes to his amoral protagonist.[68] Read from the perspective of mid-century attempts to grapple with the agency of the thing, on the other hand, Gulley's outrageous anti-social behaviour and fascistic psychopathy become instead the portrait of an artist so preoccupied by the threshold between the animate and inanimate, and art's capacity to straddle that divide, that he wants to transform into a human art-object, entirely free to exist and express himself. Yet despite Gulley's repeated meditations on philosophical and aesthetic questions, the material world shakes off this discursive scaffolding by rendering it irrelevant; like Apelles's brush, Gulley's materials have an agenda and an aesthetic project of their own, which will be pursued no matter what the cost to Gulley. In the end, the artist's subjective will and creativity (Gulley repeatedly insists he is a genius) always depend on his precarious grasp of the material world: on his ability to buy or steal paints and brushes, unearth used canvases in junk shops, find walls with the right texture and surface and – in all cases – on his ability to preserve and hold on to these things through the storm of incident that swirls around him.

Gulley is aware of the fact that, as soon as he gets his ideas down in paint on walls or canvas, he renders them precarious; either they will suffer the depredations of materiality and be vulnerable to theft and damage, or they will be absorbed into a commodity system in which they will once again become abstract and fluid. With other objects, he has come to accept this; after each spell in prison, he expects to find his possessions have 'just melted' (as Marx warns everything solid will do in a commodity culture),[69] though he is shocked when his artworks fall prey to the same process:

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[68] See for instance Alvin J. Selzer 'Speaking out of both sides of "The Horse's Mouth": Joyce Cary vs. Gulley Jimson', *Contemporary Literature* 15:4 (Autumn, 1974), 488-502.

[69] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore, section 1, paragraph 18, lines 12-14

> I hadn't expected to see the frypan and kettle again. You can't leave things like that about for a month in any friendly neighbourhood and expect to find them in the same place. But [the painting of] the Living God with his stretchers and stiffeners weighed a couple of hundredweight. […] Someone said the landlord took it for the rent. The landlord swore he had never seen it. I daresay he had hidden it somewhere in an attic, telling himself that it might be worth thousands as soon as I was dead.[70]

Throughout the novel, his canvases revert to their status as vulnerable material objects – they are variously stolen, vandalised with an air-gun and a knife, used to patch a leaking roof, or simply lost – but Gulley's bitterest complaint is that they have been sold for inflated sums without his permission and without any financial benefit to him. Yet despite his repeated attempts to retrieve past paintings and sketches in order to sell them to a collector he has met, he never quite manages to do so, partly because he understands all too well that the market turns solid objects into abstractions and that retrieving their value in fact devalues them:

> What do you mean, for instance, when you say a picture is worth five thousand pounds or five hundred or five bob? A picture isn't like chocolate, you can't eat it. Value in a picture isn't the same thing as the value in a pork chop. […] For instance, one might say that pictures haven't got any value at all in cash. They're a spiritual value, a liability. Or you might say that they hadn't got any real value till they're sold. And then the value keeps on going up and down.[71]

Cary gives Gulley this speech at the very point when his friend, Coker, is attempting to defend his right to be compensated for the loss of pictures seized to repay his debts: in other words, at the very point when he might have succeeded in receiving cash for his work. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published the same year as *The*

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/ communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007> [accessed 20 December 2014].
[70] Cary, p. 506.
[71] Cary, p. 592.

Horse's Mouth, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer pinpoint the same paradox which skewers Gulley: 'Pure works of art which deny the commodity society by the very fact that they obey their own law were always wares all the same.'[72] Gulley's answer is to commit a series of wilfully self-sabotaging acts whenever he comes close to a profitable engagement with the social and financial systems he despises. None of the paintings he begins over the course of the novel is finished – the implication being that he deliberately avoids the moment when the completed artwork will break free of his creative authorship and realise its own potential autonomy. But in any case, this autonomy is inevitably compromised as soon as the work changes hands as a commodity.

This is clearly the case with the sketch which provokes Sara's murder. This is an early study for his masterpiece – a portrait of Sara in her bath – and is the object most closely indexical to the encounter between artist, muse and art-object which led to his consummate artistic achievement. The sketch remains a powerful object, but only as long as it stays in Sara's possession, where it continues to articulate a truth about the particularity of its moment. Despite this, owning it brings her no happiness; she admits to looking at it often, though 'not for pleasure. It makes me so sad I could cry.'[73] For her it is a souvenir of her disastrous marriage to Gulley and her lost youth and beauty: her emotional history is congealed within it. For Gulley, who finished with it, and her, long ago, it has become a dead thing, at best a frozen moment of technical virtuosity, and perhaps merely a token of congealed financial value. When they look at it together, Sara admires her own youthful body, while for Gulley her beauty is inextricable from his skill at rendering it. 'Look at the vein there,' he says, 'just a drag of the brush across the grain. Yes I could handle paint then.'[74] They fight over it until Gulley threatens to cut her with a box-opener – foreshadowing her later death when, determined to seize the sketch, he coshes her and throws her down a flight of stairs. At the end of this first struggle over the painting, Sara gets the better of him, however: offering to wrap the picture for him, she secretly switches it for a bundle of old newspaper. This deception fittingly encapsulates their differing understanding of the sketch as an object: because it has meaning for her, she sees it clearly and is bound to it, even though it brings her grief.

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[72] Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 157.
[73] Cary, p. 670.
[74] Cary, p. 669.

On the other hand, reduced to mere objecthood in Gulley's eyes, the picture easily slips out of sight and away from his grasp.

The role of the model as the primary witness to, and victim of, artistic objectification is crucial to Cary's exploration of the relationship between artist and artwork. Indeed, Gulley's first vision of 'The Bath' comes to him the first time he hits Sara – subjugating her flesh in the service of spirit and Ideal form, as he interprets it:

> As Billy [Blake] would say, through generation into regeneration. […] Materiality, that is, Sara, the old female nature, having attempted to button up the prophetic spirit, that is, Gulley Jimson, in her placket-hole, got a bonk on the conk, and was reduced to her proper status, as spiritual fodder.[75]

Gulley's sense of authorial self-empowerment – the artist bending people and things interchangeably to his will – implicates art itself in the process of dehumanization. Gulley's confusion between the painted Sara he 'could handle […] then', and the ageing, vulnerable real-life Sara who stands in his way now, is mercilessly revealed as an aspect of his identity as an artist and not merely a crime of acquisitive ruthlessness within the superstructure of a commodity system.

Gulley's delusion of power arises from the tension between his notion of pure art and the commodity culture within which he must practice; and from that between his natural affinity with the destitute characters he lives alongside and his own aspirations to bourgeois acceptability. As the 'pork chop' speech quoted above points out, an artwork is a poor vessel for a would-be capitalist's reservoir of exchange value because its price is so volatile and subject to fashion. This potential abjection of the commodified art-object is most starkly illustrated when Gulley visits a junk shop in search of old canvases he can paint over. Junk shops appear in narratives of mid-century memory and value with remarkable frequency, and will be discussed in more detail in later chapters; this early example gives clear indications of how the trope will develop as a critique of commodity culture in the 1950s. Here, already, is the archetype of a shop that fails to function as a shop; and Gulley is the

[75] Cary, p. 542.

archetypal customer who fails to behave as a customer. Indeed, the shopkeeper is equally dysfunctional; Cary presents him/her as a hazily defined fixture ('a widow like a cottage loaf'; 'a little man shaped like a flower-stand')[76] doomed to be destroyed by the eternally cursed premises:

> Ikey's is a shop that never has any luck. It changes hands about every six months. It has murdered more people than even the haberdashers opposite. […] I walked in and bought a fine junk-shop Romney with a few holes, etc., and some boot-marks on the lady's face, for two and sixpence. Of which the two was not perhaps altogether British mint silver. But the young gentleman was in such an excited state […] that you could have paid him in a Bank of Engraving note and taken change. I often wished I had, for a week afterwards he hanged himself over the stairs.[77]

The shop's current incumbent, however, is more circumspect; Gulley fails to con him out of the large canvas he has seen there ('Fifteen by twenty. Birth of Moses, by Antonio Something, 1710. Italian style, turnips and gravy'),[78] and which has inspired him to plan a new version of *The Fall*. Crucially for the novel's denouement, his failure to procure it leads him to revert instead to his favourite medium: walls themselves. It is not that he believes walls to be more permanent than canvases – walls 'fall down or get knocked full of holes by charwomen's brooms,' he declares, whereas 'Canvas is more portable. All the National Galleries like you to paint on canvas. They can't hang walls.'[79] Rather, it is the brute materiality of walls which attracts him, despite their lack of portability and durability. When he is invited into the home of a smart art collector, Beeder, Gulley soon contrives to take up residence while his host is abroad, and immediately sees the potential of the walls as a site for his own art. The satirical point is implied: collectors want authentic art-objects to hang in their fashionable 'studio' flats, but in this case Gulley turns the space – through a process of stealing, pawning and destroying all Beeder's possessions – into

[76] Cary, p. 598; p. 599.
[77] Cary, p. 598.
[78] Cary, p. 597.
[79] Cary, p. 598.

an authentic artist's studio, impoverished, half derelict, invaded by the destitute, and covered in paint.

> [W]hen I took down the water-colours in the studio to have a look at the other walls, I made a discovery. A good wall is often ruined by pictures, and I have found most excellent material in unexpected places, for instance behind a collection of old Masters. And this was a gem. […] A good wall, as they say, will paint itself. And as I looked at this beautiful shape, I saw what it was for. A raising of Lazarus.[80]

Like his previous obsession, *The Fall*, and his final project, *The Creation*, Gulley's Lazarus picture takes the relationship between matter and eternity as its subject. While the Fall depicts divine beings transforming into mortals, and Lazarus crosses the threshold between death and life, *The Creation* – which Gulley paints on the wall of a derelict chapel – not only features the creation of matter by a supernatural force, but wields a supernatural force of its own, acting with uncanny agency on its creator:

> I used to wake at night shivering all over, thinking the vampires were eating my toes; but it was only the Creation sticking its great beak into me. I used to laugh all at once and jump up in the street […] but it was only because I felt cold hands down my back, hands of Creation.[81]

Artwork and artist are locked here into the kind of dialectical subject-object relationship described by Bill Brown in 'Thing Theory'; each producing and being produced by the other. In *The Creation*, Gulley at last believes that he will be able to marry form and meaning together, since he has found a way to make art itself the subject of his painting. 'This set [of forms] came up nearly complete. Not a gap anywhere,' he says, though he must still negotiate the gap between conception and materialization: 'As every mural painter knows […] the line that is as lively as spring steel in the miniature, may go as dead as apron string on the wall. And what is

[80] Cary, p. 674.
[81] Cary, p. 739.

a living whole on the back of an envelope can look as flat and tedious as a holiday poster, when you draw it out full size.'[82]

The scale of the mural is a corollary of its implacable materiality: just as the falling wall towered over the fireman narrator in William Sansom's story, so this wall dwarfs Gulley, who has to crawl about on its vertical surface via a complex system of pulleys and moving platforms. This is a dangerous encounter for the artist. Gulley had earlier condemned his painting of Adam and Eve because 'it didn't hit you hard enough. It wasn't solid enough': 'What was the Fall after all. The discovery of the solid hard world, good and evil. Hard as rocks and sharp as poisoned thorns. And also the way to make gardens.'[83] It's inevitable, then, that he should be drawn not only to the solidity of a wall as an artistic medium but also to its potential to lash out violently at the human subject. Indeed the chapel's solidity is as illusory as Gulley's authorial jurisdiction over the artwork he creates: the chapel has been condemned as unsafe even before Gulley applies the first stroke of paint, and as he continues to work it is literally demolished around him. When he finally succumbs to a fall of his own (echoing both Adam and Eve's and Sara's fall down the stairs), he is working on a the large, black form of a whale, which dominates the composition and symbolizes the painting's power to swallow Gulley as if he were the Biblical Jonah. In the novel's final scene, whale and wall become one as the fabric of the building cracks open under the paint, and the spectacle of Gulley as the mad artist is revealed to a waiting audience of curious onlookers:

> And just then the whale smiled. Her eyes grew bigger and brighter and she bent slowly forward as if she wanted to kiss me. […] And all at once the smile broke in half, the eyes crumpled, and the whole wall fell slowly away from my brush. […] When the dust began to clear I saw through the cloud about ten thousand angels in caps, helmets, bowlers and even one top hat, sitting on walls, dustbins, gutters, roofs, window sills and other people's cabbages, laughing. That's funny I thought, they've all seen the same joke. God bless them. It must be a work of eternity, a chestnut, a horse-laugh.[84]

[82] Cary, p. 718.
[83] Cary, p. 653.
[84] Cary, p. 766.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, laughter marks the triumph of the culture industry over art: 'Laughter […] always occurs when some fear passes […] It is the echo of power as something inescapable':

> To laugh at something is always to deride it, and the life which […] in laughter breaks through the barrier, is actually an invading barbaric life, self-assertion prepared to parade its liberation from any scruple should the social occasion arise. Such a laughing audience is a parody of humanity. [85]

As his art crumbles, Gulley seems to be transmuted into mere entertainment, like the cartoon character who (in Adorno and Horkheimer's terms) epitomizes barbaric mass culture by demonstrating that 'the breaking down of all individual resistance is the condition of life in this society'.[86] Yet Gulley's fall creates a dialectic of laughter, the hilarity of his audience echoing the 'horse-laugh' of eternal artistic divinity and turning the masses into 'ten thousand angels' who, like Benjamin's Angel of History, are onlookers to the inevitable pile-up of rubble.[87] This fatal encounter in which both wall, mural and artist are simultaneously destroyed coincides with the collapse of materiality and produces a shattering moment of revolutionary revelation, a glimpse of the semantic fluidity in which art and meaning are eternally deferred. Gulley's attempts to bluff, evade and negotiate his way through a commodity system can finally be redeemed as a protest *against* reification: as Adorno and Horkheimer argue, only through imprecision and semantic fluidity can an alternative to the deadening conformity of enlightenment rationality be glimpsed. Gulley's artistic vision may become garbled and fragile in the process of taking material form, but reification is the site of true meaninglessness, because it is 'free of the ambiguity of mythic thought as of all meaning altogether'.[88] Gulley's embrace of ambiguity enables him to escape the instrumentality of enlightenment reason, even as his brush with eternity destroys him.

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[85] Adorno and Horkheimer, pp. 140-41.
[86] Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 138.
[87] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 245-255 (p. 249). Benjamin's revolutionary vision pictured an angel of history hurled backwards through the neverending storm of progress, which 'keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.'
[88] Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 30.

The novel finishes with Gulley seriously ill in hospital, muttering to an uncomprehending nurse that laughter is the same as prayer. His transcendental epiphany at the brink of death coincides with the impending loss of his own materiality: matter, for Gulley, turns out to be a matter of life, not death. But it is not just Gulley's life, art and autonomous selfhood which are at stake at this threshold moment: the entire culture is facing the onset of war and the material wreckage it will cause. Gulley's apprehension of art as essentially a violent attempt to wrestle abstraction into materiality extends to blaming himself for the impending conflagration. 'For me to paint a wall on any building,' he says as he begins work on the chapel painting, 'is as good as asking it to catch fire, or get struck by lightning, or fall down. And as this thing I'm doing is the biggest I've done yet, it will probably bring up an earthquake or a European war, and wreck half the town.'[89]

In this way, art, which Gulley repeatedly decries as a form of madness or addiction, can be rescued from the triviality of commoditized culture; it may leak value and surrender to accident and contingency, but it is also the prime mover of history. Comparing himself to an 'admiral on the bridge of a new battle ship […] cleared for action,'[90] Gulley races to complete *The Creation* before he is arrested for Sara's murder, and before the chapel's demolition is completed, while the reader perceives another looming deadline – the declaration of war and the blitz which really will 'wreck half the town'. Stubbornly oblivious to politics, Gulley declares, 'All wars are due to modern art […] That's the trouble. It's a disturbing influence.'[91] Hitler's motivations are reduced to the complaint that he 'never could put up with modern art. It's against his convictions.'[92] Yet fascism, which despises modern art, in a sense creates it in the form of total warfare. Gulley is at times a pitiless tyrant like Hitler, obsessively trying to shape reality to match his vision – his murder of Sara is the self-aggrandizing action of a megalomaniac. Yet he is also the victim of an overbearing state, and for all his lies and rationalizations he wields no empirical power to shape the world or make it succumb to the kind of totalizing discourse that characterizes fascistic output; on the contrary, Gulley is slippery and erratic, self-contradictory and inconsistent. Instead, he attributes Hitlerian attributes to art itself;

[89] Cary, p. 738.
[90] Cary, p. 743.
[91] Cary, p. 755.
[92] Cary, p. 755.

there is something in Hitler's gaze that Gulley wants to co-opt for the enormous whale which is gradually taking over his mural. 'And all at once I saw Hitler's blue eyes fixed on me. So that's it, I thought. Yes, that's what the whale's wanted all the time. Pale sky-blue in slate, to pick up the sky.'[93]

In his Epilogue to 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducability', Benjamin counters the Futurists' manifesto of '*Fiat ars – pereat mundus*' [Let there be art – let the world perish] with the charge that mankind's 'self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure'.[94] Gulley sees art's annihilating power as analogous to Nazism, but he does not want to 'politicize art' because he is sure that both art and fascism are doomed attempts to manifest abstract concepts, and by implication must end in violent, destructive failure. 'He's got ideas that chap,' he says of Hitler. 'And he wants to see them on the wall.'[95]

'An ivy-clad ruin in the foreground': the murals of *Brideshead Revisited*

Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* is another story of a painter who makes pictures on walls only to see his art threatened by the impermanence of its material context. Its milieu is far removed from the dosshouses frequented by Gulley Jimson, yet it is just as haunted by death and destruction. It is, indeed, haunted by ruins, both actual and potential, and both literal and metaphorical. At the beginning of the novel, Charles Ryder, the bourgeois agnostic who has struggled all his adult life to read the indecipherable codes of the aristocratic and Catholic Marchmain family, arrives at their house, Brideshead Castle, with his army unit, unaware until that moment that the house he once knew so well has been commandeered for war-use. The scenes set in 1944 frame the main narrative of the novel, and lend an elegiac air to Charles's first-person narration of his youthful friendship with the alcoholic Sebastian Flyte and his later engagement to Sebastian's sister Julia. The shoddy current state of the house is contrasted with the baroque glories of its heyday earlier in the century; the ruin of Brideshead crystallizes the growing hostility to modernity which Charles has

[93] Cary, p. 757.
[94] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, pp. 211-235 (p. 235).
[95] Cary, p. 559.

internalised over the years, as he has succumbed to the allure of Marchmains' traditions and beliefs.

It is telling that he first finds his artistic vocation, as a young student in the 1920s, while painting a mural of an ivy-clad ruin in a disused garden room at Brideshead which was itself now 'derelict'.[96] Like Gulley Jimson, Charles finds artists' materials taking on an uncanny autonomy at the moment when inspiration strikes: first a tin of old paints appears in the room and gives him the idea of decorating the walls; and when he begins he finds that 'the brush seemed somehow to do what was wanted of it'.[97] Charles is not attempting to access a lofty stratum of metaphysical truth with his art, but instead seeks to tether in material form a vision of the picturesque, creating a wistful mural of hermetically sealed unreality featuring 'a landscape without figures, a summer scene of white cloud and blue distances with an ivy-clad ruin in the foreground'.[98]

In the final chapter Charles learns that this room has been ruined for a second time: his commanding officer comments that 'it was a signal office and they made absolute hay of it; rather a shame.'[99] Like all muralists, Charles must accept the symbiosis between his supposedly timeless ruinscape and the temporal exigencies of its context. Mural-painting epitomises the immersive possibilities of material art – which can superimpose one location and temporality onto the fabric of another – but also its fragility. While the building stands, a mural creates a counterfactual parallel space to trick the eye; but should the building fall, the trick fails and the illusory vistas are snuffed out along with the fantasy of timelessness which they are meant to suggest. The eternity Charles wants to access is entirely different from the sublime vision experienced by Gulley during his near-death epiphany. Charles, in contrast, is engaged in a project to create a well delineated but counterfactual reality, in which aristocratic privilege and taste will not be diminished by time.

As Waugh concedes in his preface to the 1959 edition, however, the novel's intended theme – the supposedly imminent ruination of the kind of house that Brideshead represents – never in fact transpired, thanks to a turn in postwar fashion towards the nostalgic:

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[96] Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 74.
[97] Waugh, p. 74.
[98] Waugh, p. 74.
[99] Waugh, p. 322.

> It was impossible to foresee, in the spring of 1944, the present cult of the English country house. It seemed then that the ancestral seats which were our chief national artistic achievement were doomed to decay and spoliation like the monasteries in the sixteenth century.[100]

Waugh is sheepish about the novel's overwhelming nostalgia for an architectural legacy he assumed would soon disappear, but which, embarrassingly, persisted into the postwar period. 'I piled it on rather, with passionate sincerity,' he admits. 'Much of this book […] is a panegyric preached over an empty coffin.'[101] In hindsight, he presents the novel itself as an anachronistic curio:

> It would be impossible to bring it up to date without totally destroying it. It is offered to a younger generation of readers as a souvenir of the Second World War rather than of the twenties and thirties, with which it ostensibly deals.[102]

Thus, like the buildings whose demise he anticipated, the book is overlaid with a sense of its own potential or actual ruin; its destruction has been averted, but only through a temporal sleight of hand, so that it becomes a memorial of a more complex kind, with the once-urgent moment of its creation folded into the sense of general nostalgia. The extratextual post-hoc analysis contained in Waugh's preface tacitly acknowledges the dialectic of ruin and nostalgia which runs through the novel; historical linearity turns out to be circular, like the Niezschean 'eternal return' which Benjamin evoked to explain the uncanniness of superannuated fashions.[103] As the war creates new kinds of ruins and a new attitude to the past, the very idea of ruins – and their symbolic correlative – is threatened with superannuation.

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[100] Waugh, p. x.
[101] Waugh, p. x.
[102] Waugh, p. x.
[103] See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 119. For a full analysis of Benjamin's concept see Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto 2000), p. 181.

By mentioning sixteenth-century monasteries, Waugh draws an explicit comparison between the demolished country seats of the aristocracy and the gothic ruins of the Romantic imagination – the kind of ruins Charles had originally painted onto Brideshead's walls. In his mature artistic career, he also paints ruins, but ruins which haven't yet come into being: he specialises in capturing the likenesses of large houses which have been earmarked for demolition or redevelopment, beginning with Marchmain House, the London home of Sebastian's family. This first house painting is as important for his aesthetic development as the first garden-room mural, and once again, Charles is temporarily transported out of self-consciousness as the paints begin to work autonomously:

> I could do nothing wrong, At the end of each passage I paused, tense, afraid to start the next, fearing, like a gambler, that luck must turn and the pile be lost. Bit by bit, minute by minute, the thing came into being. There were no difficulties; the intricate multiplicity of light and colour became a whole; the right colour was where I wanted it on the palette; each brush stroke, as soon as it was complete, seemed to have been there always.[104]

His inspiration comes from the fact that he is working 'against time, for the contractors were only waiting for the final signature to start their work of destruction.'[105] Yet as his fame as a house-painter grows, this antagonism towards time binds him into the very progress of destruction which he deplores:

> I was called to all parts of the country to make portraits of houses that were soon to be deserted or debased; indeed, my arrival seemed often to be only a few paces ahead of the auctioneer's, a presage of doom.[106]

Charles is caught in a temporal paradox; by seeking to arrest progress and lock himself into an eternal fantasy, he becomes an unwilling harbinger of modernity. He goes in search of a gothic ahistoricity, hoping to engage with a superannuated aesthetic which might persist into the present. But he cannot call it into being at will

[104] Waugh, p. 204.
[105] Waugh, p. 204.
[106] Waugh, p. 212.

because he is too determined to pin it down; instead he encounters something more uncanny – the agency of his own painting materials and of other objects – but is blind to its import. His failure as a mid-century artist arises from his unwillingness to understand the new gothicism, in which the objects of modernity, as abject and unauthenticated as they may be, can engage the human subject in accessing a new kind of meaning about the circularity of time and history. No wonder that, in despair, he decides to leave this successful house-painting career behind to seek alternative ruins which are – in his narrow terms – properly distant, both in time and space. Travelling in Central America, Charles

> sought inspiration among gutted palaces and cloisters embowered in weed, derelict churches where the vampire bats hung in the dome like dry seed-pods and only the ants were ceaselessly astir tunnelling in the rich stalls; cities where no road led, and mausoleums where a single, agued family of Indians sheltered from the rains.[107]

As Marina MacKay points out in *Modernism and World War II,* the only character in *Brideshead* who remains unconvinced by Ryder's colonial neo-romanticism is the 'modernist survivor' Anthony Blanche, who first appears in the novel broadcasting Eliot's 'The Waste Land' from an open window, and who glories in his outsider status as a homosexual who is 'part Gallic, part Yankee, part, perhaps, Jew; wholly exotic'. [108] He is Ryder's only critic, decrying his gentlemanly art for its dead-eyed insularity, and comparing it to 'a dean's daughter in flowered muslin'.[109] He cuts straight to the inauthenticity of Ryder's attempt at exotic gothicism, calling it 't-t-terrible t-t-tripe' ('Where, my dear Charles, did you find this sumptuous greenery? The corner of a hothouse at T-t-trent or T-t-tring?' [110]) MacKay finds Waugh's simultaneous sympathy both for Charles's nostalgia and for Blanche's contempt 'perverse' and the sign of a novel 'rebelling against itself',[111] but arguably this is a factor of the mid-century moment in which it was created. MacKay mistakes Charles for a 'would-be modernist' but there is little evidence of this ambition in the novel;

[107] Waugh, p. 213.
[108] MacKay, p. 129; Waugh, p. 27.
[109] Waugh, p. 254.
[110] Waugh, pp. 251-52.
[111] MacKay, p. 131; p. 129.

[112] on the contrary, Charles is paralysed by his inability to come to terms with progress. His love for Julia is bound up with his desire to possess Brideshead as an aristocratic time-capsule: his desire to marry her only arises with the revelation that she, not her brother, will inherit the house. Even sexual intercourse with Julia is described in terms of house ownership: 'It was as though a deed of conveyance of her narrow loins had been drawn and sealed,' Charles muses. 'I was making my first entry as the freeholder of the property I would enjoy and develop at leisure.'[113]

Yet he loses the deeds to both Julia and Brideshead by the end of the novel, and he is robbed of them by the very tradition which so beguiles him: Julia rejects him in favour of a return to Catholicism. At this moment, Charles finally capitulates his one remaining modern attitude, the agnosticism which has defined him and which has set him apart from the family. Charles loses something once central to his identity, but finds comfort in his newfound faith because through it he can finally access eternity and escape from time. He has been battling time ever since he came to Brideshead and was overwhelmed by the tantalizing inaccessibility of the past, which persists in the objects and fabric of the building but cannot be experienced except by an imaginative dissociation from the haptic present, with all its urgent bodily and material requirements. The property motif finds its way into his experience of the onset of religion, too: in an extended metaphor, Charles imagines the emergence of Julia's (and ultimately his own) faith through the image of a hut engulfed in an avalanche:

> Quite silently a great weight forming against the timber; the bolt straining in its socket; minute by minute in the darkness outside the white heap sealing the door, until quite soon when the wind dropped and the sun came out on the ice slopes and the thaw set in a block would move, slide, and tumble, high above, gather weight, till the whole hillside seemed to be falling, and the little lighted place would open and splinter and disappear, rolling with the avalanche into the ravine.'[114]

[112] MacKay, p. 128.
[113] Waugh, p. 243.
[114] Waugh, p. 291.

This brutal wipe-out leaves no ruin behind. Through Catholicism, Charles hopes – like Gulley Jimson – to be released from materialism, not through a vision of the sublime but by walling himself into a frozen version of history.

The contemporary ruins of the blitz are curiously absent from this 'souvenir of the Second World War', but they make a tangential appearance, arguably, in Charles's disgusted contemplation of a half completed housing estate, which he sees through the gaze of a future archaeologist:

> The Pollock diggings provide a valuable link between the citizen-slave communities of the twentieth century and the tribal anarchy which succeeded them. Here you see a people of advanced culture, capable of an elaborate draining system and the construction of permanent highways, over-run by a race of the lowest type.[115]

These unfinished buildings are, like ruins, porous and readable, but what Charles sees there is not the glory of a lost civilization but a hollow reduction of modern culture to mere systems of waste disposal and transport, while his snobbish (and indeed racist) disgust at the 'tribal' beings into which he imagines humanity will degenerate is reminiscent of H. G. Wells's time traveller encountering the barely human Morlocks of the distant future. As is fitting for a character who wishes to reverse time so that he might become a present-day ghost who haunts the past, his vision of the destruction of humanity does not have to wait for an apocalypse in the distant future because it has, to all intents and purposes, already happened. Charles ends the book drifting around Brideshead like a ghost, muttering 'Quo modo sedet sola civitas. Vanity of vanity, all is vanity.'[116]

'A place of stillness, a place apart': Hugh Casson and the bombed churches of London

[115] Waugh, p. 5.
[116] Waugh, p. 325. 'Quo modo sedet sola civitas' translates as 'how lonely the city stands' (Lamentations 1. 1; the verse continues 'that was full of people'). The second quotation is from Ecclesiastes 1. 2.

While Charles Ryder was vilifying the suburban schemes which had been interrupted by the war, an idealistic young technical officer at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning was busy drawing up more plans for cheap, quick solutions to the housing crisis. But Hugh Casson was, in his way, also preoccupied with ruins. In 1945, several years before his emergence as a respected architect, he wrote an illustrated booklet called *Bombed Churches as War Memorials*.[117] It elaborated an idea which had first been proposed the year before in the *Architectural Review*, and was supported by a letter to *The Times* signed by, among others, John Maynard Keynes and T. S. Eliot – namely, that a number of war-damaged City of London churches should be selected for preservation as ruins, with gardens designed around them which would provide urban spaces for relaxation, contemplation and remembrance.[118] The fact that he assumed they would not simply be rebuilt and used for worship indicates how far the role of churches, bombed or not, was changing at this time. Nine years later in 1954, Philip Larkin would write 'Church Going' in which he wondered 'When churches fall completely out of use | What we shall turn them into' and then concluded, much like Casson, that people will still haunt these places of 'grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky' because they are somehow 'proper to grow wise in, | If only that so many dead lie round.' [119]

The church, as we have seen, is a common motif in these mid-century ruin-narratives: the deconsecration of Lady Marchmain's Art Deco chapel at Brideshead, for instance, marks a key point in Waugh's novel, while in the last scene, set in 1944, Charles finds comfort in the reanimation of the chapel, which now shelters 'a Blitzed RC padre […] jittery old bird, but no trouble' who conducts masses for any soldiers, including Ryder, who want to worship.[120] A similarly jittery blitzed priest will haunt the ruins of Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness* – discussed later in this chapter – and find no comfort there; but both the elaborate chapel at Brideshead – all 'angels in printed cotton smocks, rambler-roses, flower-spangled

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[117] Hugh Casson, 'Ruins for Remembrance', in Hugh Casson, Brenda Colvin and Jacques Groag, *Bombed Churches as War Memorials*, (Cheam: Architectural Press, 1945), pp. 5-22.
[118] 'Ruined City Churches: Preservation as Memorials', *The Times*, 15 August 1944, p. 5.
[119] Philip Larkin, 'Church Going', *The Less Deceived* (London: Marvel, 1977) pp. 28-29.
[120] Waugh, p. 321.

meadows, frisking lambs, texts in Celtic script, saints in armour'[121] – and the derelict chapel reduced to rubble by the uncanny power of Gulley Jimson's *Creation* in *The Horse's Mouth*, attest to the affinity of spaces which house art and religion. Church architecture, like art, attempts to materialise an abstraction, and thus sits in a dangerously liminal zone where ideas are transubstantiated into things. Like Cary and Macaulay, Casson placed ruined churches at the vanguard of a new approach to meaning and memory. As Gaston Bachelard wrote in *The Poetics of Space* (1958): 'Space contains compressed time. That is what space is for.'[122] He was theorizing domestic rather than public space, but his concept of topoanalysis – which he defines as 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives' – is just as applicable to the idea that church ruins could provide both a material link with personal memories, and a sanctuary in which to house them.[123] The war and its ruins haunt Bachelard's notion of domesticity and homeliness as an absent presence; Casson's pamphlet was an attempt to devise new architectural treatments of bombsites within a process of cathexis for traumatized Londoners, reframing them in a way that anticipates Bachelard's argument that, in material spaces, 'our memories have refuges […] All our lives we come back to them in our daydreams.'[124]

Casson took it for granted that these churches should be deconsecrated, but argued that they could nevertheless retain their spiritual identity, with the buildings existing simultaneously as quasi-churches, as ruins, as gardens and as memorials. Linking these four definitions was an anxiety about time and history which reflected the emotions of a nation for whom modernity was no longer a revolutionary dream, but the harbinger of fascist ideology and mechanised death from the sky.

The *Bombed Churches* pamphlet was part of a wider acculturation of London's new bombscapes. Elizabeth Bowen was already incorporating ruins into the psychic landscapes of characters struggling to come to terms with peace (discussed in detail in Chapter 3), while Lorenza Mazzetti's *Together* (1956) (discussed in Chapter 2) and the Ealing Comedy *Hue and Cry* (1947) commandeered

[121] Waugh, p. 33.
[122] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1964), p. 8.
[123] Bachelard, p. 8.
[124] Bachelard, p. 8.

them as playgrounds of imaginative possibility.[125] Casson's crucial point was that the transformation of bombed churches into war memorials should involve a transformation of the object-witnesses of the blitz – the fallen stones themselves – into a particular type of art: 'Preservation […] involves an understanding of the ruin *as* a ruin, and its re-creation as a work of art in its own right, keeping the essential forms but enhancing them with an imaginative and appropriate background.'[126] This definition of art implicitly rejects the model of the Duchampian readymade – ruins are to be understood as art only once they have been 'enhanced' by the application of a carefully designed contextual frame. Like the neo-Romantic artist John Piper, who created a series of melancholy, enigmatic bombsite paintings, Casson's ruins are not to be perceived as modernist harbingers of upheaval and atomization, but as the kind of Romantic objects Charles Ryder would have recognized, in which the sublime, the picturesque and the gothic coalesce. Yet the ruins of London in 1945 were not isolated, distant features in visual dialogue with nature, but part of an extensive and ugly streetscape of rubble; and they did not provide imaginative access to the sweep of history through the longevity of their survival, but offered a snapshot of a moment of sudden, recent devastation. Casson nevertheless insists that they partake of the charisma of 'creepered and bird-haunted' places like Tintern Abbey or Raglan Castle: 'Even though a ruin to-day is as common a feature of the street scene as a pillar-box, it still has this power to stir the heart. Even though we live and work among ruins, they still possess the beauty of strangeness.'[127] Just as nature provides a backdrop which enhances the impact of old ruins, Casson imagines that a new material context will enhance the strangeness of the bombed churches once the City has been rebuilt around them:

> Against the scale of our century the churches would acquire a new meaning as monuments, small, intimate, and informal, contrasting frankly and not competing with the giant facades surrounding them. The simplicity of the modern style of building is particularly suitable to act as a screen against

[125] See, for instance, Elizabeth Bowen, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952) [1945] and *The Heat of the Day* (London: Vintage, 1998) [1948]; *Together,* dir. by Lorenza Mazzetti (Harlequin Productions and BFI, 1956); *Hue and Cry,* dir. by Charles Crichton (Ealing Studios, 1947).
[126] Casson, p. 15.
[127] Casson, pp. 17-18.

> which old buildings with their more intricate and more human forms look their best.[128]

Thus the churches' aesthetic legitimacy – which contradicts their practical redundancy – depends on the shortcomings of modernity: like Waugh, Casson fears that the future city may have no room for ancient architecture; it is taken for granted that the gigantic new buildings surrounding the ruined churches will be anything but intimate or human, and will need to have their bombastic blankness softened by contiguity with something old and intricate.

Casson argues that the new city must make room for the past within aestheticized 'communal' spaces which must not, for all their communality, succumb to everyday banality.

> In its neighbourhood then should be placed the memorial, close enough to be touched by the friendly atmosphere, but not so near that its quiet is disturbed by the bustle of daily life. A memorial should not be remote, but it should be withdrawn a little from the noise and distractions of human contacts. It should be a place of stillness, a place apart.[129]

This memorial space replaces acts of worship with a different form of imaginative and emotional work. As well as remembrance, the purpose of this space is to absorb trauma – to circumscribe and contain it and, by materializing it outside the suffering human subject, to cathect it. This is not an act of forgetting; indeed, the very language Casson uses emphasizes continuity with the painful past. The 'stillness' of the memorial space recalls the motionlessness of death, while its 'apartness' evokes, not only physical separation, but also fragmentation, the memory of buildings and lives falling apart under bombardment, which is also materialized literally in the ruins themselves. The very stones become uncanny cyphers for human suffering: 'They are aloof,' he writes, 'but have not lost contact with us, and with us they have undergone the physical trials of war, and bear its scars.'[130] For Casson, this function is even more important than religion because these object witnesses are inoculated

[128] Casson, p. 15.
[129] Casson, p. 21.
[130] Casson, p. 11.

against time and contingency by the very fact that they continue to exist. A church is, he argues, 'even when scarred and broken, a piece of architecture, sometimes perhaps a masterpiece. Every stone – whether fallen or in place – is a fragment of the past, part of the pattern of history.'[131] Art, architecture and spirituality are conjoined here to a particular definition of history structured by an underlying anti-teleological rationale. It is not just the scars of war that Casson's aloof stones must bear witness to: modernity itself is destroying old masterpieces. In 1948, Casson published an article (with G. M. Kellman) called 'Metropolis in Transition' which described the changing demography of London brought about by new transport links and ribbon development out into the suburbs. In it, he blames urban sprawl on 'building societies, and the BBC […] chain stores and 50-shilling suits […] cinemas and the Green Lane' and mourns the fact that 'London stretches over most of SE England. Metropolis has become Metroland.'[132] Moreover, the article claims that London's transformation involves a shift towards the material objects of mass culture and away from the fetishized, metaphysical commodities of a bourgeois, 'Metropolitan', economy presided over by a middle-class elite of which Casson might well count himself a member:

> Metropolitan activities […] are largely of the mind. They are concerned with the abstract notions of business and finance, with the ramifications of politics, with fashion, entertainment and learning. The carrier of city culture is the intellectual, the aesthete, the professional man, and the politician.[133]

For Casson, culture must be mediated – indeed aestheticised – by an elite if it is not to lose touch with its proper purpose. He describes, in *Bombed Churches*, the kind of time-honoured communal space he hopes to emulate, in which a fantasy of social cohesion and harmony exists because it has arisen organically from within the community:

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[131] Casson, p. 11.
[132] Hugh Casson and G. M. Kallman, 'Metropolis in Transition', in A. G. Weidenfeld, ed., *The Changing Nation: A Contact Book* (London: Contact, 1948) p. 1.
[133] Casson and Kallman, p. 1.

> Every city and village has some such place which has been naturally selected by those who live there as a focus and meeting-place for the community. It may be the city square, it may be a certain group of trees, or just a patch of well-worn grass. It is a place chosen, as a rule, not for its beauty but for its associations. The children play there, the young people meet there, the old remember it.[134]

The social politics underpinning this idyllic scene are revealed, however, when they are set beside a description of Leicester Square in the 1948 article, which acts as a gloss for the rose-tinted nostalgia of the earlier pamphlet:

> The monstrous club-foot of the Odeon towers over Leicester Square where all the visual horrors of the modern metropolitan scene can be found in their most degraded form. Against this fantastic scenery of neon and hoardings, even the trees seem an unwelcome intrusion and the patch of trampled grass, hemmed in by the circling traffic, becomes a corral for morons instead of a promenade for citizens.[135]

Placing this reactionary polemic beside the romanticism of *Bombed Churches* highlights Casson's contempt for the 'degraded' mass of human subjects who might intrude upon his bourgeois vision of the ruins. Indeed, in many of the illustrations which accompany his essay in the pamphlet, human figures are absent, or retreat to the margins of the spaces. Romantic ruins, he reminds us, are places we have traditionally 'made expeditions' to; they maintain their sublimity by shrugging off the human desire to claim and define them. Casson's postwar church-ruin-garden-memorials are similarly to be grasped by the mind, as a symbol of remembrance – not necessarily experienced directly by bodily occupation, and definitely not trampled by the masses.

The spectral quality of these spaces is addressed more generously in the pamphlet's final section, written by Czech émigré Jacques Groag, and detailing his suggested architectural treatment of St Anne's in Soho. Here, Groag's sketches do contain numerous human figures, shown relaxing on a bench or leaning over a

[134] Casson, *Bombed Churches*, p. 21.
[135] Casson and Kallman, 'Metropolis in Transition', p. 5.

balustrade to contemplate a water feature, chin in hands. People are especially visible in the interior views, in which mournful, shadowy figures haunt the memorial chapel housed in the ruin's basement. In his design, this is approached via a low-ceilinged, dark passage covered with a mural which 'should have some of the terror of medieval cycles of the Dance of Death: death in battle, death in the midst of pleasure, death coming suddenly from the sky, and death coming as a solace to the wounded.'[136] The figures in the mural and the living visitors are sketched in the same scale and with a similar vagueness, so that they merge together, emphasizing the elision of life and death, artwork and subject, within this dark, crypt-like space punctured with sudden shafts of daylight from above.

In the end, St Anne's was not remodelled as a memorial ruin, and nor were any of the other churches alluded to in the pamphlet. Casson's idea had numerous opponents, including the distinguished architect Herbert Baker, who had designed a number of war cemeteries and memorials after the 1914-18 conflict. In a letter to *The Times* he condemned the idea outright, arguing that 'a war memorial should lift up our thoughts to the hills of loving remembrance' while 'a war-blasted church left in ruins would surely lower them to the inferno where hate and revenge dwell'.[137] Another correspondent to *The Times*, L. Munday, called such preserved ruins 'a morbid commemoration of a successful assault by the forces of evil upon the Christian faith' and suggested that, 'surmounting the wreckage, the only appropriate finial would be the swastika in substitution of the overthrown cross.'[138] The church authorities, meanwhile, largely ignored the proposal. The Bishop of London's Commission on the Future of the City Churches produced a report in 1946 which placed the twenty bombed churches of the Square Mile into three categories: eleven were to be restored, five should be demolished and the land sold, and four should be demolished and the sites used for alternative church purposes 'with the primary object of administering to the needs of youth.'[139]

Yet some church ruins *were* preserved as war memorials; most famously, a new Coventry Cathedral was built beside the bombed remains of the old. Even

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[136] Jacques Groag, *Bombed Churches*, p. 35.
[137] 'Ruined Churches As Memorials: The Emotional Effect', *The Times,* 22 August 1944, p. 2.
[138] 'Ruins Of Bombed Churches' *The Times*, 19 August 1944, p. 5.
[139] See 'Future Of The City Churches: Commission's Final Report', *The Times*, 2 October 1946, p. 7.

among the City of London churches, room was finally found for fragments of ruins to be preserved, although not in any schematic way: the churchyards of Christchurch Greyfriars, St Dunstan-in-the-East and St Swithun London Stone remain as public gardens, as does the footprint of St Mary Aldermanbury, though that church's ruins were transported wholesale to Fulton, Missouri in 1966, where they were rebuilt as a memorial to Churchill. Other remnants have been adapted for modern use: useable parts of Christchurch Greyfriars and St Augustine Watling Street were listed for preservation in 1950, and the tower of St Alban Wood Street is now a private home, and sits alone on a traffic island, dwarfed by office blocks, perhaps belatedly fulfilling Casson's vision of an intimate antiquity in dialogue with the inhuman scale of its modern context – and only to be experienced directly by the privileged few.

'The nature of the wall's surface': ruins as refuge in *The World My Wilderness*

By coincidence, the same artist – Barbara Jones – illustrated the covers of both Casson's *Bombed Churches* pamphlet and the first edition of Rose Macaulay's postwar novel set amid London's bombsites, *The World My Wilderness*.[140] Jones's work as a curator is examined in the next chapter, but these illustrations demonstrate that she had a keen eye for the combination of horror and mundanity which characterized blitzed bombsites and also informed her practice as a collector. Both covers are deceptively simple pen-and-wash sketches which combine the immediacy of contemporaneous record with a romantically idealized vision of sunlit and picturesque decay. Macaulay's novel contains a crucial scene which takes place in a bombed City of London church, St Giles Cripplegate – one of a number of ruins adopted as an alternative home by a population of drifters and troublemakers. These include the novel's teenage protagonist, Barbary, who has been transplanted into London from her wild, barefoot childhood in Provence, and who is traumatized in equal measure by her experiences at the fringes of the French resistance, her guilt over her collaborationist step-father's execution, and by this sudden attempt to turn her into a civilised English art student.

Rose Macaulay would have agreed with the critics of Casson's scheme; 'bombed churches and cathedrals,' she wrote in *The Pleasure of Ruins* (1953), give

[140] Rose Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness* (London: Collins, 1950).


Illustration removed to protect copyright

us 'nothing but resentful sadness'.[141] Her own house was destroyed by an incendiary bomb in 1941, and she felt that the blitz had changed the meaning of ruins for her contemporaries:

> *Ruinenlust* has come full circle: we have had our fill. Ruin pleasure must be at one remove, softened by art […] or centuries of time. Ruin must be a fantasy, veiled by the mind's dark imaginings: in the objects that we see before us, we get to agree with St Thomas Aquinas that *quae enim diminutae sunt, hoc ipso turpia sunt,* and to feel that, in beauty, wholeness is all.[142]

She admits, however, that these 'wholesome hankerings' may simply be 'a phase of our fearful and fragmented age', and she balances two temporal perspectives in her account of contemporary bombsites. [143] In the present, they lack meaning, displaying only a 'catastrophic tipsy chaos'. They seem promiscuously candid and available, buildings broken apart by bombs offering the cheap melodrama of a 'domestic scene wide open for all to enjoy'.[144] She follows the gaze of spectators who have come to witness the interiors of a 'drab little house' transformed into something 'bright and intimate like a Dutch picture or a stage set' and who are both fascinated and repelled by the idea that they too may undergo such a squalid – or perversely glamorous – transformation:

> Tomorrow or tonight, the gazers feel, their own dwelling may be even as this. Last night the house was scenic; flames leaping to the sky; today it is squalid and *morne*, but out of its dereliction it flaunts the flags of what is left.[145]

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[141] Macaulay, *The Pleasure of Ruins* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1953), p. 454.
[142] Macaulay, *The Pleasure of Ruins*, pp. 454-5. The Latin sentence translates as 'Things that are lacking in something are thereby unsightly' and is from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1. 39. 8.
[143] Macaulay, *The Pleasure of Ruins*, p. 455.
[144] Macaulay, *The Pleasure of Ruins*, p. 454.
[145] Macaulay, *The Pleasure of Ruins*, p. 454.

In contrast to this chaotic and conflicted rush of emotion, she looks forward to a future time when human lives will be irrelevant and 'the ruin will be enjungled, engulfed' as 'trees [thrust] through the empty window sockets'. She writes: 'All this will presently be; but at first there is only the ruin; a mass of torn, charred prayer books strew the stone floor; the statues, tumbled from their niches, have broken in pieces; rafters and rubble pile knee-deep.'[146] In *The World My Wilderness*, Macaulay presents London, through the eyes of Barbary, as if this 'enjungling' had already taken place. But Barbary is on the run from history as much as Charles Ryder; she may not haunt these spaces, like he does, as a would-be time traveller seeking an aesthetic and conceptual conduit to the past, but instead sets herself up as the prototype of a new type of ruin-dweller who might inhabit the stones in an eternal future tense which does not require her to undergo any process of recuperation and renewal.

As an artist, Barbary refuses to make any claims about meaning in art; she can't take her studies at the Slade seriously but likes to paint postcards of bombsites to sell to the citizens who come to gawp at them. Like Gulley Jimson she paints a mural on a church wall, but this intervention takes place long after the building's ruin, rather than bringing it about, and lacks any of the destructive power of Gulley's paintbrush:

> Barbary and Raoul stood before the east wall, whereon a Judgment Day painting now faintly burgeoned: God the Father, with the blessed souls smiling on his right hand, on his left the wicked damned taking off for the leap into the flames. They were pleased with this painting, which had admirable clarity of design, though, owing to the nature of the wall's surface, the colours did not stand out very distinctly.[147]

Later in the same scene, a crazed vicar suddenly enters the church and insists on saying mass – a service which ends with an anguished sermon about his own personal hell:

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[146] Macaulay, *The Pleasure of Ruins*, p. 453.
[147] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, p. 165.

> Fire creeps on me from all sides; I am trapped in the prison of my sins […] The flames press on; they will consume my body, but my soul will live on in hell, forever damned […] Trapped, trapped, trapped there is no hope […] For this is hell, hell, hell. [148]

A younger clergyman arrives and explains that Father Roger has been traumatized by being pinned under a beam in his burning church. 'I'm afraid he frightened you,' he apologizes. 'No,' Barbary replies. 'Not more than I was already.'[149] Without access to her own history and the chance to come to terms with it, Barbary lives in a state of perpetual fear; unlike in Casson's pamphlet, the burnt-out church is not a sanctuary or a site of therapeutic remembrance, but an actively frightening place which threatens to trap its inhabitants in a perpetual loop of unresolved trauma. Like Sansom's fireman, this clergyman understands that walls enclose a space where you can be 'trapped, trapped, trapped' and find yourself erased from the world; but for Barbary, the aftermath of catastrophe is a space of freedom, full of voids and absences. Barbary's solution to trauma is to accept this sense of emotional and physical wilderness, just as she and Raoul accept that 'the nature of the wall's surface' – it's pocked and fire-blasted ruination – will define their painting of Judgment Day.

The novel's vivid descriptions of London's shattered postwar landscape as an enchanted jungle of weeds and greenery empties them of people and any sense of urban life: when Macaulay writes that 'the paths ran like streams and the ravines were deep in dripping greenery that grew high and rank running over the ruins as the jungle runs over Maya temples, hiding them from prying eyes' she is herself painting a kind of mural on top of the bombsites, creating a counterfactual space-within-a-space and turning a few overgrown streets into a vast landscape. Like the Mexican ruins amongst which Charles Ryder attempted to find some essence of ahistoric profundity, Macaulay's fecund bomb sites have a hellish quality of damp decay, and this reflects Barbary's perception of herself as a lost sinner without hope of redemption. Yet she is willing to embrace novel forms of escapism, as long as they do not demand any self-examination or acknowledgment of her troubled past;

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[148] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, p. 167.
[149] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, p. 167.

indeed, her perception that the ruins are a place where 'one belongs more'[150] makes her more, not less, amenable to the idea of turning herself into a consumer, the ideal prototype of frictionless ahistoricity. Naturally, though, she accesses this new realm of nihilism via criminal rather than economic activity. She is egged on in this project by a street-smart shoplifter called Mavis, who first advises her she needs to 'doll up' if she is going to pass for a shopper. Thus disguised, Barbary trawls a department store for things she might steal in order to create a new sense of a future in which history and authenticity will no longer exist:

> She saw much. Galaxies of desirable objects, glittering into the focus of attainability, shone with a new moonish lustre, as of fruit ripe for plucking and within reach. They slid like dropping peaches into her bag […] She was carried away by the bounty of opportunity and the ease of performance. [151]

Barbary's physical transformation into the painted image of a consumer with 'rouge on her cheeks, crimson lipstick on her mouth, and scarlet polish on her nails' is a carefully staged illusion; like Sansom's sense of blitz 'pantomime' or Macaulay's own description of bombsites as a 'stage set', Barbary understands instinctively that these transitional places require a greasepaint performance. The sense of lush possibility she finds at the shops echoes the alien fecundity of the bomb sites, and her newfound acquisitiveness is real:

> Barbary said she would like to keep some of the things, such as a musical-box, a yellow scarf decorated with black kittens, a paint-box, a canary with a whistle, a cushion with a handle, and a small alarm clock.[152]

Suddenly burdened by possessions which might be lost or stolen, she calls on the 'sly secrecy of the maquis' and hides them among the ruins;[153] and Macaulay pauses at this crucial turning point for an extended meditation on the commercial history of the streets through which Barbary travels with her stolen goods, reflecting that they

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[150] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, p. 181.
[151] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, pp. 178-79.
[152] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, pp. 178-79.
[153] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, p. 179.

had recently been 'stately with ingenious men who had manufactured hats, mats, ties, underwear, accounting books, typewriters, fancy goods, gloves and buttons';[154] these merchants have been 'blown sky high' and in their place 'the new traders, the pirates, the racketeers, the black marketeers, the robber bands, roam and lurk.'[155] It quickly transpires that Barbary's wartime cunning will be no match for the blunt bullying tactics of the spiv Horace, who has followed her to her hiding place and effortlessly relieves her of her spoils.

Barbary has learnt a sharp lesson about postwar consumerism: things 'glittering into the focus of attainability' may prove as ephemeral as the commodities 'blown sky high' by the war. Barbary's drift from the anarchism of the unmediated ruins to the trap of consumerism and the lure of objects of desire leaves her little choice but to retreat even further into her fantasy that she is still in Provence and on the run from the Gestapo, rather than fleeing British policemen hunting for spivs and shoplifters. When Barbary undergoes her own seemingly inevitable Fall, 'plung[ing] steeply down a chasm into the stony ruins of a deep cellar', it is not – like Gulley Jimson's – an epiphanic escape from materiality, but a definitive re-entry into the world of things:

> [She] lay still beneath a thorn apple bush, among the medieval foundations of Messrs. Foster, Crockett and Porter's warehouse. They – Messrs. Foster, Crockett and Porter – had been used to make surgical instruments, which were what she would now require.[156]

'Exploding the Regatta Restaurant': murals at the Festival of Britain

When Macaulay's novel was published, plans were already well advanced to channel the memories of blitzed citizens into the desires of modern consumers on a population-wide scale, via the South Bank Exhibition of the 1951 Festival of Britain. Six years on from his work on *Bombed Churches*, Hugh Casson had taken on responsibility for the architecture of Festival. This piece of immersive, three-dimensional rhetoric was designed and conceived as an exercise in concrete discourse, turning the abstractions of British character, achievement and potential

[154] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, pp. 181-82.
[155] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, p. 183.
[156] Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*, p. 195.

into a coherent national story. The event had an undisguised agenda; it was to act as a 'tonic to the nation' and model, via its experimental architecture and aspirational exhibits, a cultural turn towards materialism.[157] In the 1940s, Hugh Casson had wanted to imagine a new Metropolis built on abstract ideas, where a middle-class elite could cathect the trauma of war via a return to the picturesque and the soothing notion that the past could be preserved in a carefully framed aesthetic space dedicated to memory. By the 1950s, he had realised – or been forced to accept – that London's transformation would be demotic and dynamic, with wartime relics and residues reimagined in a collective *Traumarbeit* which enabled the population to re-embrace the idea of modernity. His 27-acre architectural experiment was built literally on a foundation of bombsite rubble. The pavilions – commissioned from the brightest young designers Casson could find – combined clean lines and bold forms with exactly the kind of humane details and a friendly sense of proportion and scale which Casson had warned would be missing from the new builds in the City. Here, visitors would imbibe a vision of a hygienic and smoothly contoured future while they drank their tea amid comfortingly familiar landscape features. Like ruins, these spaces incorporated voids and openings which made them porous and accessible, and their thematic treatment – each housed a different aspect of British culture or achievement – put them in touch with both the recent and the ancient past.

Unlike the reverent historicism of the *Bombed Churches* proposal, though, the South Bank site invited not remembrance, but wonder. It may have been 'a place apart' – contained behind turnstiles in a waterside strip between the Thames and a brightly painted palisade – but it was not a place of stillness: it was a playground, designed for crowds to explore and dream in. And whereas Barbary's dreamspace was the site of nightmares, a perpetual future tense in which both past and present were nothing more than traps, the South Bank Exhibition sought to provide its visitors with a sensorium which retold the past as a glorious progression and actualized a progressive future in tangible form.

However, the idea of progress supposedly built into the sanctioned 'story' of the exhibition and performed by visitors following its carefully mapped 'way to go

[157] The phrase 'a tonic to the nation' is usually attributed to the Director General of the Festival, Gerald Barry, although it may have been coined by a sub-editor as it appears only in the headline to Barry's article in the *Daily Mail Preview & Guide to the Festival of Britain*, May 1951, p. 3.

round' was undermined by the crowded chaos of the reality on site. Visitors, for instance, tended to arrive, not as expected via Waterloo Station, which marked the 'beginning' of the story, but by crossing the pedestrian bailey bridge across the Thames, which came at the 'end' of the exhibitionary narrative, where the architecture was at its most robustly modern.[158] Thus they arrived next to the Regatta Restaurant, designed by Misha Black, where they were confronted at point-blank range by an uncompromising architectural statement in International Style, visually detonated by a large-scale spiral mural by Victor Pasmore. [159] Rather than being painted, this design – consisting of graphic black swirls on a white background – had been fired onto ceramic tiles and used as the building's cladding. William Feaver, writing in 1976, called Pasmore's mural 'the most positive contribution by a painter to the South Bank', and described its 'roughcast textures and cosmic overtones' as a key Festival motif.[160] Pasmore had carefully considered the relationship between his work and the building where it would be displayed; he wanted to make a case for 'the purely abstract style' and its 'validity […] when brought to bear emotionally on the cubic and utilitarian functionalism of modern architecture.' Disdaining the option of 'reinforcing [the architecture] harmonically by repeating its forms', he wanted to 'transform it optically by means of contrast'. [161] As a recent convert to abstraction, he was rejecting the idea of the figurative mural as a counterfactual scene obscuring its architectural host; instead, he imagined the confrontation between wall and artwork as a moment of crisis – a deliberate statement about fragmentation in a piece Pasmore based on 'the idea of "exploding" the Regatta Restaurant'.[162]

There were other disconcerting touches in the Regatta Restaurant too, like Mitzi Cunliffe's gothic bronze door handles shaped like disembodied hands, which inescapably referenced the bombed body parts of the blitz (and which the sculptor

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[158] For a full explanation of how the narrative was supposed to develop for visitors following the sanctioned route, see Elain Harwood, Annie Hollobone and Alan Powers, 'Festival of Britain South Bank Tour', in Elain Harwood and Alan Powers, eds., *Twentieth Century Architecture 5: Festival of Britain* (London: Twentieth Century Society, 2001), pp. 67-90.
[159] The Regatta was designed by Mischa Black and Alexander Gibson of the Design Research Unit.
[160] William Feaver, 'Festival Star' in Banham and Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation*, pp. 40-57 (p. 49).
[161] Victor Pasmore, 'A Jazz Mural', in Banham and Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation*, p. 102.
[162] Pasmore, 'A Jazz Mural', p. 102.

Barbara Hepworth 'refused to touch as she associated them with amputation').[163] For newly landed inhabitants of old London, all this contributed to a kind of defamiliarizing cinematic jump-cut from their war-damaged capital into the shiny micro-city of the future, where fragmentation and confusion could be a deliberate design strategy rather than (or as well as) a traumatised blitz memory. Rather than cling to a Romantic idea of ruin and loss, which must be aestheticized within a picturesque conceptual and physical landscape, the South Bank Exhibition rebooted the idea of an exploded building as a legitimate modern statement about materiality and abstraction.

Around a hundred murals in total were commissioned for the South Bank, most of which were destroyed at the end of the Festival of Britain.[164] John Piper's *The Englishman's Home,* which made walls both the subject of the work and its medium, was a rare survivor. Commissioned for the southern façade of the Homes and Gardens Pavilion, the painting shows a collection of monumental buildings – including a Moorish mansion, a Palladian edifice, the suggestion of Tudorbethan gabling and some bricky Victorian gothic – jumbled together in a parade of architectural styles which never quite amount to a sense of wholeness or safety. Inside the pavilion, stylish room-sets staged an ideal of modern domesticity, but outside, the buildings in Piper's mural made a dark statement about the impenetrability of the English mindset. As they soar to the top of the mural, they seem to shoulder each other out of the way, jostling to command the foreground. A dead white tree reaching hand-like into a fiery red sky makes a gothic statement on the left of the picture, and various examples of a fortress aesthetic – railings, turrets, a heraldic shield – remind us that an Englishman's home is a place to be defended at all costs. None of the windows and doors seems to be a real opening, and even in places where perspective suggests you could walk in, the way is barred by thick shadows. A courtyard walled with topiaried box hedging is filled with swirling murk lightened only by puffs of smoke. And in the sky, adrift amid the gathering storm clouds, hangs a wispy streetscape of back-to-back terraces: this is a statement about class too. If the enigmatic blocks inhabited by the bourgeoisie are all too substantial

[163] Mischa Black, 'Art, Architecture and Design in Unison', in Banham and Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation*, p. 83.
[164] See Lynn Pearson, '"Roughcast Textures and Cosmic Overtones": A Survey of British Murals 1945-1980', *Decorative Arts Society 1850-the Present*, 31, 116-137 (p. 119).


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and impassive, the city streets are barely real, clinging precariously to the idea of form as they mingle with the dark and tumbled sky.

Six months later, the South Bank was itself a ruin, the pavilions dismembered and the site sold off to developers. Its passing was publicly mourned by Casson himself, who appeared in a film, *Brief City*, in which he stalked through the wind-blown debris while reminiscing about the Festival's success.[165] The mournful figure of Casson – contrasted with footage of the crowded Festival in full swing during the summer – emphasizes the loneliness of the desolate, wintry site and returns the viewer to the idea that architecture somehow invites its own destruction. In its ruined state, the South Bank completes the cycle begun by the blitz: it is transformed from a chaotic place of communal possibility into a self-contained unit of space, entirely explicable (at the very moment when it slips into absence) by Casson as the figure of the artist pronouncing magisterially on its definitive meaning. Yet this idea of the human subject describing and defining the art object was already insufficient; as the next chapter will show, objects at this time were beginning to describe, define and materialize missing human subjects in their turn.

[165] *Brief City: The Story of London's Festival Buildings*, dir. by Jacques B. Brunius and Maurice Harvey (Observer Films, 1952).

CHAPTER TWO

Seeing things: found objects and the eye of the beholder in the exhibitions of Barbara Jones and the Independent Group

In the early summer of 1939, amateur archaeologist Basil Brown began excavating a large mound in the grounds of Edith Pretty's East Anglian estate at Sutton Hoo.[166] Having investigated three other mounds nearby the previous year, he was not expecting to find much more than some minor evidence of a looted grave, but when he unearthed a single iron rivet he began to realise that he had found a rare Anglo-Saxon ship burial. Not only that, but it soon became apparent that the ship contained an undisturbed burial chamber. The excavation eventually yielded a magnificent hoard of gold, silver, jewelled and highly decorated objects of unparalleled artistic quality, evidence that a powerful king had been interred there. Or had he?

Early accounts of the find naturally focused on the idea that the items were ritually buried alongside a king or chieftain's corpse – the sword was 'by his side'; there was a 'deliberate placing of precious objects for the man's use and enjoyment in another life.'[167] Then on 23 February 1940 *The Times* reported a lecture given by C.W. Phillips to the Society of Antiquaries, which contradicted these speculative conclusions in the light of the absence of any human remains on the site. The 'remarkable feature of the deposit was that it was not associated with a body […] The whole had the character of a cenotaph for a great man whose body could not be recovered, possibly through being lost at sea.'[168] When the Sutton Hoo treasure was exhibited for the first time in 1946 – having spent the war in the depths of Aldwych tube station – it was presented as the avatar of a missing Anglo-Saxon, who, despite being 'lost', could be conceptually reconstructed from the traces his absent body left on the world in the form of his weapons, armour, and symbols of power. [169] At a

[166] See Angela Care Evans, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial* (London: British Museum, 1986), pp. 19-22 for a full account of the excavation.
[167] 'Anglo-Saxon burial ship: treasures found in Excavation on Suffolk Estate', *Manchester Guardian*, 31 July 1939, p. 13; 'Ship Burial In Suffolk: Jury's Finding On Gold And Silver, Not "Treasure Trove"', *The Times*, 15 August 1939, p. 9.
[168] 'A Mystery Burial Ship: Treasures Without A Body', *The Times*, 23 February 1940, p. 6.
[169] 'London's Museums Renewed And Rising Popular Demand: The Aftermath Of War', *The Times*, 7 June 1946, p. 7.

time when the postwar population were still grieving for those missing in action, this was a powerful idea.

The excavation itself was carried out in a hurry as war with Germany became inevitable. C. W. Phillips took over from Basil Brown as head of the excavation after it became clear that the find was substantial. His 1956 account of the dig shows how much the glamorous objects he unearthed impressed him, and how clearly they spoke to him. He recounts the first visit made to the site by T. D. Kendrick, then keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum (a post later taken over by Phillips), and his excitement at sharing the treasure with his superior:

> I went to meet him at Woodbridge station and took with me one of the best of the small jewelled buckles, carefully wrapped, in a tobacco tin, so that he could have an advance idea of what he was to see when we reached the main treasure at Mrs Pretty's house. It was a dramatic moment when I drew him into the waiting room to show the buckle, and the scale of the discovery became clear to him.[170]

It is a tellingly intimate detail; by placing the buckle in a humble tobacco tin and pocketing it, not only was Phillips staking a personal claim to it, he was instinctively performing a symbolic act of regeneration, transforming it from a dead relic into a modern object. His action can be read as a rejection of the norms of archaeological practice, which demands that finds should be treated with strict reverence, yet it also exemplifies the subject/object exchange inherent to an archaeologist's relationship with his finds. Phillips, by turning it into his private accessory, was both restoring the buckle to life through active use and movement, and appropriating its power and articulacy by letting it speak for him. Other objects, too, seemed to come alive for Phillips during the dig: he remembers the huge and elaborately carved whetstone, for instance, part of the royal regalia, 'projecting upwards, and the sinister-looking bearded human heads carved on the emergent end gave it a daunting look'.[171] A stack of upended silver bowls is remembered as giving 'the most odd performance':

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[170] C. W. Phillips, 'The Excavation of the Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial', in R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, ed., *Recent Archaeological Excavations in Britain* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), pp. 159-160.
[171] Phillips, p. 161.

'It stood quietly in the rays of the setting sun for some time and then suddenly heaved upwards slightly with a metallic click,' he wrote. On examination, it turned out that the bowls had been corroded and compressed by the weight of the sand and soil, and 'as the mass dried out with the overlying weight of sand removed, it sprang apart like an opening concertina.'[172] But while the objects blossomed into subjecthood without the burden of the soil to restrain them, the missing human subject became the object they narrated and evoked. Later research would indicate that the burial *had* in fact once contained a body, which had dissolved in the acidic local soil; but for the mid-century, the supposed cenotaph seemed to provide historical backing for a modern shift in ideas about identity and material culture. If Anglo-Saxon things achieved so much charisma and meaning that they could ritually materialise their missing owner, what did this say about the objects of modernity?

For conservatives, the comparison might simply reveal the extent to which culture had declined: the Sutton Hoo hoard was the property of a king, and his ceremonial, hand-crafted weaponry and regalia not only spoke of power and wealth but demonstrated it too; in contrast, the idea of future treasure-hunters poking through the mass-produced detritus of the twentieth century provoked a snobbish cringe. In *Brideshead Revisited*, Charles Ryder's disgusted contemplation of the 'Pollock diggings' displayed the kind of class panic that was interlaced with the nostalgia for pharaohic glamour evoked by the Sutton Hoo hoard. At a time when economic austerity coincided with a crisis of national identity, the evocation of a mythical past in which gold-plated overlords bestrode the Anglo-Saxon fenlands provided a haven for those in revolt against postwar socialism, as well as reaffirming the ancient provenance of a certain definition of Englishness.

Yet the Sutton Hoo treasure caught the popular imagination. The agency of charismatic things brought into focus a new sense of the power and autonomy of objects which surrounded and interpellated the modern consumer, while the foreign flavour of Anglo-Saxon material culture, with its exotic zoomorphic motifs and non-Christian theology,[173] also acted as a reminder of Britain's heritage as a nation of immigrants – 'one of the most-mixed people in the world' as the South Bank

[172] Phillips, p. 161.
[173] See Care-Evans, pp. 59-62 for a dismissal of the theory that some items suggest a Christian sensibility.

Exhibition guide put it.[174] The England evoked by the Sutton Hoo hoard, though magnificent, was essentially a dangerously foreign place. In the guide's potted history, the Anglo-Saxons were 'pirates' who 'rushed in to rub out all traces of the Roman touch' – 'barbarians' who only settled when they 'could find no more cities to sack'.[175] An anonymous archaeology correspondent writing in the *Manchester Guardian* saw Sutton Hoo as cheering proof that art could transmit civilizing ideas across centuries and between cultures:

> Art knows no frontiers is a platitude which is more clearly illustrated in [the relics'] story than any other. Insular Britain owes the first impetus of its Saxon art to the style which had already over twelve hundred years of life in the Middle East. The Sutton Hoo finds, if for no other reason, are of the highest importance to the history of our art because of this.[176]

A 1951 article on Sutton Hoo by R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford in *Scientific American* began with the admission that

> the story of the birth and beginnings of the English people is remarkably hazy […] The early Anglo-Saxons left no temples, no pyramids, no cities, roads, aqueducts or colossal figures, no written documents. […] The archaeology […] is an archaeology of little things – "nothing larger than a bucket or longer than a sword."'[177]

With the discovery of Sutton Hoo, such 'little things' brought an unknown culture vividly out of the darkness and into the modern world, where they could act once again as avatars of the dead.

This chapter will examine how collections of things that were curated and interpreted in the years after the war echoed this combination of attributes: both instantiating absent subjects through their timeless presence, and expressing the

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[174] *South Bank Exhibition London: Festival of Britain*, p. 63.
[175] *South Bank Exhibition*, p. 65.
[176] 'Discoveries at Sutton Hoo: Anglo-Saxon art', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 September 1939, p. 6.
[177] R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, 'The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial', *Scientific American* 184:4 (April 1951), 24-30 (p. 24).

fluidity of time, space and identity. A new inclusive approach to the vernacular, in exhibitions mounted by Barbara Jones and the Independent Group, challenged the verticality of aesthetic systems of taste and value. Change and the movement of history provoked the fear that something essential to British identity might be lost, but were a necessary part of postwar regeneration and recuperations. Profound ideological conflicts were played out in debates about the eye, the gaze and ways of seeing, and the idea of mediation – by taste, custom, or the machinic intervention of the camera – haunt the cultural outputs of the mid-century.

'I know what I like': *Black Eyes and Lemonade*

Barbara Jones was particularly alert to the disruptive power of new ways of seeing. Having studied mural-painting at the Royal College of Art in the 1930s, Jones worked at the intersection of public, commercial and fine art, and was also a much-commissioned book illustrator and graphic designer. By the time she was invited by the Society for Education in Art (SEA) to curate an exhibition of popular and traditional art at the Whitechapel Gallery, under the aegis of the Festival of Britain in 1951, she was already a passionate observer and collector of the aesthetics of everyday life. She exceeded her brief spectacularly, conceiving *Black Eyes and Lemonade* as a celebration of the modern vernacular and a challenge to the art establishment, and although her plans initially alarmed the SEA, the show proved to be a hit with the public, with a total of 30,754 visitors making it the most successful exhibition at the Whitechapel in the 1950s.[178] Many of the pieces on display came from her own private collection, and all of them were selected according to the personal and idiosyncratic preferences of Jones and her co-organiser Tom Ingram ('It will […] be noticed that we are prejudiced in favour of cats and commerce,' she joked in the catalogue's introduction).[179] Jones was clearly determined to operate from first principles in the absence of any precedent for such an exhibition; among other methods of selection, she canvased acquaintances, asking them

> When you think of the posters you can remember seeing as a child, what comes up first? That question evoked for a surprising number of people the

[178] Visitor numbers from minutes in the Whitechapel archive.
[179] Barbara Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, exhibition catalogue (Whitechapel Gallery, 1951), p. 6.


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> Start-Rite shoes poster of the little girl and boy, back view, setting out down a long road lined with poplar trees, so we had that.[180]

She recalled how she and Ingrams bought an old London taxi and toured Britain following such leads and scooping up things that caught their eye. She described a warehouse on the Regent's Canal crammed with advertising material from Thorley's Agricultural merchants:

> The latest discards were near the door, clean and new, but beyond them far to the back were rolls and bundles thickly black with London grime. We peeled off the top layers to find more than a century's advertising: posters, tin plates, leaflets that unfolded to show chicks bursting from the egg, and portraits in oils of prize animals fed on Thorley's. The collection filled a whole room of the gallery.[181]

This anecdote combines the cheerful opportunism of Jones's curatorial practice with a quasi-archaeological methodology: by digging up a buried past, she is also highlighting a continuity of popular taste which is endlessly refreshed and renewed but retains its essential character. For Jones, popular art required a new type of seeing. She draws a distinction, in the catalogue introduction, between the instinctive good judgement of the 'popular eye' which 'arranges stripes on butcher's aprons and lobsters and soles on the fishmonger's slab'[182] and the 'museum eye' achieved by education within an elite cadre of connoisseurs, which 'must be abandoned' if the visitor is to understand the collection of objects at the Whitechapel as an exhibition of art. [183] Both the catalogue's cover and its poster feature strong graphic representations of unblinking eyes, though they are arranged, not horizontally as on a face, but vertically, as if to emphasise that a new kind of gaze will be required by the exhibition's visitors. The effect was successful: 'People began to realise that indeed they were [works of art],' she claims, noting that the arrangement of the exhibition

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[180] Barbara Jones, 'Popular Arts', in Banham and Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation*, pp. 129-132 (p. 132).
[181] Jones, 'Popular Arts', p. 132.
[182] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 7.
[183] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 5.

inculcated them into a performance of this new mindset: their progress through the galleries brought about their change of mind:

> Visitors were eased into the idea by a row of ships' figure heads and cases of other acceptable art-objects, and were brought gradually to accept comic postcards and beer labels. All through the exhibition the new and commonplace were seen near the old and safe, and by the end most people felt able to accept a talking lemon extolling Idris lemon squash and Bassetts Liquorice Allsorts isolated under a spot light.'[184]

It is the eye of the beholder, then, and not the essence of the object, that contains aesthetic merit in Jones's scheme. Cultivating a new eye is the only way that connoisseurs can possibly distinguish popular art from the deluge of everyday kitsch – and even then, canon-formation is necessarily hampered by the vagaries of personal taste. 'We have not been able to find a satisfactorily brief and epigrammatic definition of Popular Art,' she wrote in the catalogue introduction,[185] but an early draft in the Whitechapel Gallery's archive shows her attempting to locate one through an analysis of what it is not: fine art. 'We see the fine arts from a judicious distance,' she wrote. 'They stay in museums, and between the covers of large[…] books on the bottom shelf, and usually we see them only when we wish to. We are therefore prepared for them, on our toes.'[186] In contrast, 'the popular or vernacular arts, on the other hand, only get into most museums as sociological exhibits, and they surround us overwhelmingly all day, everywhere, undocumented and uncatalogued.' She goes on:

> But we can stick up a few firm poles of definition in this flood: objects of popular arts are created either by or for people with no training in art or in its appreciation: 'I know what I like' belongs to all of us at first. By education or self-discipline, it can be ironed out into 'I know what I <u>should</u> like'. Later with luck and hard work it can be creased back into 'I know what I like' again, but this is the zenith of appreciation, so the first 'I know what I like' is

[184] Jones, 'Popular Arts', p. 131.
[185] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 5.
[186] Jones, 'Popular art', handwritten draft in the Whitechapel archive.

> the criterion of popular art. We can also say that though the fine arts express the artists' mind and eye, the sole aim of popular art is to please the consumer. It may please, with charm, gaiety, luxury or horror, but it will never seek to exalt.[187]

Although the traces of a vertical hierarchy of taste are apparent here in 'zenith' and 'exalt', Jones is arguing that the 'education and self-discipline' traditionally required by the connoisseur should give way to natural and intuitive preference. Jones invited her visitors to experience a new way of seeing through the suspension of good taste. A newspaper cartoon about the exhibition evoked the fastidious elitism, which relied on a rejection of tactility, that was being challenged by the haptic familiarity of the objects on display. In the cartoon, amid a heap of canal-related bric-a-brac, one exhibit stands out: 'Bargepole,' reads the caption. 'Please do not touch'.[188]

If many of her exhibits seemed informed by a kind of perverse nostalgia for the nearly-old and the not-quite-good, the exhibition as a whole laid out a manifesto for a distinctively modern measure of quality which deliberately overturned traditional distinctions between art, design and rubbish. As she wrote in the catalogue:

> The things in this exhibition are seldom found in museums and galleries. Some of them are big and bright, visible enough, but others we hang on the bedroom wall, accept in the shops and cinemas, stare at blankly on the bus and rarely consider closely.[189]

Jones was not alone in wanting to challenge such blank stares. In 1946, Penguin began a series of four accessible books about everyday design called *The Things We See*, three of which featured a large stylised eye on the cover, and all of which were produced under the guidance of the Council of Industrial Design (CoID). The CoID had evolved out of the pre-war Council for Art and Industry, though it was also a product of wartime governmental interest in consumer goods triggered by the restrictions required by rationing. Its purpose when it was launched by the Board of

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[187] Jones, 'Popular art', handwritten draft in the Whitechapel archive.
[188] 'Bargepole – Please do not touch', cartoon caption, *Evening News*, 8 September 1951, p. 13.
[189] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 5.


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Trade in 1944 was both to encourage manufacturers to produce better designed products, and simultaneously to educate the public to recognize and demand such goods.[190]

The first book, *Indoors and Out*, was written by Alan Jarvis – then on the staff of the CoID – and set the hectoring tone of the series; in his introduction, 'Seeing is Believing', he laments the loss of a golden age of seeing: 'The capacity for distinguishing the differences between things,' he writes, 'is discrimination and was, for Aristotle, the mark of the educated man.'[191] His gendered terms of reference – though standard issue for the 1940s – nevertheless reflects the books' agenda, which contrasts the 'educated man' with the presumably female purchaser of domestic objects so shoddy that they are actually ruining the eyes of the nation's children:

> The result, socially, of the indifference of the vast majority of us to our visual environment is the increasing degradation of our surroundings: the shabbiness, ugliness, clutter and squalor amongst which so many children are growing up, in which they will learn to see, and by which their discrimination will be dulled.[192]

The solution his book proposes is to introduce 'the consumer' to the principles of proper looking via the carefully arranged and mediated objects in his book. 'If the reader spends three quarters of his time studying the pictures and one quarter reading the accompanying text, he will fulfil the author's intentions,' he writes in a prefatory note.[193] The illustrations provide polemical comparisons and contrasts: an over-frilly bedroom is placed next to a photograph of sickly-sweet iced cakes, for instance, while on the opposite page a plain and simple bed and dressing table are pictured beside a wholesome loaf of bread. 'The camera eye', he explains 'teaches us to concentrate *on the object itself*'; quoting Lewis Mumford's 1934 study of the

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[190] For a detailed account of the CoID and its inception, see Lesley Whitworth, 'Inscribing Design on the Nation: The creators of the British Council of Industrial Design', *Business and Economic History*, 3 (2005) <http://www.thebhc.org/sites/default/files/whitworth.pdf> [accessed 17 January 2015].

[191] Alan Jarvis, *The Things We See: Indoors and Out* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946), p. 3.

[192] Jarvis, p. 5.

[193] Jarvis, p. 2.

machine, *Technics and Civilization*, Jarvis instructs his readers to look at, and if possible take, photographs in order to 'clarify the object' and 'recognize [objects] in the independent form created by light and shade and shadow'. Thus photography accesses the platonic abstractions which underlie mere decorative or utilitarian qualities. Words are less valuable because 'words are not the same as things', and abstract nouns like 'shape, form, contour, colour, texture, surface and so on' need to be glossed by photographic explanations before they can be applied to objects in the round.[194] Adjectives in particular are 'innumerable and they are even more difficult than are the nouns to use precisely'.[195] Instead he presents a bizarre 'word-picture game' juxtaposing images of animals with pieces of furniture – a chair with a greyhound, a chesterfield sofa with a hippo:

> How often […] do we find a Chippendale chair described in such terms as graceful, light, strong, or some Victorian design described as clumsy, heavy, awkward. We can use such descriptions more accurately if we use metaphors, and say 'as graceful as…', 'as clumsy as…', and we will understand design better, and make our judgements of taste more clearly if we picture these analogies as well as verbalize them.[196]

Such visual similes, for Jarvis, are the key to training the half-blind consumer, who has been confused by the abstracted commodities of mass production: 'Whatever their nature, the articles displayed [in shops] are in a sense mysterious, for they were made elsewhere, designed elsewhere, distributed by some impersonal agency.'[197] It is up to her to make the effort to break the 'vicious circle […] whereby the manufacturers make what they think we want and we buy it just because it is there on the shelves.'[198] Unlike Jones, who questions the need for 'education and self-discipline', Jarvis is a stern task master. For all his chummy adoption of the first person plural, he is clearly delivering an edict to the masses from his privileged position as an Aristotelian 'educated man': 'It takes time and effort, no doubt,' he warns, 'because it is a matter of looking twice, and because it is a matter of

[194] Jarvis, p. 36.
[195] Jarvis, p. 36.
[196] Jarvis, p. 36.
[197] Jarvis, p. 34.
[198] Jarvis, p. 35.

understanding more about the things we buy.' Nevertheless the responsibility must not be shirked: 'The debasement of quality in mass-produced goods lies not in the machine or mass production processes, but with ourselves.'[199]

'Much better to have real, smaller things': Jones and the 'camera eye'

For Jarvis, then, mass-produced objects were enigmatic agents of cultural debasement which demanded a concerted attack from an army of informed purchasers in order to preserve the principles of beauty and pleasure in daily life. For Jones, on the other hand, such objects, though equally lively and mysteriously autonomous, reflected and promoted a similar recalcitrance in the human subjects they interpellated. Given the prevailing atmosphere of public improvement and careful mediation, it is not surprising that Jones's idiosyncratic selection and arrangement of her exhibits proved to be controversial. Gillian Whiteley, in her essay 'Kitsch as Cultural Capital: *Black Eyes and Lemonade* and Populist Aesthetics in Fifties Britain', tracks evidence of an increasingly heated debate between the SEA on one side, and Jones and Hugh Scrutton of the Whitechapel Gallery on the other.[200] The SEA had originally agreed that their aim was 'to develop the imagination and creative powers of the whole rising generation and to establish an indigenous expression of art in the everyday life of the community which is based on common experience and interest in the environment'.[201] Once Jones had begun sourcing her exhibits, however, they became nervous, protesting that

> the lowest levels of taste are not worth exhibiting and bring the exhibition down to a trashy level. We need not bring in greenish hairdressers models and fluffy kittens – still less the dull and ugly enamelled tin advertisements which are not even the result of popular taste, but sordid practical commerce.[202]

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[199] Jarvis, p. 35.
[200] Gillian Whiteley, 'Kitsch as Cultural Capital: Black Eyes and Lemonade and Populist aesthetics in Fifties Britain', in Monica Kjellman-Chapin, ed., *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), pp.40-57.
[201] Letters and notes from the SEA dated June 1950, in private Barbara Jones papers, quoted in Whiteley, p. 49.
[202] SEA document, dated 27 March 1951, Barbara Jones papers, quoted in Whiteley, p. 49.

In the light of this evidence, Jones's catalogue introduction becomes a pointed retort:

> There are a number of ways in which an exhibition of popular art could have been arranged: historically, sociologically, geographically, by categories of materials used, by occupations, by artistic themes, and so on. But it was finally decided to set up a series of arbitrary categories which reflect most forms of human activity without creating bogus sociological implications, and which also did make the exhibition physically possible to arrange.[203]

Thus, Jones's exhibits were grouped broadly by theme, with 'Transport' coming first in the sequence as if to introduce the idea of an aesthetic journey into the unknown. Next came 'Toys, Hobbies and Pets', including contemporary toys from the Hamley's store alongside Victorian train sets, a doll's house and a zoetrope. Within this section, 'Pet's Corner' included taxidermy, a kitten calendar and numerous anthropomorphised animals dressed and posed as humans. 'The Home' was a large section featuring Staffordshire figurines, china, worked pictures and needlework, and a model Victorian house 'made chiefly of marble chips and beads, with dolls'. Most of the items collected in 'The Home' were nineteenth-century, with a few contemporary pieces of china and home crafts representing modernity; on the other hand, in the next two sections, 'Food' and 'Birth, Marriage & Death', that ratio was reversed, with only a few old examples providing a foil for an unabashed display of twentieth-century design (including the spotlit Liquorice Allsorts). The Thorley collection found in the Regent's Canal warehouse featured in the next section, 'Agriculture', alongside a selection of other posters, show rosettes and corn dollies. After that came 'Festivity and Entertainment', by far the largest section in the exhibition. Here were Christmas cards, fireworks, and fishing tackle, followed by an exhaustive collection of ephemera devoted to fairs and circuses, much of it from Jones's own collection. Although theatre, music, and even Punch and Judy shows all had their own displays, Jones didn't find room for any material connected with

[203] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 6.


Illustration removed to protect copyright

cinema or photography; she does not comment on this omission, but the catalogue introduction does suggest one rationale:

> Selection has been difficult: of course there is only room for a tiny fraction of the possible material, so we have left out architecture, furniture, gardening, heavy industry, railways, road transport, aviation, shop-windows and a lot of other things, because they are far too big to get into the gallery, and it is much better to have real, smaller things than photographs.[204]

This implied rejection of the 'camera eye' demonstrates that the new gaze that Jones is promoting should be mediated by an instant and instinctive aesthetic response rather than the indexical realism of a photographic reproduction: she is interested in the aura and tactility of the individual object, and what it expresses. After sections on 'Printing' and 'Religion', a whole display was devoted to 'Man's Own Image', and that image was definitively not a photographic one: instead, the visitor was greeted by waxworks, hairdressers' busts with wigs, a ventriloquist's doll and a carnival head: three dimensional objects with a disturbingly uncanny resonance. Close by – after the tattoos of 'Personal Adornment' – came 'Pictures' which presented another kind of image-making. This was far from any idea of canonical fine art: here were anonymous amateur paintings of eccentric subjects, including the 'primitive' work of the spiritualist Miss M. Willis, whose canvases were produced, as she claimed, by the method of 'automatic' painting guided by the spirit world. The specific Willis painting chosen by Jones for display was 'Lord Kitchener in his coffin' – a vision that no human eye had ever witnessed, since he was lost at sea in 1916 when HMS Hampshire struck a German mine off the coast of Orkney. The fact that his body was never recovered led to a famous hoax in which a coffin supposedly containing his remains was passed off by a conman called Frank Power, but was opened to reveal that it was empty.[205] In Willis's picture, like the Sutton Hoo ship burial, a missing corpse is made present despite its absence, through the agency of a material thing.

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[204] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 5.
[205] 'Home Office And Mr Power: Kitchener Allegations Refuted' *The Times*, 10 September 1926, p. 9.

‘Monstrosities and curiosities’: outsider cultures and disrupted temporality

Spirituality was left behind for the climax of the exhibition, which focused on the most everyday objects. The ‘Commerce and Industry’ section featured wrappers, labels, carrier bags and advertising material, throwaway items which would blend into the material world outside the gallery and – Jones hoped – encourage visitors to take their newly calibrated aesthetic framework with them when they left. Clearly, Jones’s purpose was not just to expand the traditional aesthetic canon to include the best of the vernacular. Rather, she expressed a desire to situate her revolutionary aesthetic within the mid-century’s new appreciation of how objects can become focal points in the restless onrush of history and time. Her instant classics, which become collectable as soon as they are manufactured, speed up the inevitable process by which time confers a patina of acceptability onto humble things. Like ‘the great collector Pachinger’ mentioned by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, who stoops to pick up ‘a misprinted streetcar ticket that had been in circulation for only a few hours’ and yet has been the object of his search for weeks, Jones’s practice telescopes, accelerates or reverses temporal linearity.[206] This untethering of objects leads, according to Benjamin, to a radical uncertainty about the status of ordinary things: ‘[Pachinger] hardly knows any more how things stand in the world; explains to his visitor – alongside the most antique implements – the use of pocket handkerchiefs, hand mirrors, and the like.’ Moreover, Benjamin’s collector can repurpose any object into an optical instrument, seeming ‘to look through them into their distance, like an augur’.[207] For Jones, the disruption of time implied by her curation of the everyday also leads to a new way of seeing value and identity. In the traditional understanding of popular art, a century-old Staffordshire Spaniel ‘may be safely admired’, she writes, yet a contemporary ceramic gilded Alsatian is ‘beneath critics’ contempt’. She goes on:

> England is at this moment crammed with popular art before which most art lovers quail in alarm, but still most of them will ultimately become QUAINT, then CHARMING and at last GOOD.[208]

[206] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 207.
[207] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 207.
[208] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade,* p. 6.

She makes it clear that the link between social acceptability and the passage of an object from present to past (and from private to public) is part of the stratification of taste which she is hoping to disrupt. In the book (based on her series of articles in *Architectural Review*) that accompanied the exhibition, *The Unsophisticated Arts*, she writes:

> [The objects'] steady ritual progress will follow clearly ordained lines; via the appreciation of the common man into almost total oblivion, out again to the intellectual home, onward to the antique shops and finally to permanent deification in wealthy drawing rooms and museums.[209]

During the blitz, this spatial and temporal schema had been reversed; in Powell and Pressburger's *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), for instance, a collection of taxidermied hunting trophies undergo a profound transformation when his house is bombed: they are picked out of the rubble by the Demolition Squad, who are first baffled, then amused by their archaic appearance. Freed from their fixed meaning as status symbols or witnesses to skilful marksmanship, they are presented first as mere, dusty rubbish to be cleared away with the rest of the detritus, but finally are recognized as potential playthings. 'It'll do for hoopla anyway', says one man of a buffalo head he has pulled out of the rubble, before using a large boar as a jokey prop when he's queuing for his cup of tea.[210] The drawing-room status-symbols, which had calcified into quasi-museal artefacts in the trophy room, lose this meaning once their material context has been dismantled; they transform smoothly into low-status novelty items which can be repurposed on a whim as toys. It's the opposite trajectory to the one by which ancient and folk items, once in everyday use, accrete value over time as items of novelty, then connoisseurship, and finally reverence as historic artefacts; once this linear evolution of objects has been overthrown, Jones is free to confer museal status even onto things as ephemeral as sweets and paper bags.

Yet it is not by accident that she exhibited the objects in an art gallery rather than a museum. Museums, as Tony Bennett has shown, are places where power

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[209] Barbara Jones, *The Unsophisticated Arts* (London: Architectural Press, 1951), p. 9.
[210] Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) p. 272.

relations are reified in order to achieve or reinforce social schemata. As Bennett puts it in 'The Exhibitionary Complex':

> Through the provision of object lessons in power – the power to command and arrange things and bodies for public display – [museal institutions] sought to allow the people, and *en masse* rather than individually, to know rather than be known, to become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge.[211]

In Bennett's Foucauldian analysis, however, this invitation to subjecthood comes at a disciplinary price:

> Yet, ideally, they sought also to allow the people to know and thence to regulate themselves; to become, in seeing themselves from the side of power, both the subjects and the objects of knowledge, knowing power and what power knows, and knowing themselves as (ideally) known by power, interiorizing its gaze as a principle of self-surveillance and, hence, self-regulation.[212]

For visitors to the Whitechapel Gallery, however, any institutional performance of power was compromised by the bold claims being made by the objects to the status of art, rather than ethnographic or sociological specimens. If – by seeing themselves in everyday objects and popular decorative practices – visitors were invited to participate in a process of knowing and being known, then this was a complication of the subject/object distinction rather than a simple reversal. As presumptive art-objects, the chaotically displayed paper bags, Christmas crackers and advertising posters were refusing to lie quietly in their aesthetic categories, and their recalcitrance offered a mirror to visitors who might also resist hierarchies of taste and culture. And in showcasing the visual culture of fairs, circuses and other 'outsider' cultures, Jones was evoking the kinds of public display-spaces which

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[211] Tony Bennett, 'The Exhibitionary Complex' in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 81-112 (p. 84).
[212] Bennett, p. 84.

preceded the establishment of educative institutions, and which were associated, according to Bennett, with 'riot, carnival, and, in their sideshows, the display of monstrosities and curiosities which, no longer enjoying elite patronage, were now perceived as impediments to the rationalizing influence of the restructured exhibitionary complex.'[213]

'A little dog is nice': autonomous objects gaze back

An earlier exploration of traditional decorative arts, Noel Carrington's 1945 *Popular Art in Britain* had focused on craft objects like horse brasses, smocking and ironwork hinges and had expressly placed them outside the system of taste, thus inoculating visitors from any revolutionary potential they might suggest.[214] Carrington instead prescribed a moratorium on rational critique as the best strategy for appreciating such handwork. 'The real test of merit in such works is certainly emotional,' he states. 'To classify and rationalise too far will not prove rewarding.'[215] Jones, in contrast, wanted to challenge taste *and* engage criticism in a new way; indeed, she asserted that the objects she exhibited were doing valuable work by tackling subjects that serious art was not addressing, namely the discomfort and even horror produced by the surreal juxtapositions of everyday life. In spite of its profusion of sentimental ephemera involving birthday cakes and dressed-up kittens, her catalogue explicitly rejects irony as the defining rationale of her curatorial practice. The introduction deliberately peels away the layers of potential 'charm' with which nervous connoisseurs might want to excuse their appreciation of the objects in the exhibition. First, she allows that some of the more abstract exhibits happen to chime with 'current art fashions' and 'could go straight into an exhibition of modern art'. Dismissing that as an invalid criterion for acceptance, she then concedes the temptation to read other items through the lens of patriotic ideas about the 'vigour, humour and precision' of British art. But finally she insists that we look frankly at the objects 'we think[…] are ugly', the 'artificial flowers, bus tickets, lino […] and Brumas hotwater bottles'.[216] 'The popular arts' she says,

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[213] Bennett, p. 96.
[214] Noel Carrington and Clarke Hutton, *Popular Art in Britain* (London: Penguin, 1945); thus on the title page; the cover gives the title as *Popular English Art*.
[215] Carrington, p. 11.
[216] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 7. Brumas was the name of a polar bear cub born, to much public interest, at London Zoo in 1949.

> also keep certain other characteristics which are at this moment less evident in the fine arts, such as horror, and realistic representation. Realism is a strong vernacular urge – a little dog is nice; let us have one for our calendar, our mantelpiece, for a doorstop or a fireplace. He is made of flock paper, pottery, iron or tiles, as like as may be. He expresses the artist, of course, but not deliberately: the dog is more important than the man.[217]

This rejection of Romantic self-expression was exemplified by the profusion of animals, both in effigy and stuffed, which strayed into most sections of the exhibition, from 'Agriculture' to 'China' and 'Pet's Corner' to 'Drinking'. Here, the animal gaze that meets the spectator's critical eye suggests a rival subjectivity inhabiting the object. A taxidermied animal can be understood as the ultimate in tautological realism: the object is fashioned out of the very thing it is called upon to represent; it is what it is. On the other hand, it speaks also of the 'horror' that Jones refers to as lacking in fine art: the stuffed simulacra represent the uncanny persistence of the dead in life, the porosity of the border between presence and absence.

Taxidermy could also be called on to provide a gloss on the class-stratification of cultural expression. In *The Unsophisticated Arts*, Jones notes the difference between hunting trophies in standard poses, fashioned from the 'reliable parcels' sent home by experienced safari veterans, and the sentimental souvenirs of pet-owners. 'The sorrowful,' she says, 'have ideas. They try to explain, with gestures and inadequate grey snapshots, the little ways of Rover.' It's a typically wry observation, but it also implicitly challenges the vertical model of aesthetic value. Rover's preserved pelt has as much meaning stuffed into it as the hunter's masks or rugs; perhaps more, because the 'sorrowful' want to preserve the particularities of subjective affect, not just make a symbolic statement about status and power. The bereaved pet-owner requires an object that will look back at its maker/spectator, and collaborate in the production of meaning in the space between.

Now the uncanny begins to intrude into the fantasy of mimesis. The reason we have always liked stuffed animals until today, Jones explains, is that 'many of them

[217] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 7.

[were] enclosed in their accustomed cases, removed from us into their special glass world'. In contrast, modern specimens 'stand free, and come too close to us.'[218] And while she praises the anthropomorphic tableaux of Walter Potter's Museum collection of taxidermied scenes (the most famous of which, 'The Death and Burial of Cock Robin', was displayed at the *Black Eyes* exhibition) as 'magnificent – stuffed Academy painting'[219] she closes the chapter on a shudder, with a description of a mermaid 'sold to gullible sailors' that is

> half baby anthropoid ape and half fish, stuffed together and embellished with breasts and a wig. Today it is old and shrivelled and deceives nobody, but its demi-semi humanity is horrible, and fills one with pleasure that the law, or some technical trouble with the skin, prevents us from having dead Auntie stuffed to hold a standard lamp.[220]

The *unheimlich* hybrid, too close to home for comfort, is central to Jones's conception of popular art as both a reservoir and release-valve for horror. The horror of death-in-life and life-in-death appears in her tentative definition of the difference between the embalmed corpse of folk art and the restless transience of the popular ('most of the folk arts are dead, or self-consciously preserved by societies').[221] And it's there in her valorization of objects that 'lean to disquiet, the baroque and sometimes horror':

> Fear is concealed by sophisticated man, and today in any case he has less of it to express, as urban amenities are driving the dark edges round the cities further and further towards the sea. But horror still appears suddenly in peaceful streets and fields, finding expression in Punch and Judy or the *Police Gazette,* in a ventriloquist's dummy, in sad wooden architecture by riversides, in the little tents that house the freaks at a fair.[222]

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[218] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 20.
[219] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 21.
[220] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 21.
[221] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 9.
[222] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 10.

But in choosing the image of 'dead Auntie stuffed to hold a standard lamp' as the closing line of her chapter on taxidermy, Jones is perhaps also alluding to the infamous case of Ilse Koch, widow of the Buchenwald camp commandant, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment in the US in 1948 for atrocities including making lampshades of out the tattooed skin of Jewish prisoners. Released on appeal, she was subsequently retried for the same crimes in Germany, the case running from November 1950 to January 1951, just when Jones was preparing her exhibition and writing her book. The complication of subject and object, homely and horrific, which characterises Jones's theory and practice, gets a chilling final twist with this buried Holocaust reference to humans transformed into objects as the most radical extreme of murderous othering.

The recalcitrant objects in Jones's exhibition, which often hint at the uncertainty of aesthetic systematization, also offer a paradigm of resistance to such othering. Whether art or quasi-art, they refuse to be harnessed to the service of the subjectivity that creates or contemplates them, instead achieving an agency of their own by slipping between semantic categories and conferring similarly fluid status onto their makers, owners and users. Many are objects disguising their utility and identity by adopting the form of something else: thus we have doorstops in the shape of a sheep, loaves in the shape of cottages, a whisky decanter in the shape of a monk ('head is detachable as a cork')[223] and a 'model of the rotunda of Brighton Pavilion containing a nutmeg grater'.[224] Jones's observation that the dog is more important than the man had been conditioned by the sensorium of war and postwar displacement, in which familiar objects, defamiliarized at the point of their potential annihilation, seemed disturbingly close to declaring their own subjective intent. Jones's curatorial practice was a response to this uncanny fusion of life and art, subject and object. The cornucopia of tinsel pictures, grave goods, corn dollies, fairings and swag at the *Black Eyes* exhibition was not just an evocation of plenty, or an exercise in nostalgia; it was a room full of uppity witnesses, staring back at the art insiders who came to judge them.

For the critic Nevile Wallis, writing in *The Observer* in August 1951, Jones's exhibition compared unfavourably with another at the RBA Galleries called *British Taste* which traced fashions in art over a century to conclude that 'every age sees

[223] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 33.
[224] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 37.

with different eyes, and the work of revaluation is endless'.[225] Evidently Wallis could not see that such revaluation would ever encompass the objects in *Black Eyes and Lemonade*:

> If the vagaries of 'informed' taste are unpredictable, unwavering is the loyalty of the wholly uninstructed […] The arts of the pavement artist, the wedding cake baker, and the toymaker prove as sure as the early food posters and the tile fireplace in the form of an Airedale, that popular art exists only to satisfy the simplest human curiosity.

A month later, however, another review appeared in *The Observer*. Patrick O'Donovan praised *Black Eyes* as 'wickedly entertaining' and attempted to meet it on its own terms:

> The things – hung on the wall and piled in cases – range from china dogs to fireworks and memorial cards to footstools. They have a few qualities in common. They are all cheap; they are very complicated; they are bright and they are often sentimental or cruel. There is none of the realism that is said to be an essential quality in Peoples' Art. Indeed there is a hankering after splendour here, much dreaming of Marble Halls. And the general effect is not so much ugly as sad, a sense of indefinable loss under all the cheerfulness and noise.[226]

Crucially, O'Donovan understood that 'there is no attempt to pass any aesthetic judgment'. Unlike Wallis, who found no meaning in the objects but concluded ironically that their 'perfect naiveté results in purest art', O'Donovan saw that Jones was using them suggestively, like the Sutton Hoo treasures, to describe what wasn't directly represented: 'Whether they are beautiful or not is beside the point. This exhibition is a better portrait of England than some of the more portentous displays on the South Bank.'[227]

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[225] Nevile Wallis, 'Taste in Art', *The Observer*, 19 August 1951, p. 6.
[226] Patrick O'Donovan, 'Black Eyes and Lemonade', *The Observer*, 16 September 1951, p. 8.
[227] Donovan, 'Black Eyes and Lemonade'.

‘Oriental flavour’: popular alterity and mass alienation

Yet the touristic overtones of *Black Eyes and Lemonade* also begs questions about the orientalization of working-class culture. To some extent, an implied exoticism simply helps to situate the objects within their newfound gallery context by comparing them to the expressions of geographically or temporally distant cultures. But many of the *Black Eyes* exhibits also demonstrate how the stylistic promiscuity of the popular naturally infuses indigenous British subcultures with the tang of otherness. The exhibition’s title borrows its evocation of an easily assembled festivity from the orientalist poet Thomas Moore: ‘A Persian’s heaven is easily made | Tis but – black eyes and lemonade.’[228] This quotation was chosen, according to Jones’s introduction to the exhibition catalogue, because it ‘seem[ed] to express the vigour, sparkle and colour of popular art rather better than the words “popular art”[…] Even the oriental flavour is valid, for English decoration is always susceptible to exotic influences.’[229] In her early draft she had expanded on this theme: ‘Today,’ she wrote, ‘there can hardly be an alien style left in the world that has not first excited the artists, been absorbed or discarded by the various movements of British painting, then taken up by the cultured and at last adopted generally or left high and dry.’ And while ‘decorative impulses from foreign parts during the eighteenth century […]were at least fifty years filtering down’ from high to low culture, such tardiness is no longer the norm: ‘If it does catch the popular eye it can sweep England in a month, produced by the million – Mickey Mouse.’[230]

The reference to Disney – epitome of disposable American cinema, with Mickey Mouse as the ultimate merchandisable commodity – reminds us that US culture was still considered exotic in the mid-century. It was this alterity which the Independent Group were to harness in the name of pop art; Eduardo Paolozzi, in particular, had been collecting American magazine illustrations since the 1940s, and reimagining them for collages about restless consumer desire, such as *Dr Pepper* (1948). Indeed, he presided over the first meeting of the Independent Group in 1952,

[228] Thomas Moore, Letter 6, *Intercepted Letters; or, The Two-Penny Postbag* (London, 1813) (facsimile edition printed by Bibliobazaar, 2010), unpaginated.
[229] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 5.
[230] Jones, ‘Popular Art’, handwritten draft.

where he displayed a series of such images via an epidiascope and called the resulting collection *Bunk!*.[231]

The connection between Jones and the Independent Group has not always been generally accepted. Anne Massey's seminal 1995 study argues that the Independent Group were defined by their antipathy to folk revivalism and the pre-masticated light-modernism of Festival of Britain style.[232] She lumps Jones in with Noel Carrington and the other heritage-fanciers who provided a distraction from 'the realities of living in ugly, bombed-out cities',[233] but in quoting Jones's observation that 'mass production makes its own traditional arts'[234] Massey misses the radical redefinition of tradition that this implies. In fact, Jones's desire to bring ordinary material objects into the conceptual fine-art space of the gallery not only references the readymades of Marcel Duchamp (although she would reject the idea that, by being exhibited as art, such things are inducted into a new mode of being), but also provides a commentary on André Malraux's 'Le Musée Imaginaire', in which he proposed the abolition of the strictures which the museum placed on the definition of art, and which influenced the Independent Group in the early 1950s. More recently, Catherine Moriarty recreated some of the original displays for a 2013 exhibition at the Whitechapel, *Black Eyes and Lemonade: Curating Popular Art* and explicitly traced the connections between the Independent Group and Jones's project, specifically comparing Jones's 'quality of pathos' to the work of Nigel Henderson. Indeed Henderson also contributed an exhibit to *Black Eyes*, 'Bookie's tickets from a racetrack: 1950', which appeared in the 'Transport' section under the heading 'The Horse'. Moriarty is wary, though, of overstating the connection:

> 'Perhaps 1951 is best considered as an unusual moment of collision between the concerns of a thirty-nine year old designer and those of a younger

[231] See Anne Massey, *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-59* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 46.
[232] Massey, pp. 4-17.
[233] Massey, p. 5.
[234] Jones, *The Unsophisticated Arts*, p. 9.

generation when, albeit briefly, their approach to the popular and the exhibition as a site of enquiry, were aligned.' [235]

Yet arguably, the connection was more long-lived than Moriarty is prepared to allow: Lawrence Alloway, for instance, praising Dada in 1956, used terms that closely echo Jones's *Black Eyes* catalogue when he asserts that 'a work of art may be made of bus tickets or it may look like an advertisement. It may be an ad.'[236] Gillian Whiteley, meanwhile, argues that '*Black Eyes* pioneered not just a "popular aesthetic", but […] is connected to a contemporaneous burgeoning anthropological approach to the "populous"', which she also traces in Eduardo Paolozzi's work in particular.[237] Jones herself rejected the anthropological approach, as can be seen in her handwritten catalogue draft, in which she drew a distinction between her own curatorial ambitions and the way vernacular arts enter most museums as 'sociological exhibits'.[238] Instead of using her displays merely to present contemporary mass culture as an exotic curiosity, she was interested in how otherness was being reinterpreted and ultimately inducted by the popular arts.

As we shall see later in this chapter, the Independent Group harnessed American otherness to make claims about the future of British art and society; Jones, on the other hand, wanted to show how the historical and geographical Other had already been assimilated. To an extent, her exhibition's narrowly 'British' frame of reference was in line with the rest of the Festival of Britain's inward-looking agenda. As Becky Conekin has noted, ideas about empire, decolonization and migration were notably absent from the Festival; she argues that this silence was due to a combination of embarrassment about the end of the empire as a 'loss of British power and prestige in a period already filled with disappointment and uncertainty' and a new emphasis on science, rather than foreign adventure, as the motor of British discovery.[239] One exception was an exhibition of 'Traditional Art and Sculpture from the Colonies' at the Imperial Institute, and its catalogue, written by William

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[235] Catherine Moriarty, *Drawing, Writing, Curating: Barbara Jones and the Art of Arrangement – An Essay to Accompany the Exhibition* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013), unpaginated.
[236] Lawrence Alloway, 'Dada 1956', *Architectural Design* (November 1956), p. 374.
[237] Whiteley, p. 42.
[238] See Jones, 'Popular Art', handwritten draft.
[239] Becky E. Conekin, *'The Autobiography of a Nation': The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 184.

Fagg (then the assistant keeper of anthropology at the British Museum), provides a curious echo of Jones's in that it emphasises the importance of a recalibration of perception:

> The European who seeks to 'understand' what is usually called 'primitive' art, to cultivate a state of mind and heart receptive to its strange forms and rhythms, must begin by divesting himself of some of the assumptions which are so fundamental in modern European thought that he is probably unconscious of the part which they play in forming his own reactions to art and to life.'[240]

The idea that modernity would have difficulty with the aesthetic of African art had recently been rejected by the ICA's Herbert Read, who in 1948-49 had staged *40,000 Years of Modern Art* in an attempt to draw comparisons between the two. However, the air of self-congratulation evident in the press conference Read gave prior to its opening suggests a similarly condescending attitude to non-Western culture:

> The art of primitive people is no longer to us merely a manifestation of the disgusting idol worship of savages and cannibals. We have discovered in it powers of invention and expression which fill us with amazement and seem to point the way to new forms of art which can combine primitive vitality and vision with modern technique and sensibility.'[241]

Both Read and Fagg were asserting that non-Western art was so inexplicable and foreign that only viewers with an elevated level of connoisseurship would be able to understand it. The 'oriental' flavour that Jones found in British popular art, on the other hand, argued that assimilation of the Other into twentieth-century mass culture could be almost instantaneous. She was working at a time when postwar 'displaced persons' were still in the news; in 1945, there were between twenty and thirty million stateless refugees in Europe, 'myriads of desperate, sick and starving

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[240] William Fagg, *Traditional Sculpture from the Colonies* (London: Colonial Office, 1951), p. 3.
[241] Unpublished transcript of Herbert Read's press conference speech, undated, p. 2, ICA Archives. Quoted in Massey, p. 25

people', as Lord Reading put it in a House of Lords debate.[242] A year later, this figure was estimated to be down to 500,000 and the UNO's short-lived Special Committee on Refugees and Displaced Persons was wound up. [243] By 1951 Britain had absorbed 85,429 refugees, mainly from Eastern Europe.[244] The Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration was set up that year and resettled 155,000 people in its first two years, many to America, Canada, Australia and South America, but by this time there were also significant new Polish communities in Britain, both in London and in the 'temporary' camps – some of which existed into the 1960s – which were set up in rural areas after the Soviet annexation of Eastern Poland.[245] Outside Britain, the creation of Israel in 1948, while solving part of Europe's refugee problem, was seen to have 'created a large and intractable problem of displaced Arabs', as a *Times* editorial put it in 1956.[246] This editorial also noted that 70,000 refugees still remained in 200 European Displaced Person camps. Meanwhile, colonial immigration was beginning to influence British urban culture sufficiently to interest social anthropologists like Michael Banton, whose 1955 study of Cable Street in Stepney, *The Coloured Quarter: Negro Immigrants in an English City*, set out the problems of the newly coined 'racial relations'.[247]

Jones's collection was heavily influenced by the culture of displacement: barge decorations, fairground attractions, circuses and ships' figureheads were the work of travelling people whose internationalism was embedded in their style. Jones's point was that creativity is restless and unbounded; by borrowing the Moore quotation for her exhibition's title, she was making explicit the connection between modern aesthetic promiscuity and the respectable borrowings of the *Arabian Nights* boom

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[242] 'Adrift in Europe', *The Times*, 8 February 1945, p. 5. For a full account of international efforts to solve the refugee problem after World War II, see also Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 13-34.
[243] 'Homeless People of Europe: UNO Committee's work ending', *The Times*, 1 June 1946, p. 4.
[244] 'Displaced Persons for England: Women of Baltic States', *The Times*, 24 July 1946, p. 4; 'New Homes for 893,000 Refugees, *The Times*, 28 March 1951, p. 3.
[245] 'Surplus population of Europe: help for migrants', *The Times*, 7 December 1953, p. 6; 'Exiles in Britain: flourishing Slav settlements in our midst', *The Times*, 20 June 1953, p. 7.
[246] 'Those who are left', *The Times*, 8 March 1956, p. 11.
[247] Michael Banton, *The Coloured Quarter: Negro Immigrants in an English City* (London: Cape, 1955).

which had inspired Moore's *Intercepted Letters.* This craze had been triggered in 1704, when the French translator Antoine Galland had published *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* based on three volumes of Syrian manuscripts he had collected while working in the Middle East.[248] These appeared in English in a Grub Street version published in the *London News* between 1723 and 1726, and sparked a craze that, as Marina Warner puts it, 'fired a train of imitations, spoofs, *turqueries*, oriental tales, extravaganzas, pantomimes, and *mauresque* tastes in dress and furniture: the sofa, the brocade dressing gown, coffee itself.'[249] As Ros Ballaster points out in *Fabulous Orients*, the passage of these stories was not a straightforward cultural translation:

> Stories are not simple freight; in their passage from East to West they are often radically altered to become hybrid commodities and the bearers of multiple new meanings. Thus, through their ostensible depiction of life in the eastern harem, the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* could, amongst other things, provide a window for English readers into the 'précieuse' culture of the eighteenth-century French salon.[250]

The visual markers of Oriental style had washed out, by the middle of the twentieth century, to the margins of popular culture, where Jones found them in the arabesque patterns of painted bargeware and the miniature Brighton Pavilion nutmeg grater. But Jones's intervention sought to reverse this trajectory, reinstating to this style the prestige of the museum, and incidentally dispelling any notion that cultural value could only be authentic when fixed by a static class system of taste.[251] On the contrary, Jones finds value in the unruly translations and tireless reiterations by which an archaic and exotic text could be transmitted into the homely visual and material cultures she encountered. Indeed, it was the disconnection of culture from texts that accounted for the popularity of intricate decoration in vernacular art:

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[248] See Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 2011) pp. 12-18.
[249] Warner, p. 213.
[250] Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orients: Fictions of the East in England 1662-1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 4.
[251] See for instance, T. S. Eliot's argument in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948).

> *Complexity* is obviously the legacy of illiteracy and a simple way of life; only those who cannot read and write remember long ballads, or elaborate smocking patterns; only those who live such a separate and lonely life as that of canal boatmen will create elaborate layers of decoration round their daily lives.[252]

The restlessness of the rich patterning never allows the eye to wallow in easeful contemplation; like the travelling populations that preserve them, popular arts are 'complex, unsubtle, often impermanent, they lean to disquiet.'[253]

Jones's theorization of the vernacular thing-world also turns on what Marina Warner terms the 'dream of plenitude'.[254] *Mauresque* furniture and pleasure *à la turque* had challenged the Enlightenment's hard-headed denial of magical thinking along with the hard edges of Georgian and Regency design. In the mid-century, an analogous process was happening in relation to the strictures of high modernism and its status as the taste of an elite audience. Jones, though, was taking this process one step further, removing the artist as mediating subjectivity and attempting to tap into the cultural resonance of objects in themselves, via a curatorial practice that relied on the chaotic contiguity of the junk shop to throw up a kind of 'found' meaning.[255] She was less interested in the kind of Mass-Observation-style valorization of ordinariness that had characterised pre-war counter-modernism, than in the elevation of a new category of the extraordinary, neither pseudo-primitive nor sophisticated, but shouty and unselfconscious.

'Torture through the ages': laughing machines and working-class dreams

Alongside the ad-hoc exoticism of popular baroque, Jones was also fascinated by modern, machine-made faux-luxuries:

> To draw a rigid line between hand and machine-made works of art is unrewarding […] Somewhere there is a dividing line between tool (allowed as hand) and machine, but it is very difficult to say exactly where, and so far

[252] Jones, *The Unsophisticated Arts*, p. 10.
[253] Jones, *The Unsophisticated Arts*, p. 10.
[254] Warner, *Stranger Magic*, p. 7.
[255] The junk shop analogy was noted at the time in a review by G. S. Whittet, 'London Commentary', *Studio International* (November 1951), p. 154.

> the human brain has always dictated just what the machine shall produce. It will be interesting to see what popular arts are produced by cybernetics.[256]

Her interest in post-human art shows that she was prepared to look towards a technological future in which human subjective expression was entirely redundant, not as the gloomy end-point of traditional craft, but as an exciting new efflorescence in the arabesque progress of the vernacular, with the products of man and machine on a continuum of decorative and creative possibility. But others saw the intervention of machines into mass culture as symptomatic of cultural aridity. Lyndsey Anderson's 1953 film short *O Dreamland* was a portrait of Margate's Dreamland amusement park, featuring a static funfair, penny arcades, bingo, a 'Swiss beer garden' complete with jerky automata, and an animatronic freak show displaying torture through the ages. The film touches on similar themes to the *Black Eyes and Lemonade* exhibition – horror, animals, uncanny human simulacra – but there is no affection for the flimsy baroque of the seaside, and no sense of a coherent aesthetic pulling the disposable novelties together. Instead, the tone is one of frank disgust: against a soundtrack of false, recorded laughter and the robotic sing-song of the bingo-callers, Anderson shows crowds of silent, unsmiling visitors trudging along litter-strewn walkways, caged animals pacing glumly up and down, and assembly-line fun as a weary substitute for freedom from work. By lingering over the scenes of torture rigged up as a form of entertainment, Anderson seems to be suggesting an analogy between the mechanical spectacle and mechanical punishment, although he finds no scope for sympathetic exchange between the reified fun seekers and their robotic counterparts on the rack and the electric chair.

The film was one of three which formed the National Film Theatre's first *Free Cinema* programme in 1956: the others were Lorenza Mazzetti's *Together* and *Momma Don't Allow* by Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson. They were not filmed as a group effort, although some of the personnel overlapped; instead, it was Anderson who gathered the films, ad hoc, under the Free Cinema banner and wrote a short manifesto retrospectively, which proved to be an excellent way of garnering interest and publicity:

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[256] Jones, *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, p. 6.

No film can be too personal.

The image speaks. Sound amplifies and comments.

Size is irrelevant. Perfection is not an aim.

An attitude means a style. A style means an attitude.[257]

In a television programme he made in 1985, Anderson placed Free Cinema in a direct line from the 1930s documentary movement, Humphrey Jennings and Mass Observation, to the Angry Young Men of late-1950s theatre and the films of the British New Wave in the 1960s. He does not comment on the group's links with the Independent Group, despite the obvious temperamental sympathy between film-makers and fine artists who all wanted to engender a new way of looking at mass culture. This link was exemplified by the casting of Eduardo Paolozzi as one of the actors in *Together*. Set in the East End, Mazzetti's film tells the story of two men (brothers or perhaps just friends) who work together on the docks and share a mean little room in a boarding house. They are deaf-mutes, and communicate with each other in sign language, signalling their self-contained isolation from the rest of society but also suggesting the beguiling possibility of secret cultures which are not susceptible to outside interpretation. Whereas Anderson's camera intruded into Dreamland with appalled close-ups of 'buttocks encased in grey, shapeless material [that] spread and crease over stools at counters',[258] Mazzetti's holds back from her characters, framing them carefully within the urban landscape of dusty bombsites, narrow streets and the river's sudden watery vistas. Paolozzi and the painter Michael Andrews (then a student at the Slade, where Mazzetti also studied) play the men with a kind of intense stillness; they pass in silence through the uproar of the docks, the local pub and even a funfair (represented here as a chaotic but not detestable place). In these public spaces they form a discrete unit but they find acceptance within the adult world, and even – for Andrews's character – a thread of sexual fantasy. Tension arises, though, from the children who haunt the streets and follow them everywhere, taunting them for their difference. This childish bullying precipitates the film's tragic climax, as Andrews's character is pushed off a wall into the Thames and drowns in the water.

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[257] Free Cinema manifesto, as quoted in *Free Cinema* (London: BFI, 2006), booklet accompanying DVD, unpaginated.

[258] Gavin Lambert, 'Free Cinema', *Sight & Sound*, Spring 1956, pp. 173-77 (p. 175).

In a 2012 interview with Christophe Dupin in *Sight & Sound*, the Italian film-maker explained that *Together* was an exercise in personal postwar recuperation. Both Mazzetti's parents died when she was young and her aunt, who was bringing her up, was killed by the SS, along with her cousins; her uncle later committed suicide. She told Dupin:

> I had serious psychological problems because of my past, but as no one knew about it, the only way to express my anxiety was to translate it unconsciously into a film script […] I'd projected my own feeling of being different onto these characters, who were constantly followed by a group of children who shouted things they couldn't hear.[259]

Like harbingers of the future, the children seem to represent the break-down of a social order atomized by the bombs along with the fabric of the buildings. As the film's title implies, the deaf-mute men will survive only as long as they stay together; Paolozzi's character, the more withdrawn of the two, has trouble with the daily routines of washing and dressing, while Andrews's, though more competent and cheerful, is physically weak and vulnerable. It is their co-operation that allows them to function in the world, and the heart-breaking upshot of the drowning is that the Paolozzi character, who had wandered away for a few minutes, returns to the baffling absence of his companion and can't think of anything to do except continue to wait for him.

According to her recollections in the 2012 interview, when Mazzetti first conceived it the film was originally called *The Glass Marbles* because of the fascination these objects have for Paolozzi's character. He picks them up from the street, where we had previously seen the children playing with them, and then carries them everywhere with him, taking them out of his pocket from time to time to look at them and roll them in his hands. They are solid symbols, something to hold onto in a world often reduced to inexplicable abstractions because of his inability to communicate. An image of his self-containment – and reminiscent of the uncanny eyes plucked out by Hoffmann's Sandman to feed his children – they also perhaps represent the camera's glass eye and its ability to create a miniature world; they are

[259] Bryony Dixon and Christophe Dupin, 'Soup Dreams', *Sight & Sound*, March 2001, pp. 28-30 (p. 29).

like Jones's ephemera, too, in that Paolozzi's character picks them out of the dross of the mundane and animates them with a new meaning and value. It is impossible, given the casting, not to see these characters as representing artists – and perhaps Mazzetti herself. Through these glass symbols of the artistic gaze, Mazzetti is surely saying something about the concrete vision of her semi-documentary filmic practice. The film's lack of synchronized sound (a necessity of the low-budget techniques she and other Free Cinema film-makers used) is used to create an oneiric counterpoint to the everyday setting and to show the characters' deaf-mute experience redefining their world with a supercharged visual perception. Mazzetti remembered rejecting some script additions by her then boyfriend Denis Horne, because what he wrote 'had lots of dialogue and what I really wanted was silence.'[260]

But the marbles are also playthings, and symbolise the feral children who have tormented the men: at one point Paolozzi, in frustration, picks up a child and throws him upside down like a toy. If the glass eye of the artist is a toy, it is one that threatens loss as well as perception. Paolozzi takes care to hold on to the marbles, but he loses his brother. In the film's closing moments, Mazzetti includes a shot of a barge chugging away down the river, oblivious to the violent drama that has just taken place. There is no Sutton Hoo-style object-enabled resurrection here – just a man who has sunk without trace.

'So different, so appealing': the Independent Group's mediation of art and objects

Free Cinema's examination of the 'camera eye' echoed many of the preoccupations of the Independent Group (IG). In 1951, for instance, Richard Hamilton chose to mark Festival year by displaying enlarged but otherwise uninterpreted scientific images of natural morphology. The exhibition he curated at the ICA in Dover Street was inspired by a new illustrated edition of D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form*. It investigated how photography facilitates the scientific and technological mediation of nature, encouraging viewers to understand that natural artefacts, rather than offering sublime objects for Romantic contemplation, shared characteristics of rational design with machine-made products. Nigel Henderson, in a draft proposal for the exhibition, argued that it could influence 'design trends' and

[260] Dixon and Dupin, 'Soup Dreams', p. 29.

promote the view of Sigfried Giedion, in *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948), that 'the evolution from material and mechanistic conceptions must start from a new insight into the nature of matter and organisms'.[261] Moreover, like *Black Eyes*, *Growth and Form* placed non-art images and objects into a gallery context, implicitly questioning the boundaries between art, design and 'real life', and problematizing the possibility of qualitative judgements based on socially derived semantic schemata or dependent on the provenance of the object and the connoisseurship of the viewer. *Growth and Form* thus creates a link between *Black Eyes* and the Independent Group's 1953 ICA exhibition *Parallel of Life and Art*, as well as the 1956 'pop art' exhibition at the Whitechapel, *This is Tomorrow*, all of which developed the idea of what an exhibition could be.

When *Parallel of Life and Art* opened, Nigel Henderson made a speech at a panel convened at the Architectural Association in London to coincide with the exhibition, in which he explicitly referred to André Malraux's *Le musée imaginaire*, describing the exhibition's genesis, during which he and his collaborators brought together items from their 'own private "imaginary museums"'. Rather than arising from a theoretical appreciation of the images' artistic merit, the images themselves gave rise, through the act of their curation, to a theory after the fact:

> We often found that this exchange resulted in confirmation of our beliefs that we had happened upon something significant, that others responded in the same way to the visual impact of a particular image. Up to a point, that is, we found that we had a common working aesthetic, though we could none of us formulate a verbal basis for it. Eventually we decided to pool the material we already had and to continue to collect more in an attempt to elucidate what we had in common and the nature of the material moving us.[262]

This puts the image-based practice of Henderson and his collaborators in a dialectical relationship with that of Jones, who enacted a redefinition of art not by noticing that non-art objects might resemble modern art by accident, but by insisting

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[261] Draft proposal for *Growth and Form*, 1949, p. 1, ICA Archives. Quoted in Massey, p. 44.
[262] MS, Henderson Collection, Tate Archive. Quoted in Victoria Walsh, *Nigel Henderson: Parallel of Life and Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), p. 92.

that the museum encompass the somatic experience of unmediated materiality, and that the things she curated need not compromise their 'unsophisticated' thingliness for the sake of being understood as art. But could the viewer simultaneously perceive her objects' art and artlessness, while recognizing the Whitechapel Gallery as an art-space rather than a junk shop? And could the objects and artworks captured in *Parallel of Life and Art* retain their aesthetic status even when they were deliberately remediated and divorced from their auratic singularity? For Bill Brown, the ability of simple objects to appear in an exhibition is what distinguishes them from subjective Things. In his 2001 essay 'Thing Theory' he acknowledges resistance to the conjunction of 'things' and 'theory',

> not […] because things reside in some balmy elsewhere beyond theory but because they lie both at hand and somewhere outside the theoretical field, beyond a certain limit, as a recognizable yet illegible remainder or as the entifiable that is unspecifiable. Things lie beyond the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects.[263]

For the Independent Group, inspired by Malraux, things could be translated into art only by becoming images. As Hal Foster interprets it, Malraux's validation of photographic reproduction does not shatter canonical tradition but

> provides the means to reassemble the broken bits into one metatradition of style, a new Museum without Walls whose subject is the Family of Man – and it is the very flow of a liquidated aura that allows all the fragments to course together in the River of History.[264]

His language here evokes the defamiliarized sensorium of war-damaged cities, and indeed Malraux also conceived his idea of new perception in terms of exposure to exotic and uncanny new sights. He wanted photographic reproduction to open the eyes of art students not only to great paintings but to 'a host of second-rank pictures, archaic arts, Indian, Chinese and Pre-Columbian sculpture of the best periods,

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[263] Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 5.
[264] Hal Foster, 'The Archive without Museums', *October* 77 (Summer 1996) 97-116 (p. 109).

Romanesque frescoes, Negro and "folk art", a fair quantity of Byzantine art'.[265] Similarly, Henderson looked to imagery from ethnography and anthropology to find echoes of the modern vernacular and a justifying aesthetic which might reconcile them. But whereas Read, in *40,000 Years of Modern Art,* had looked to ancient, non-Western art as theoretical cover for modernist transgressions against classicism, the Independent Group, and Henderson in particular, introduced the idea of alterity into practices much closer to home.

From 1948-1952, Henderson lived and worked in Bethnal Green, where his wife Judith, a sociologist, was studying working-class social rituals on Chisenhall Road (and in particular, those of the family next door, the Samuels, whom Henderson also photographed extensively):

> Judith's job was to take responsibility for a course called 'Discover Your Neighbour' [...] with the object of putting before professional people such as doctors, lawyers, probation officers, priests etc [...] an analysis of the historical conditioning forces acting on a community and bringing, over time, a cohesive system of attitudes, sympathies, prejudices – what you like – which would in some measure represent such a community.[266]

His Bethnal Green photographs often feature the marks and scratches made by non-artists on the walls and pavements of the streetscape – graffiti and hopscotch both appear – just as Jones featured billboards, shop signs and Mr McErnean the live pavement artist working on the gallery floor.[267] Like the muralists and ruin-dwellers in the previous chapter, Henderson's eye was informed by the strangeness of war damaged buildings:

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[265] André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans Stuart Gilbert (London: Secker & Warburg 1956), p. 16.
[266] *Nigel Henderson: Photographs of Bethnal Green 1949–1952*, exhibition catalogue, (Midland Group, Nottingham 1978), p. 3.
[267] See Ben Highmore, 'Hopscotch Modernism: On Everyday Life and Blurring of Art and Social Science', *Modernist Cultures*, 2:1 (Summer 2006), 70-79.

> Houses chopped by bombs while ladies were still sitting on the lavatory, the rest of the house gone but the wallpaper and the fires still burning in the grate. Who can hold a candle to that kind of real life Surrealism?[268]

His response to this question of dismantling the boundaries that separate art from its spectator was *Parallel of Life and Art*, which presented photographic images as the fabric of an overwhelmingly immersive walk-through experience, suspending them from the ceiling and at all angles so that the viewer's eye was flooded with competing perspectives. Visual consistency was instilled in the diverse array of radiographs, diagrams of spacesuits, and scenes from tribal ceremonies by the simple means of presenting them all in photographic form. This amounted to a rejection of the haptic and auratic properties of things and artworks. Original works by Henderson and Paolozzi were presented as photographs of themselves, and their American hero Jackson Pollock appeared in the form of a candid shot of him working in his studio, photographed by Hans Namuth and published in *Life* magazine. Photography was becoming, for Henderson, a way of creating distance between artist and object, which disrupted the authorial subject's claim to self-expression while at the same time allowing for the autonomy of the thing being observed. Reviewing the show in *Art News and Review* Bryan Robertson of the Whitechapel Gallery noted: 'The exhibition […] leaves the spectator with the feeling that the barriers between the artist, the scientist and the technician are dissolving in a singularly potent way.'[269] Other barriers were broken down as well: the juxtaposition of photomicrographs, aerial views and x-rays, alongside images from newspapers and books, dismantled hierarchies of scale and spatiality – an effect heightened by the installation, which suspended the panels in different planes and insisted on a novel perspective. Time, too, was disrupted and flattened, with ancient artifacts brought into dialogue with modern art, and both placed next to timeless natural forms. As Ben Highmore has pointed out, when Henderson photographed the installation, he placed his own young daughter Justin into shot beneath a photograph

[268] Henderson, interviewed by David Mellor in 'Mass-Observation: The Intellectual Climate', *Camerawork*, 11 (September 1978), 4-5.
[269] Bryan Robertson, 'Parallel of Life and Art', *Art News and Review*, 19 September 1953, p. 6.


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of the remains of a dead child excavated at Pompeii;[270] it is as if the Roman child, who was transformed into a thing first by the hot volcanic ash which encased it, and then by the act of unearthing it and turning it into an archaeological piece, has been resurrected within the suggestively open, dialogical and anachronic installation.

Henderson's interest in the recuperative potential of photography had already informed his experiments with photograms, a photographic technique (invented by Lázlo Moholy-Nagy) which turned everyday objects – he particularly favoured bomb-site debris – into images which combined a timelessly simple aesthetic with a scientistic diagram of their material form. This involved placing them in a photographic enlarger and passing light through them onto photosensitive paper to produce an image halfway between an x-ray and a technical drawing. But by the time he was working on 'Patio and Pavilion' in 1956, Henderson was confident enough of the articulacy of objects to remove the frame of photography and rely on the installation to mediate them. This shed-like space, which he created with Paolozzi and Alison and Peter Smithson for *This is Tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Gallery, was filled with artfully arranged junk and debris, much of it retrieved from bombsites. Some of them were simply placed on the floor or arranged on tables, others were placed on the translucent corrugated plastic of the pavilion's roof, so that their ghostly forms were visible from within the structure, like a kind of three dimensional photogram.

Members of the Independent Group made up twelve of the thirty-six participants in *This is Tomorrow*, which was conceived as a series of individual environments grappling with ideas about design and spatial habitats. It was described by Lawrence Alloway in the catalogue's introduction as 'a lesson in spectatorship':

> [It] cuts across the learned responses of conventional perception. In *This Is Tomorrow* the visitor is exposed to space effects, play with signs, a wide range of materials and structures, which, taken together, make of art and

[270] Ben Highmore 'Something out of nothing: concretizing the immaterial in Brutalism', plenary at 'Objects of Modernity', 23-24 June 2014, University of Birmingham.

> architecture a many-channelled activity, as factual and far from ideal standards as the street outside.[271]

Patio and Pavilion took this definition to its most abstract extreme. As the Smithsons explained in a BBC radio programme about the exhibition:

> We worked on a kind of symbolic habitat in which are found responses, in some form or other, to the basic human needs […] The actual form is very simple, a 'patio' or enclosed space, in which sits a 'pavilion'. The patio and pavilion are furnished with objects which are symbols for the things we need: for example, a wheel image for movement and for machines.[272]

Presided over by Henderson's large but enigmatically blank photocollage of a head (glossed in the catalogue as 'for man himself – his brain & his machines') and reverently displayed in a roped-off zone, the bombsite fragments of *Patio and Pavilion* resembled the precious relics retrieved from an archaeological dig. Robert Melville's review in the *Architectural Review* found homeliness in the collection, commenting that the installation 'returned us safely to the bicycle shed at the bottom of the garden in a singular tribute to the pottering man'.[273] Yet Reyner Banham instead described the mesmeric accumulation of 'objects, images, shards of real and imaginary civilizations dredged up from the subconscious of Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson […] a kind of personal archaeology which you just had to stand and look at.'[274]

The most famous image of the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition, though, must be Hamilton's 'Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?', which evokes a different kind of visual articulacy: the mythopoeic aesthetic of consumer desire as expressed in American advertising imagery. In Hamilton's collage, the walls of 'today's homes' are unpunctured by bombs and unravaged by

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[271] Lawrence Alloway, 'Design as Human Activity', in *This Is Tomorrow*, exhibition catalogue (Whitechapel Gallery, 1956), unpaginated.
[272] Alison and Peter Smithson, *Changing the Art of Inhabitation* (London: Ellipsis, 1994) p. 109.
[273] Robert Melville, 'Exhibitions', *Architectural Review*, 120 (November 1956), 332-4 (p. 334).
[274] Banham, recorded in 1976 as part of the Arts Council Film *Fathers of Pop*, but not used. Quoted in Walsh, p. 117.

time, but stand firm in their uninflected modernity. Yet the influx of exotic (they are exclusively American) mass-cultural signifiers nevertheless testifies to their porosity. The domestic scene is no more private here than it was for the lady sitting on the toilet of her blitzed house. The naked human form is as commoditised and rectified as the utilitarian label on the can of tinned meat; the Eve-figure's lampshade hat recalls both Jones's stuffed Aunty and, perhaps, Ilse Koch's idea of 'appealing'. This is collage as curated *objets trouvés*, the taxidermied appropriation of the materiality of real life. The television – which shows only the image of a one-sided telephone conversation – and the emphatically foregrounded reel-to-reel tape recorder, accentuate the capitulation of mass-media, which once promised utopian fluidity, to the sterility of the closed loop.

Marshall McLuhan called advertising 'the folklore of industrial man',[275] connecting the domesticated desire for exotic plenitude with the ancient myth-making of communal oral tradition. Hamilton's picture seizes on American visual culture to solicit the same dialectic of estrangement and familiarity implicated in Jones's decision to follow the traces of Oriental decoration from the street into the art gallery. Past, present, homely and strange come to occupy identical space-time in the uncannily shifting sands of postwar culture. The Sutton Hoo chieftain's missing body has been replaced by a parodically power-wielding body builder, a place holder for the subject's ultra-presence in advertising's rhetoric of elusive identity. Confronted by objects and spaces which no longer frame experience in an easily interpretable way, material culture comes to be haunted by the idea of human subjectivity. As Jones puts it:

> A human figure stands perpetually behind each of us, and in solitude or darkness moves into the margin of focus, but never stands square in sight. Those of us who are most afraid seek to exorcise this figure by making its portrait, the horrid simulacra of man.[276]

In the next chapter, the materiality of the body itself comes into focus as visual technologies enable new kinds of simulacra to stand in for the human subject. If the

[275] Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (New York: Vanguard, 1951).
[276] Jones, *The Unsophisticated Arts*, p. 117.

gaze was a site of ideological conflict in the mid-century exhibition, the invention of television, and the spectrality of its images, would open up further questions about autonomy and power.

CHAPTER THREE

Machines and spectrality: the gothic potential of technology in Orwell, Grey Walter and Turing

'You need not be there.' An advertisement for Pye television sets published in 1949 strikes a surprisingly negative note about the new technological object it was promoting. The television set brought with it an unsettling sense of the uncanny: this apparatus which seemed to materialize things out of thin air, evoked a paradox of presence and absence. To compensate for any resistance this might cause in the buying public, Pye promoted its product as a way of dispensing with the nuisance of mere physical presence in favour of a superior ability to oversee and master the world. The accompanying illustration presented the undesirable, outmoded alternative to televisually mediated experience: a small, clownish cartoon figure is trying to view an unspecified spectacle, but is dwarfed by a solid wall of blank backs belonging to taller, more modern and – it is implied – more capable and assertive men. 'Bert always likes to be there, but personally we prefer to see it, and we're sure you do too,' runs the caption. 'There is no better way of doing this than by a Pye.'[277]

The implied binary stand-off between vision and presence – 'being there' versus 'seeing it' – marks the definitive moment of the television age partly because of the way it intersected with philosophical questions current at the same time, about whether or not human consciousness has a physical presence or is entirely immaterial. Of course, television was not the first visual prosthesis to materialize philosophical speculation. Indeed, machines in general, as a special category of object, had been susceptible to metaphorical appropriation since the Enlightenment, when Descartes compared certain aspects of the human mind (but not the soul) to clockwork:

> I should like you to consider that these functions (including passion, memory, and imagination) follow from the mere arrangement of the

[277] Frank Coven, ed., 'You Need Not Be There', advert in *Daily Mail Television Handbook* (London: Associated Newspapers [1949]), p. 10.


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> machine's organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automaton follow from the arrangement of its counter-weights and wheels.[278]

In the early twentieth century, Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny' had pondered the confluence of optical instruments and automata in E. T. A. Hoffman's 'The Sandman', which described a kind of technologically enhanced vision which made dolls look like living women, and real women look like mechanical trickery. In the decades leading up to Freud's 1919 essay, photography and cinema had enlarged the scopic capabilities of the culture on a diachronic plane by carrying visual imprints of the past into the present; now, in the mid-century, live television promised to telescope space within a synchronic instant, bringing the spectacle into the home or – as in the Pye advertisement – carrying the home viewer into the spectacle as it happened. Thus the viewer is implicated in the process of dematerialization and rematerialization which the apparatus achieves; he or she is there and not there simultaneously. Arguably, the meeting point of viewer and spectacle is experienced as a third, middle zone, inside the medium itself. The idea of being 'present' escapes both time and space.

This technological enhancement of human vision coincided with new ideas about human consciousness to contribute to a distinctive cultural turn. In this chapter, I will argue that one of the mid-century's cultural responses to this prevailing atmosphere of innovation and uncertainty was a new iteration of the gothic, a genre which created its own kind of ludic 'third space' in which the uncanny resonances of modernity – its revenant truths and haunting perspectives, its other worlds and alternative life-forms – could be examined and confronted.[279] The gothic mode, from Walpole onwards, has been characterized by the interventions of supposedly inanimate things into the human realm, in which they operate as solid metaphors for internal mental processes. Reading Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as

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[278] René Descartes, *Treatise of Man*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972) p. 113.

[279] See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 1991) p. 118. 'Third space' is the term Lefebvre uses for a space, such as a theatrical stage, which is 'at once fictitious and real'; he writes: 'To the question of whether such a space is a representation of space or a representational space, the answer must be neither – and both'. I am not referring here to the post-colonial third-space theory of Homi Bhabha nor the political-geographical theory of E. W. Soja.

a mid-century gothic text, it is possible to see how the medium of television could transform a real, solid thing, with an apparently immutable adhesion to the linearity of time and the geometry of space, into a historical anchor for, and sometimes a hostile witness to, human mutability. Conversely, new objects such as televisions and computers seemed capable of enabling the disruption of linearity and geometry, and of assuming a quasi-lifelike power over time and space. As we shall see later in the chapter, the gothic turn is clearly discernible in the writings of mid-century scientists investigating human thought, such as William Grey Walter and Alan Turing. Philosophical, neurological and cybernetic enquiry raised questions about the exact relationship between abstract thought and brain activity. Technological metaphors for human consciousness were revisited and redrawn to take account of new types of machine. Lacan's mid-century development of Freud's ideas depended on the age's new technologies of presence and vision, while the novel images which came into being via the development of the cathode-ray tube gave rise to new ideas about what images themselves might be capable of.

In the two previous chapters, I have examined what happened to the idea of art when everyday objects erupted into the realm of aesthetics; this chapter explores what happened to the idea of objects when images (mediated by technology) began to intervene in the territory of things. The analogy between images and objects – or images *as* objects – is itself essentially a gothic one, in that the blurring of boundaries between categories, coupled with an unease about the disruption of proper spatial and temporal order, produces an uncanny effect and supercharges the objects and images with meaning – meaning which often buckles and flexes under such semantic pressure. This idea is central to the postmodern theory of uncanny visual culture expounded by W. T. J. Mitchell in *What Do Pictures Want?,* in which he evokes the paradigm of Bill Brown's Thing Theory to 'shift the question from what pictures *do* to what they *want,* from power to desire, from the model of the dominant power to be opposed, to the model of the subaltern to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak.'[280] Indeed arguably, he takes Brown's theory even further into the gothic, attributing to picture-things not just a Thing-like interrogation of the subject/object dialectic but an agglomeration of qualities ('animation[…] vitality[…] agency, motivation, autonomy, aura, fecundity') that suggest that

[280] W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 33.

'pictures are something like life-forms'.[281] The new televisual images of the postwar period seemed to contemporary audience to possess just this quality of life-likeness. Such images, for Mitchell, become tropic figures, like dream-objects, which reflect the consciousness of the human subject. Art, and by extension all media, create the essential context in which pictures manifest themselves as Brownian Things: 'If images are life-forms, and objects are the bodies they animate, then media are the habitats or ecosystems in which pictures come alive.'[282] But as thresholds or conduits for meaning, they are in a constant state of crisis, sucking in and spewing forth interchangeable subjects and objects:

> Perhaps this is the fundamental paradox built into the concept of media as such. A medium just is a 'middle', an in-between or go-between, a space or pathway or messenger that connects two things. […] The problem arises when we try to determine the boundaries of the medium. […] If media are middles, they are ever-elastic middles that expand to include what look at first like their outer boundaries. The medium does not lie between sender and receiver; it includes and constitutes them.[283]

Jeffrey Sconce argues, from a similarly postmodern position, that television instantiates a 'flowing metatextual empire'[284] in which viewers 'like ghosts and psychotics […] wander through a hallucinatory world of eternal simulation.'[285] His history of *Haunted Media* describes American cultural responses to technological telepresence in terms of a repeated return to the gothic mood. His analysis identifies three recurring fictions – 'disembodiment, teleportation and anthropomorphization' – which respond to telecommunication's 'power to atomize and disperse both body and consciousness across the vast expanses of the universe.'[286] He is less interested, though, in the dialectical relationship between this atomization and the world of solid objects which, I will argue, defines the mid-century in British culture.

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[281] Mitchell, p. 6.
[282] Mitchell p. 198.
[283] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 204.
[284] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 17.
[285] Sconce, p. 19.
[286] Sconce, p. 10; p. 14.

Visions of the uncanny: cathode-ray tubes, telepresence and the mediated subject

When the BBC television service launched in London in 1936, it had its own theme tune, sung by Adele Dixon. Intercut with exciting shots of hulking cameras and lab-coated technicians sitting in front of banks of switches, the song referred to television's 'new enchantment' and included the lines

> A mighty maze of mystic, magic rays
> Is all about us in the blue,
> And in sight and sound they trace
> Living pictures out of space
> To bring a new wonder to you.[287]

This veneer of mysticality is striking but it was not unusual. All along, the technology which made television possible had been presented to the public as an uncanny phenomenon. An early US newspaper report about the invention of the Coolidge vacuum tube – a forerunner of both x-ray and cathode-ray tubes – describes the apparatus as 'an alchemist that changes solids into liquids and liquids into solids'.[288] Its tone is a mixture of awe and disquiet and its sub-headline, 'what will it do for Humanity?', hints at the related but less comfortable question: what will it do *to* Humanity? A *Scientific Monthly* article in 1926 continued the theme of the disquieting agency of cathode rays, remarking on various miraculous phenomena associated with the passage of electrons through a sealed glass tube, including a haze of light in the air, the materialization of a new yellow compound, and the observation of long- and short-lived luminescence in various substances.[289] By the time the CRT was developed into a screen by devising a way to control the luminescence with electro-magnetic fields, these hand-blown pieces of heavy glass

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[287] 'Television', lyrics by James Dyrenforth and music by Kenneth Leslie-Smith. See <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/technology/technology5.html> [accessed 18 February 2015].

[288] Robert Merrill, 'Dr William D. Coolidge and his New Magic Ray', syndicated by Public Ledger, for instance to Salt Lake Telegram, 21 November 1926, p. 12. <http://udn.lib.utah.edu/cdm/ref/collection/tgm8/id/44988> [accessed 18 February 2015].

[289] 'A new tool for the research scientist,' *Scientific American*, 135:6 (1 December 1926) <http://www.scientificamerican.com/magazine/sa/1926/12-01/> [accessed 18 Feb 2015].

were firmly understood as a kind of crystal ball, where messages materialized out of the ether. Viewers peering into one of the early television sets, which reflected the screen in a mirror lid, were invited to perceive themselves, not only as cutting edge early adopters, but also as soothsayers interpreting strange signs from another realm. From a scientific point of view, the discovery of cathode rays provided proof of the existence of subatomic particles and inaugurated the development of electronics. But the CRT also promised to redefine materiality. Whereas x-rays enabled human vision to access the inner lives of familiar things and human bodies, cathode rays seemed able to conjure new things into existence, and to access the inner life of the human mind.

The uncanny was, like those magic mystic rays, 'all about us in the air' in the age of electronic technology. The BBC song shows a shaky grasp of the science involved and was based on the misconception that cathode rays are transmitted through the ether: they have leaked out, so to speak, from the television set and become confused with the rather less exotic radiowaves which actually transmitted the signal over the air. But this sense that cathode rays were 'all about us', an enveloping cloud out of which wonders would materialize, demonstrates how these new viewers became conceptually imbricated with the technology; the human subject was no longer merely a receiver of signs, but was understood as part of the picture.

Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny' is much concerned with reading and writing, and the double or ambiguous meanings which create an uncanny effect by allowing us to glimpse the traces of the unconscious:

> An uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes.[290]

The cathode-ray screen similarly performs and makes apparent the process of interpretation and inscription: it operates as an autonomous reader and writer, reading an electronic code and reinscribing it in a palimpsest of pixellated lines, their

[290] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 150.

outputs operating independently of any human agenda. The cathode-ray tube might be described as an uncanniness machine, not only generating uncertainty about reality, but also exposing and dramatizing the machinery of semiotic response. Freud's own chosen exemplar of *unheimlich* story-telling, E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', itself dramatizes this process via the agency of a piece of scientific apparatus, in repeated encounters between a flawed reader, the neurotic Nathaniel, and the Sandman himself, who appears first as the alchemist Coppelius who threatens to burn out the young Nathaniel's eyes, and later as the technician – Freud calls him an optician – who peddles barometers, telescopes, and other scientific prosthetics for human vision. For Freud, this emphasis on eyes was proof that the uncanny was connected with the post-Oedipal castration complex, but it is notable that his formulation of the *Unheimlich* depends on concepts which themselves uncannily duplicate the potentiality of cathode-ray tubes: not only the prioritization of ocularity and the gaze but the relationship between perception and deception, and the temporal and spatial displacement of objects which appear in the 'wrong' place.

The crucial difference between television and earlier visual media like film lies in the way it visualizes and interprets time and space. For Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, film defined modernity; the immersive experience of the cinema seemed to him to be of a piece with modernism in its alertness to cutting and fragmentation and its unflinching surgical gaze; but the CRT screen was perhaps the first post-modernist object, revealing the magical intimacy of subject and object and eliding completely the difference between artwork and audience. The television-viewing subject cannot partake of the powerful gaze described, for instance, in Laura Mulvey's analysis of film as a constructed representation of desire.[291] Cinema's sense of occasion, its dark spaces and gigantic representation, invite complete absorption, whereas the flickering CRT image, around which the subject hunches and squints, cannot flatter the ego in this way. Because of the simultaneity of the image, the viewer perceives herself as projected through time and space, into the scene she is observing: she becomes another apparition, encountering the image in a middle zone, inside the medium itself. The idea of being 'present' shifts and curdles into telepresence.

[291] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16:3 (Autumn, 1975), 6-18.

Freud's attribution of the *Unheimlich* to the return of superannuated emotions that have been repressed similarly describes a time- and space-shifted notion of presence; the uncanny effect is the flicker of recognition we experience when confronted with something that is both repressed and visible, both present and not-present. Telepresence produces this strange and troubling flicker because we want to understand images as asynchronic, as pieces of congealed time, like paintings and photographs. Television, instead, like a mirror, presents the present, and then erases it. But unlike a mirror, it has no indexical relationship with reality. Freud's definition of the uncanny describes a conflation of the familiar with the enigmatic, and the same nearness/strangeness binary is disrupted by telepresence and television. The images appearing on cathode screens slip between categories: they are mirrors and maps, they are pictures and they are codes. They operate in the Symbolic realm, the realm of mediation – of language and signification; and whereas – as in the Lacanian Mirror Stage – the mirror provides a glimpse of the imaginary wholeness of the ego, these uncanny television images withhold this wholeness and elide the ego and the mirror into a cyborgian hybrid.

Hoffmann's tale is concerned with an analogous piece of visual trickery: the telescope that Coppola sells to Nathaniel perverts his perception, allowing him to see the mechanical doll Olimpia as a real woman, and making his real fiancée Clara appear to be a false contraption. Freud writes: 'It becomes clear that the author wants us too to look through the spectacles or the spyglass of the demon optician, and even, perhaps, that he has looked through such an instrument himself.'[292] For Freud, Coppola's apparatus enables Nathanial to spy on Olimpia; to broadcast himself across the space, as it were, between his room and her window in the opposite house, to bridge the gap between inalienable categories of signification, and thus to access the world of fiction and symbolism. But it also initiates an operation where the mediation and remediation of the Real causes devastating consequences for the imaginary ego. It reifies the human as well as animating and vivifying the fictional. At the end of the story, when Nathaniel stands at the top of a tower and tries, like a human transmitter, physically to throw himself into the rift of his mediated vision, he plunges to his death.

[292] Freud, p. 139.

‘Involuntary and compulsive transmitters’: radar and the ghosts of war

An early instance of the intersection of broadcast media and the gothic is the basis of Powell and Pressburger’s *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946).[293] The film’s ghost – the fighter pilot Peter Carter, who cheats death and then must fight to stay out of heaven – is initially presented as a technological phenomenon; he avoids annihilation when he bails out of his plane without a parachute, because his spirit has become tethered, via his final radio broadcast, to a radio operator called June. Knowing he cannot survive, he insists on telling June the particulars of his life, first in a parody of bureaucratic form-filling – ‘Age: 27, 27 do you get that, that’s important. Education: interrupted, violently interrupted. Religion: Church of England. Politics: conservative by nature, Labour by experience’ – and then by way of Romantic lyricism, as he quotes his favourite poetry. Mind meets Sublime in Romantic fashion as Peter’s expression of soul is beamed out on radio waves into the universe. The film opens in deep space with a voiceover tour-guide pointing out galaxies and nebulas, and then gradually homes in on earth, which seems to be enfolded in a cacophony of radio voices. Finally, Peter’s voice is picked out and we follow it into the wrecked and burning aircraft where he straddles the threshold of life and death. By transmitting his spirit into the ether along with his voice, he manages to rematerialize, unharmed, on earth, but the film immediately puts this Romantic interpretation in doubt: both June and the local medic Dr Reeves believe the whole episode to be a hallucination brought about by a neurological blockage. A caption at the start of the film makes this conflict between psychopathology and imagination explicit: ‘This is the story of two worlds, the one we know and another which exists only in the mind,’ it reads, before scrolling upwards to reveal the rest of the sentence: ‘…of a young airman whose life and imagination have been violently shaped by war.’

When Peter is recalled to heaven, he lodges a legal appeal on the basis that he has fallen in love with June. But at his court case, his only witness is a material object – June’s fallen tear caught on a pink rose and solidified into glass in the timeless realm of the heavenly court. This object-witness helps to entrench the film within the gothic tradition, however firmly Peter’s ghostliness is excised by the

[293] *A Matter of Life and Death*, dir. by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (The Archers, 1946).

surgeon's knife as he undergoes brain surgery. Moreover, Peter's supernatural revenance is as much technological as medical, as he stresses himself when he mentions the 'important' fact of his age; since the film is set in May 1945, Peter must have been born in 1918, at the end of World War 1, and the beginning of the radio era. As a child of the medium, he can exist in it as his natural element – a facility which, as we will see later in this chapter, contrasts sharply with the fate of George Orwell's Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, born in '1944 or 1945; it was never possible nowadays to pin down any date within a year or two.'[294] Winston was also born at the end of a war and the start of a new medium; but this condemns him to death rather than reprieving him from it.

It was World War II that precipitated the superannuation of radio telecommunication by the development of visual media. By 1944, the invention of television's military doppelgänger, radar, had started to be reported in the press. In November *The Times* reported the existence of a 'complex mechanism […] known to RAF crews as the "gen-box" and to Americans as "mickey"' which 'enables bombs to be aimed with uncanny accuracy through cloud, smoke, haze, or darkness.'[295] A month later, the *Illustrated London News* carried a full-page article featuring an artist's impression of the technology and a more detailed explanation of how 'the transmitter sends a downward signal at 186,00 miles per second, this hitting the earth beneath and bouncing upwards again at the same speed to the aircraft'.[296] Known as the 'gen-box' or 'black-box', the apparatus 'receiving the echoed signals, translates them by an electronic system, employing the television principle, into a reproduction of the landscape in shadow-tone outlines on a fluorescent screen.'[297]

In *Optical Media*, Friedrich Kittler asserts that television 'would not have risen to world power without World War II', and adds (borrowing from Paul Virilio's *War and Cinema*) that its military forerunner did not simply enable but had the power to command perception: 'Radar is an invisible weapon that makes things visible […] because it converts objects or enemies that do not want to be seen or measured at all

[294] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 10.
[295] 'Accurate Bombing Through Cloud', *The Times*, 28 November 1944, p. 4.
[296] 'Bombing through Clouds: A British Target-Finding Invention', *Illustrated London News*, 6 December 1944, p. 689.
[297] 'Bombing through Clouds', *Illustrated London News*, p. 689.

into involuntary and compulsive transmitters.'[298] As the war progressed, this power extended, so that what had started as a defensive technology assumed an attacking role: radar stations were initially 'connected by radio throughout all of southern England, and they could report attacking Messerschmitts or Heinkels of the German Luftwaffe even while the approaching planes were still invisible.'[299] Later, 'airborne radar first made their blind enemies on the Luftwaffe's side visible, but after 1943 it also made the rivers, streets, and cities of the empire visible, which were destroyed by the carpet bombing of fighter-supported long-range bombers.'[300] Finally, when television was used to guide German V2 rockets, the war 'produced the first self-guided weapons systems, which have since made people, the subject of all modern philosophies, simply superfluous. With the end of the subject, a television audience became possible in the postwar period.'[301] This is a provocative cancellation of the generally accepted equivalence of audience and viewer – in Kittler's analysis, an electronic prosthesis for subjective human vision ends by displacing the autonomy of the subject entirely. But his point of view finds an echo in the first major imaginative response to television culture to be published in Britain, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

'A tiny world with its atmosphere complete': the telescreen and the glass paperweight in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

In the militarized dystopia of Oceania, television is primarily a technology of surveillance; the enhanced eye belongs to the Thought Police, and its object – the 'involuntary and compulsive transmitter' – is the citizen. The wall-mounted domestic telescreens, which cannot be turned off, do not offer entertainment but a stream of propaganda; they telescope space, not by transporting the viewer to a distant event, but by allowing the state to enter the private spaces of the individual.

In an earlier essay, 'Poetry and the Microphone' (1943), Orwell had deplored the 'totalitarianization' of state-controlled media, on the basis of its effect on radio's

[298] Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, trans. Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 216.
[299] Kittler, *Optical Media*, p. 216.
[300] Kittler, *Optical Media*, p. 217.
[301] Kittler, *Optical Media*, p. 218.

content – and the fact that (unlike the Romantic Peter Carter), he cannot imagine 'poetry on the air':

> Few people are able to imagine the radio being used for the dissemination of anything except tripe. […] Indeed the very word 'wireless' calls up a picture either of roaring dictators or of genteel throaty voices announcing that three of our aircraft have failed to return.[302]

As a similar mechanism for the output of tripe, the telescreen is relatively easy for Winston to ignore or dismiss; compared to the visceral immersivity of the communal Two Minutes Hate, which is more analogous to a cinema screening or a political rally, the screen 'babbling away about pig-iron' in Winston's flat has little impact as a form of psychological control; [303] the control comes from the paranoia of being continuously present to the eyes of Big Brother:

> Always the eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed – no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull.[304]

Being both spatially and temporally 'present' is the key to survival for the general ranks of Outer Party Oceanians. The prohibition against attempts to escape the eye of the state is matched by the impossibility of escape into the private perspective of individual memory. As the book opens, Winston is attempting to 'squeeze out some childhood memory that should tell him whether London had always been quite like this'.[305] Later he tries to collect memories of the past from an old man in a pub, but 'the old man's memory was nothing but a rubbish-heap of details':[306]

> The few scattered survivors from the ancient world were incapable of comparing one age with another. They remembered a million useless things, a

[302] George Orwell, 'Poetry and the Microphone', in *Essays* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 239-247 (p. 244).
[303] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 6.
[304] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 25.
[305] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pp. 6-7.
[306] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 77.

> quarrel with a workmate, a hunt for a lost bicycle pump, the expression on a long-dead sister's face, the swirls of dust on a windy morning seventy years ago: but all the relevant facts were outside the range of their vision.[307]

The irony is that such individual memories are exactly what gives the past its human dimension, but Winston, hungry for a countervailing system to challenge the Party's hegemonic dominance, can no longer interpret such scraps of individuality as historically valid. If Winston's own vision wasn't so faulty, he might see that these junk memories tell him what he needs to know, which is that intellectual freedom and autonomy will not come by accessing an impossibly lucid, premasticated historical account, but from a collage of idiosyncratic observations and priorities, individual to each subject. A child of his times, Winston can only conceive of the failure of individual memory as an optical limitation: the past no longer exists, because it is outside the reach of technologically unboosted human perception. For Orwell, the real political importance of the new medium is in its resonance with a more general obliteration of individual vision, which can leave no mark in a culture which has stamped out history and time, and within which Party-sanctioned things bear the standardized branding of the Big Brother portrait, watching its human objects 'on coins, on stamps, on the covers of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrappings of the cigarette packet – everywhere'.[308]

For contemporary audiences, the fact that television had no memory – was unrecorded and unrecordable – was its primary selling point. The *Daily Mail Television Handbook* makes much of the charms of 'liveness':

> The fact that actors are acting at the very moment that you are looking at them – and may faint or fluff or forget their lines – gives television a sense of immediacy and excitement which is unknown in the cinema […] The fact that personalities of every description are brought visually into your own sitting-room or lounge at the very moment in which they are engaged in interesting and intriguing activities, alone introduces a completely new element into home entertainment.[309]

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[307] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 78.
[308] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 25.
[309] Coven, ed., *Daily Mail Television Handbook*, p. 64.

But the same quality of existing in an eternal present, unable to be recorded or fixed, makes television the ideal medium for Oceania. Paper records have to be continually rewritten and 'rectified' by Winston and his co-workers at the Ministry of Truth, to make them conform with the present version of reality; he clings desperately to the memory of once holding a photograph which contradicted the Party's sanctioned version of events, even though he unhesitatingly destroyed it moments after it fell into his hands. Television needs no rectification: what is broadcast one day can be contradicted the next without any historical friction. In such a culture, even when he is in possession of contraband paper and pen, Winston feels powerless:

> In front of him there lay not death but annihilation. The diary would be reduced to ashes and himself to vapour[…] How could you make appeal to the future when not a trace of you, not even an anonymous word scribbled on a piece of paper, could physically survive?[310]

Winston is trying to create a personal text to counteract the Party's totalizing rhetoric, but he abandons this attempt when he finds himself scrawling an uncontrolled stream-of-consciousness account of his most grubby desires – a kind of bastardized version of modernist self-absorption. It's not just the inanity of his personal record that makes Winston feel powerless, but the fragility of the paper medium itself, which he takes as a portent of his own utter deniability. Later he thinks he has found his text in the illicit Goldstein book passed to him by the man he takes for a rebel leader, O'Brien, although in fact, like the forbidden notebook and pen, this object is a plant, a trap to provoke him into treason. The only accurate records are those held by the Thought Police, as O'Brien proves when he confronts Winston with the meticulously stacked-up evidence of his thoughtcrimes. 'Who controls the past controls the future,' runs the Party slogan, 'and who controls the present controls the past.'[311]

Eventually Winston attempts to find an anchor, not in words or human memories, but in inanimate objects, which have survived from the past and thus bear witness to the passage of time. It is a more mid-century solution to the problem of

[310] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 26.
[311] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 199.

self-containment: he decants his longed-for identity as a complete man, a lover and a thinker, wholesale into a glass paperweight with a tiny piece of coral inside:

> It was as though the surface of the glass had been the arch of the sky, enclosing a tiny world with its atmosphere complete. He had the feeling that he could get inside it, and that in fact he was inside it, along with the mahogany bed and the gateleg table, and the clock and the steel engraving and the paperweight itself. The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia's life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal.[312]

The glass dome contains not only Winston's sense of autonomous self-hood, it also paradoxically seems to contain the room in which he places it. This is the upstairs room of the junkshop where he bought it, a love nest offered to him by the shopkeeper, Mr Charrington, as a museum of pre-Party life, which appears to have no telescreen, and thus promises a haven in which Winston and Julia can meet for awkward trysts and shared readings of the Goldstein book.

W. T. J. Mitchell's analysis of found objects and readymades – objects which take on the properties of images when they are redescribed as art – speaks to the mid-century junkshop mythos which informs not only the nostalgia trap of *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* but also Barbara Jones's curatorial practice, and the gentrification aesthetic of Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise-Longue* (discussed in the next chapter). Mitchell highlights the importance of a remediating process in the uncanny doubling of trash and treasure; referencing Lacan's anecdote about an empty sardine can bobbing in the sea, he writes:

> Everyone knows that there are just two criteria for a found object: (1) it must be ordinary, unimportant, neglected, and (until its finding) overlooked; […] and (2) its finding must be accidental, not deliberate or planned. One doesn't seek the found object…One *finds* it. Even better: it finds you, looking back at you like Lacan's sardine can.[313]

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[312] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 121.
[313] Mitchell, p. 114.

Lacan's anecdote describes a trip in a fishing boat, during which a boy, Petit Jean, points out a floating sardine can with the words 'You see that sardine can? Do you see it? Well it doesn't see you!' [314] Lacan uses this to introduce an analysis of the gaze and the potential or actual interchange between observer and observed: the can may not 'see' Lacan but it nevertheless occupies a point in space and time that implies his visibility. The agency of the found object described by Mitchell relies on a kind of suggestively porous and even creative intersubjectivity between human consciousness and the thing-world, but it also creates the disquieting suggestion of non-human surveillance of the subject. Once the object finds you, a moment of remediation occurs:

> Once found […] it may undergo an apotheosis, a transfiguration of the commonplace, a redemption by art […] If it really works, however, we have a sneaking suspicion that the transfiguration was a trick, a comic ruse engineered by a *deus ex machina*; and the plain old thing with its homely familiar name, is still there, blushing and smirking at us in the spotlight of aesthetic attention or (better) ignoring us totally.[315]

Mitchell's sense of being tricked recalls Freud's feeling of dissatisfaction on reading a gothic text that 'tricks us by promising everyday reality and then going beyond it';[316] the uncanny object, once it finds the subject, stakes a claim to a rival subjectivity and is endowed with a potential for malevolent mischief.[317] Yet whereas the found art-object is redeemed by the aesthetic context in which it is understood, the charisma of the junk-shop object depends on its attendant narrative. This junkshop mythos relies on certain key signifiers, which can be traced back at least as far as Balzac's *La peau de chagrin* (1831).[318] The powerful object around which desire coalesces is usually found in a shop which seems to appear out of nowhere to a protagonist who has lost his way. The shop is full to the point of excess, piled up

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[314] See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 95-6.
[315] Mitchell, p. 114.
[316] Mitchell, p. 157.
[317] Freud, p. 157.
[318] Honoré de Balzac, *La peau de chagrin* [The Wild Ass's Skin], trans. Herbert J. Hunt (London: Penguin, 1977).

with rubbish, yet despite this the person who is destined to encounter the object will spot its potential immediately, displaying an instinctive connoisseurship which attaches him to the object and makes him determined to have it. Here he encounters another crucial element of the paradigm: the reluctant shopkeeper who tries to distract him with other, worthless goods which he insists will suit his needs better. Often, this reluctance to sell – the very opposite of functional capitalism – comes along with a warning that the desired object is haunted, cursed, or otherwise undesirable. Once pulled out of the dark corner and rubbed like Aladdin's lamp, the abject object suddenly blossoms into treasure, but also threatens to exact a great price from the buyer who has performed this transformation. Smith's encounter with Mr Charrington and the paperweight follows this paradigm closely, although Smith, cut off from cultural memory, cannot possibly read the danger signs; Orwell is placing him inside a 'junked' mythos which has the same museal quality as the staged anachronism of the little room with its steel engraving and gateleg table. The junkshop represents a form of materialized memory, but the story behind it, which Smith cannot access, contains a warning he cannot read.

The romance of the junkshop was a popular theme in the mid-century, although it was often framed in terms of a sense of unease. 'To those whose heads are turned firmly backwards every junk shop is a menace and every cathedral town a snare,' wrote Alan Shadwick in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1948. 'Half concealed in the dim, religious light of those interiors, the antique dealers lurk, affecting an indifference that deceives nobody.'[319] His sense of entrapment derives as much from his own addiction to the past as to the wiles of the shopkeeper, however; merely reading an old book from his collection invariably triggers dissatisfaction with the present:

> Who shall blame the modern reader […] if his brooding gaze should stray from the printed page to dwell dangerously upon the 1935 table, with its twisted legs like four sticks of barley-sugar the whole carried out in fumed oak? […] And so once more into the antique shop, where, with a sinking

[319] Alan Shadwick, 'Collector's Piece', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 December 1948, p. 3.

heart, one learns that they have the very thing in the warehouse across the yard.[320]

The phenomenon was at a turning point, however. In 1952, *The Times* published a feature piece called 'Decline of the Junk Shop' in which the writer decried the new breed of shop presided over by 'young men in flashy ties and well-oiled hair and brassy young women in trousers and beads'. [321] Here, electric light illuminated once excitingly dingy corners, and the stock was all 'badly made bric a brac of a period that delighted in pretentious impedimenta'; in other words the Victorian and Edwardian decades. This is a consequence of the 'modern vogue for antiques': 'Commercialism has penetrated even to those ancient dusty shops where, unmolested by "sales technique", we could while away an hour or two turning over forgotten relics of past ages and come away the richer for finding something that took our fancy.'

In the mid-century, the prize find was not necessarily a high-quality (and preferably ludicrously underpriced) antique, but was perhaps something whose value depended on the quirk of individual taste – as we will see in the next chapter, this might even be a piece of kitsch Victoriana that could be made 'charming' by being placed within a fashionable middle-class decorative scheme. And so the gothic potential of the found object changed too – it became not so much an uncanny amulet through which the past erupts with the all-purpose destructive energy of a curse, but a heterotopian portal into an alternative time and space which addressed the individuality of the finder. The paperweight's auratic presence in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a kind of solid metaphor helps to focus the book's delineation of the power of images and the relation between the symbolic and the real, and can usefully be compared to Mitchell's stipulation that found objects must be '*objectionable* objects, object lessons, or even *abject* objects that have been disgraced, and discarded.'[322] Like a multistable gestalt image such as Wittgenstein's Duck-Rabbit, the found object doubles time and space by being two different things at once: both trash and treasure. The paperweight's very materiality, its thingliness, marks it out as an abject object, a thought crime in material form ('It was a queer thing, even a

[320] Shadwick, p. 3.
[321] 'Decline Of The Junk Shop', *The Times*, 28 April 1952, p. 9.
[322] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 108.

compromising thing, for a Party member to have in his pocket') because its symbolic freight, as an emblem of interiority and as a portal to the past, cannot be burnt, vaporized or edited out of existence.[323] Yet its 'found' meaning turns out to be a trick, just as the art-mediated readymades were to Mitchell: the paperweight has been planted in the junkshop as a lure, and like the hidden room that it both contains and is contained by, it has deceptively magnified Winston's sense of individuality and freedom. He discovers this at the point when both the illusion and the paperweight are destroyed by the dawn raid of the Thought Police:

> Someone had picked up the glass paperweight from the table and smashed it to pieces on the hearth-stone. The fragment of coral, a tiny crinkle of pink like a sugar rosebud from a cake, rolled across the mat. How small, thought Winston, how small it always was![324]

Winston's paperweight, which he thinks is simply bearing witness to the past, has acted as a mendacious magnifying lens that enables an illusory prosthetic perception, just as the glass screen of the television set makes distant objects visible without putting them within tangible reach. Its final metaphorical flourish, delivered at the point of its destruction, finally emerges from the mediating glass to enable Winston to access a gustatory sensation from a distant past that he supposedly has found impossible to remember – a pink sugar rosebud decorating a pre-Oceanian cake. That this image seems to reference both Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* and the Proustian madeleine of *A la recherche du temps perdu* (and echoes, perhaps, the pink rose holding June's tear in *A Matter of Life and Death*) emphasizes the object's former promise as a nexus of memory and narrative, and the hopelessness of Winston as he contemplates the impossibility of such a thing continuing to exist.[325]

The idea of glass itself as a medium has been explored by Isobel Armstrong in *Victorian Glassworlds*, in which she traces the impact of glass technology on the mid-nineteenth-century imaginary. In this period,

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[323] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 80.
[324] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 179.
[325] *Citizen Kane,* dir. by Orson Welles (RKO Radio Pictures and Mercury Productions, 1941); Marcel Proust, *Du coté de chez Swann* [The Way by Swann's], trans. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin, 2003)

> a glass dialectic marked contradiction, a subject in difficulties, rather than smooth transitivity. Transparency posited an oppositional world, not invisible mediation but marks on the surface, scratches, fingerprints. Minuscule impurities and bubbles of air, internal impediments to vision, signified and created internal contradictions.[326]

It is the physicality of the glass and its origin in the body of the glassblower that makes it a medium rather than a frictionless conduit of light:

> Transparency is something that eliminates itself in the process of vision. It does away with obstruction by not declaring itself as a presence. But the paradox of this self-obliterating state is that we would not call it transparent but for the presence of physical matter, however invisible – its visible invisibility is what is important about transparency. It must be both barrier and medium.[327]

A century after the period Armstrong is examining, and with vast expanses of flawless industrial plate-glass no longer providing such signifiers of subject/object mediation, another form of high-tech glass offered a different problematic of transparency. The thick glass of a television screen frames the same dialectic but in a very different way: it is understood to be transparent, since images can be seen through it; yet what is seen is not there, and what is there – the inside of the box – is not seen. Unlike the window or the mirror, the screen obliterates itself without becoming invisible. And when the apparatus is switched off, it reverts to solid, uniform opacity. Armstrong goes on to point out that when Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of transparency to critique the 'classical' Cartesian subject, he refers to the 'self-transparent thought, absolutely present to itself' which ignores a 'natal pact between our body and the world, between ourselves and the body.'[328] By inserting a mediating third term between subject and object, a 'moment of difficulty', experience is rescued from the purity of abstraction and aestheticization. [329]

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[326] Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 14.
[327] Armstrong, p. 11.
[328] Armstrong, pp. 11-2.
[329] Armstrong, p. 12.

In the telescreen's ocular reversal, Big Brother is the viewer and the citizenry are the spectral presences flickering into and out of existence at the viewer's whim. Thus it is their sheer corporeality that Winston and Julia are trying to assert in their secret junk-shop trysts, and it is by physical pain that the Party enforcer O'Brien finally succeeds in breaking through Winston's resistance to the looking-glass logic of doublethink, which demands that individual consciousness rewrites itself reflexively to conform to a communal lie, and then forgets not just the act, but even the concept of forgetting. This requires a complete semantic breakdown, a severance of the link between real and symbolic, as exemplified by the annihilation of the unambiguous arithmetical notation of Winston's mental touchstone, 2 + 2 = 4. It's this act of untethering that puts *Nineteen Eighty-Four* within the genre of mid-century gothic, which brings together cultural artefacts which tend to perform and problematize semantic unreliability of the kind that Freud used in his definition of 'uncanny'. O'Brien completes his remediation of Winston by confronting him with the disconnect between his body and his mind: first, after weeks of torture, he stands his broken form in front of a triple mirror so that Winston can experience a total alienation from his reflected self; and then he demonstrates the potency of the Party's mind-control by confronting him with his worst fear in Room 101. Winston relinquishes any hope that his physical persistence in time and space will help him to remember his individual identity. He is only the flickering apparition visible on a television screen; he is the ghost in the Party machine.

Ghosts, machines and 'the thing in the head': reflection and speculation in the human brain

For Gilbert Ryle, who coined the phrase 'the ghost in the machine', this ghost was a myth, the impossible spectre of a consciousness untethered to the material fact of the body. Published the same year as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949) is concerned with many of the same questions that Orwell's novel asked about subjective identity.[330] As we will see, Ryle's ideas were quickly superseded by the inauguration of cognitive science triggered by neurological advances and the dawning of the computer age, but his theory illuminates the definition of

[330] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Penguin, 2000).

consciousness within which Orwell was staging his thought-experiment. Starting from a critique of Descartes's prioritization of abstract thought, Ryle sets out to dismantle the notion that the mind is 'a second theatre', entirely separate from the theatre of sensory evidence, and 'that its consciousness and introspection discover the scenes enacted in it.'[331] Drawing a line from phenomenological philosophical enquiry to behaviourist psychology, he argues that, rather than needing a mysterious 'Privileged Access' to subjective awareness, 'the sorts of things that I can find out about myself are the same as the sorts of things I can find out about other people, and the methods of finding them out are much the same.'[332] In Orwell's Oceania, the abolition of the ghostly theatre of the mind was achieved by flushing out 'the few cubic centimetres inside your skull' through technological supervision.[333] The logical behaviourists of the Thought Police could not read minds; they had to deduce thought crimes from the words and actions of their targets. They got round this by decreeing that anyone who claimed to possess a discrete consciousness, a 'tiny world with its atmosphere complete', inaccessible to Big Brother's disciplinary optics, must ipso facto be a criminal, since this self-reflective and self-illuminating cranial space could not exist inside an obedient party member. The result for Winston, though, was not the kind of rescue from immateriality that Ryle aspired to, but rather a total retreat from his own tortured body into a state of unthinking abstraction. Without his own theatre of the mind to act as a buffer, he was subsumed within the stream of insubstantial and endlessly rewritten Doublethink emitting from the telescreens.

Indeed, the technology of television might almost have been designed to refute Ryle's radical empiricism. Along with his metaphor of the theatre, he employs the idea of phosphorescence to explain the impossibility of consciousness; he uses the simile of 'tropical sea-water, which makes itself visible by the light which it itself emits'.[334] For Galileo and Descartes, he writes,

> 'consciousness' was imported to play in the mental world the part played by light in the mechanical world. In this metaphorical sense the contents of the

[331] Ryle, p. 149.
[332] Ryle, p. 149.
[333] Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 25.
[334] Ryle, p. 152.

> mental world were thought of as being self-luminous or refulgent […] [Locke] called this supposed inner perception 'reflection' (our 'introspection'), borrowing the word 'reflection' from the familiar optical phenomenon of the reflections of faces in mirrors. The mind can 'see' or 'look at' its own operations in the 'light' given off by themselves. The myth of consciousness is a piece of para-optics.[335]

Ryle treats this as an impossibility, but the cathode ray screen offers a concrete example of just such a self-luminous optical instrument, revealing a 'theatre' in which insubstantial subatomic particles are transformed into real sensory perceptions. Ryle's refutation of ghosts, which wanted to reveal such gothic ideas as irrational fictions, was being overtaken by the inherent gothicism of an apparatus which could make apparitions appear in time and space. And indeed, one scientist, William Grey Walter, was already attempting to make the 'theatre' of the mind literally visible, on a television screen.

Grey Walter is remembered as a pioneer of cybernetics, but his experiments in robotics grew out of his neurological research at the Burden Institute in Bristol, which tackled the question of how far, if at all, human consciousness could be considered identical to its corporeal medium, the brain. He approached the question from the opposite direction to Ryle's, proving, for instance, that the brain could physically react to stimuli before any conscious awareness was experienced. To do this, he first needed to refine the process of electroencephalography, or EEG, into a medium through which 'brainwaves' could be manifested in the outside world; only then could he attempt to understand the brain from the inside out, by building mechanical models of neurological feedback systems which could be set the task of contemplating themselves.

His final EEG breakthrough, described in his 1953 popular science book *The Living Brain*, depended on the cathode-ray tube as a means of visualizing the 'moving panorama' of the brain's electrical activity.[336] It built on the strides taken in the 1930s by Hans Berger, who had brought an investigation of electrical brain activity out of the séance room and into the laboratory, but had depended on superannuated technology as its output-medium. Berger's method involved inserting

[335] Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, p. 153.
[336] William Grey Walter, *The Living Brain* (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 63.

silver wires under the subject's scalp and recording the brain's electrical pulses using a string galvanometer. This apparatus consisted of a long, thin filament of silver-coated glass which vibrated in response to electrical impulses in the subject's brain, the result being recorded in the form of a wavy line on a photographic plate. By the 1950s, this had already been widely replaced by the ink-writing oscillograph, which responded to the brain's electrical vibrations by moving a set of pens across a roll of constantly moving paper. The process resulted in images of thickly scribbled wobbly lines, a gestural output analogous to a pre-alphabetic handwritten mark. For Grey Walter, this had the disadvantage of unravelling the picture of the brain across time and space, so that its message was accessible only through a laborious act of readerly reconstruction: 'EEG records may be considered,' he wrote, 'as the bits and pieces of a mirror for the brain, itself *speculum speculorum* [a mirror of mirrors]. They must be carefully sorted before even trying to fit them together.'[337]

Grey Walter's need for an alternative method for recording, expressing and conceptualizing the brain's electrical signals led him naturally to the cathode-ray tube, which could turn any electric signal into an integrated visual image. Like the strings of wavy marks on paper, this involved fragmenting the image of the brain to make it visible, but the technology also included a mechanized process of reading, which reintegrated and interpreted the pixellated information by streaming it onto the screen in the form of rapidly written and rewritten lines. It was a kind of mechanical version of the self-legibility which Gilbert Ryle had argued was impossible.

For Grey Walter, though, the key advantage of a CRT output was that it enabled him to untether brainwaves from the materiality of photography or pen and paper (both technologies which had failed Winston Smith as reliable receptacles for history). By translating them from one medium of flow (the brain) into another (the CRT screen), he could endow them with a perceptible presence in a virtual space-time, mapping them onto a three-dimensional representation of the brain which he likened to the cartographer's Mercator Projection. His cathode-ray EEG anticipated much later breakthroughs such as CT scans and MRI by drawing a map of a mind in the act of thinking. Thus, brainwaves, which had first been studied by spiritualism-inclined psychologists as an argument for the possibility of telepathy and life after death, promised for Grey Walter to lead to a new type of optics on a par with

[337] Grey Walter, *The Living Brain*, p. 61.

diagnostic x-ray, electron microscopy and radar. He could see that EEG would enable scientists to look inside the black box of the brain and see what was happening without having to open the skull or dissect neural fibres, which had hitherto been the limit of neurophysiological methodology. This meant, in effect, that the human mind could begin to contemplate itself.

Grey Walter's chapter on EEG, entitled 'A Mirror for the Brain', opens with a quotation from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* which emphasizes his intuition that cathode-ray technology could undergo a transformation from mirror into threshold:

> Let's pretend there's a way of getting through it somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy to get through.[338]

Crucially, he contrasts this fairy-tale suggestion with a phenomenological theory of mind limited by an empirical adherence to the materiality of flesh: 'The Greeks had no word for it,' he begins; 'To them the brain was merely "the thing in the head".'[339] He goes on:

> More curious still is Greek negligence of the brain, considering their famous oracular behest, 'Know thyself'. Here indeed was speculation, the demand for a mirror, insistence upon a mirror. But for whom, for what? Was there, among the mysteries behind the altar, concealed perhaps in the Minerva myth, a suspicion of something more in the head than a thing, and that the organ which had to do the knowing of itself must be an organ of reflection?'[340]

Ryle's logical objection to consciousness and introspection rested on what he saw as the fallacy of self-reflection, and the insistence that the mind, insofar as the term was meaningful, was identical to the brain. But for Grey Walter it was the brain's

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[338] Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, in *The Annotated Alice*, ed. by Martin Gardner (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 149. Quoted in Grey Walter, *The Living Brain*, p. 45.
[339] Grey Walter, *The Living Brain*, p. 45.
[340] Grey Walter, *The Living Brain*, p. 46. The 'Minerva myth' may refer to the goddess of wisdom's birth, where she springs fully formed from the skull of Jupiter.

'insistence upon a mirror' which defined the difference between brain and consciousness, since speculation could only take place in a conceptual realm which was enabled, but not confined, by 'the thing in the head'. By mapping consciousness onto empirical neuroscience, Grey Walter hoped to locate the intersection between the two.

For Jacques Lacan, the distinction between mind and body was most starkly dramatized during the infant Mirror Stage, in which the physical reflection of the child's body allows access to the Imaginary in the form of the unfragmented self, while at the same time emphasizing the fact that this imaginary whole self is external, and other. But the mirror metaphor is not the only scopic analogue he employed to explain his reading of consciousness. In his Second Seminar, he refers to early computers as a symbolic medium, operating linguistically through codes.[341] Television, however, straddles these two categories within the Lacanian triad. At one point he uses the analogy of a triode lamp – a forerunner of the cathode-ray tube – to explain how the Imaginary intervenes in the coded outputs of language and symbols:

> Let us try to light up the magic lantern a little. We are going to take on a mechanical outlook, which is the enemy of man, by imagining there to be a triode lamp at the point of intersection of the symbolic direction and the passage through the imaginary. Let us suppose that a current passes down the circuit. If there is a vacuum, a bombarding of electrons takes place between the cathode and the anode, thanks to which the current passes. Besides the anode and the cathode, there is a third ode, a transverse one. You can make the current pass through it by making it positive, in such a way that the electrons are led towards the anode, or else by making it negative, cutting the process short – what emanates from the negative is repelled by the negative you've interposed.[342]

[341] For a detailed examination of the influence of computing on Lacan's thought, see John Johnston, *The Allure of Machinic Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 65-103.
[342] Jacques Lacan, *Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 323.

By selecting which electrons pass and which are reflected back, the lamp or screen becomes the medium for an image, and for Lacan, such technological image-making demonstrated the interdependence of the symbolic and the imaginary, since his triode lamp needed both in order to produce its effect. The cathode tube provides a material analogy for the fragmentary subject: it produces itself autonomously through a process that is fluid, conflicted, and 'at best […] contradicts itself, cuts itself off, grinds itself up.'[343]

Television's self-legible autonomy helps to explain its uncanniness to its early users, but is somewhat different to the medium's characterization by later theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler as being defined only by fragmentation. As Kittler puts it (borrowing from McLuhan):

> Film is a hot medium because its widescreen illusions result in a decrease in the spectator's own activity, while television is a cool medium because it only supplies a moiré pattern comprised of pixels that the audience must first decode back into shapes again in an active and almost tactile way.[344]

Arguably, the necessity for the human eye to 'decode' the pointillism of television's pixels is no more or less 'cold' than the reliance of film on the persistence of vision which smooths out the flicker of rapidly cycling celluloid images. Kittler himself goes on to outline his reservations about McLuhan's hot/cold distinction, detailing how the invention of high-definition television has created a more film-like intimacy with television's spectator-subject. In his earlier work, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, he had associated film with the imaginary realm and with Lacan's mirror, while early gramophone recordings of undifferentiated and uninterpreted sounds gave access to the ungraspable realm of the real, and the encoded communications of typewriters figured the symbolic realm.[345] In *Optical Media* he updates his reading of Lacan's Mirror Stage and suggests that the intractable real is not (as in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*) best expressed by analogy with auditory recordings, but is more persuasively accessed through the machine-mediated

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[343] Lacan, *Seminar II,* p. 323.
[344] Kittler, *Optical Media*, p. 222.
[345] See Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

indexicality of sophisticated computer-generated media – although he also suggests that in modern technology the symbolic and the real may not be 'absolutely independent'.[346] In fact, even in their mid-century infancy, cybernetics and computing were already starting to instigate new questions about the relationship between reality, consciousness and codes of meaning, and complicate the definition of human subjectivity.

'Jigging like a clumsy Narcissus': Grey Walter's neurotic robots

Grey Walter set out to create a mechanical model which could mimic the brain's ability to process sensory input and use the object-world to feed back information about itself. This research was to make him famous when he unveiled his 'tortoise' robots at the Festival of Britain Exhibition of Science, staged at the South Kensington Museum in 1951. The simple robots, which he called *machina speculatrix*, were 'designed to illustrate […] the uncertainty, randomness, free will or independence so strikingly absent in most well-designed machines.'[347] Their apparent independence – they would move towards light, avoid objects in their path, and return to their 'hutches' to recharge when necessary – was the result of an electronic feedback system involving a light source, a light-sensor, and a simple circuit which specified how various inputs should be acted upon.

In his 1976 recollection of visiting the Festival, Brian Aldiss remembered his sense of anticipation about seeing these revolutionary machines:

> What I was after was a glimpse of the future […] what I most wanted to see was Grey Walter's electronic tortoises. So, first, to the Science Museum where they were housed. The electronic tortoises were animals begot between a new science, cybernetics, and a new technical development, automation (both labels coined during the forties). These chelonian hybrids were clumsy creatures of metal, not at all prepossessing to look at, but they did something that no mechanical had done hitherto: they pottered about their cage and, when they were feeling hungry, returned to their power source and

[346] Kittler, *Optical Media,* pp. 39-41.
[347] Grey Walter, 'A Machine that Learns', *Scientific American*, 185.2 (August, 1951), 60-63 (p. 44).


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> replenished their batteries of their own accord. […] Although I understood how the metal tortoises worked, I wanted to see them for myself – to feast my eyes on them, in that expressive phrase. So I did. Squat, unlovely, but full of significance, they sat in their unlit tank, unmoving, gathering dust. A notice on the exhibit said 'out of order'.[348]

The machines' frequent break-downs helped to quell any suggestion that science had created a rival to human thought and subjectivity. The official Festival book was at pains to stress the limitations of these lumbering but endearing quasi-animals:

> These 'tortoises' designed by Dr Grey Walter, are purely mechanical but have very simple 'brains' […] Simple as they are, they copy certain patterns of man's behaviour and help us with human problems.[349]

Similarly, a newsreel on Grey Walter's research described them as 'pets' named Elsie and Elmer and showed their inventor and his wife smiling fondly as he teased them by pushing objects into their path.[350] The guide-catalogue for the Science Exhibition, meanwhile, almost ignored the robots, with the guide's writer Jacob Bronowski limiting himself to a terse parenthetical mention of the tortoises within a detailed description of the nervous system:

> The senses send their findings rather like electric signals along the nerves. Such a signal may set off an automatic or reflex action; this is how a shadow across the eye makes us blink, or an insect moves towards the light. A mechanical "animal" can be constructed to steer itself towards the light in this automatic way.[351]

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[348] Brian Aldiss, 'A Monument to the Future', in Banham and Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation*, pp. 176-77 (p. 176).
[349] Basil Taylor, *The Festival of Britain* (London: Lund Humphries, 1951), p. 45.
[350] 'Bristol's robot tortoises have minds of their own' (BBC newsreel, 1950) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lLULRlmXkKo> [accessed 17 August 2015].
[351] Jacob Bronowski, 'The Story the Exhibition Tells', in *1951 Exhibition of Science South Kensington: Festival of Britain* (London: HMSO, 1951) p. 32.

For Grey Walter himself, however – as his 1953 account shows – the real value of his robots lay not in their power to amuse the public but to demonstrate a neurological basis for consciousness. He felt he was able to demonstrate the appearance of sentience by introducing a mirror and attaching headlamps to the tortoises, so that the light-seeking feedback system induced the machines to move towards their own reflected light. The increased light level as they got closer to the mirror then caused their light to switch off; but once the reflected light had disappeared, the machine was programmed to switch its own headlamp on again – a process repeated *ad infinitum*:

> The creature therefore lingers before a mirror, flickering, twittering, and jigging like a clumsy Narcissus. The behaviour of a creature thus engaged with its own reflection is quite specific, and on a purely empirical basis, if it were observed in an animal, might be accepted as evidence of some degree of self-awareness.[352]

The importance of this robotic Mirror Stage was emphasized in the illustration which found its way into the Guide-catalogue and many other written accounts of the Tortoises: one of the creatures is clearly seen admiring itself in a looking-glass.

The cod-Linnaean name Grey Walter gave his robots, *machina speculatrix,* becomes clearer: these were not only speculative machines, but mirror-gazing machines. Like Lacan, he makes it a marker of consciousness that there is, first, an acknowledgement of the difference between self and other, and, second, a recognition of the self *as* other. This passage is reminiscent of Mitchell's reservation about the '*deus ex machina*' by which inanimate objects are remediated by art into quasi-sentient things – 'the plain old thing […] is still there, blushing and smirking at us in the spotlight of aesthetic attention or (better) ignoring us totally.'[353] The self-absorption of Grey Walter's robot suggests a rival subjectivity which appears able to ignore its human creator. Moreover, the greater the complexity of the programming, the more lifelike the behaviour becomes – if 'lifelike' is taken to mean irrational and unstable. Grey Walter's 1951 paper 'A Machine that Learns' describes a phenomenon he dubs 'experimental neurosis', which he induced is his next-stage

[352] Grey Walter, *The Living Brain*, p. 115.
[353] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 114.

robots, *machina docilis*, and which manifested as a state of perplexed paralysis. These were set up with 'learning circuits' which aimed to replicate the classical conditioning described by Ivan Pavlov, for instance by 'training' the robots to associate a ringing bell with a light stimulus. As soon as more than one learning circuit was added, however, the machines began to display dysfunctional behaviour, with one model losing its '"instinctive" attraction to light' so that it 'can no longer approach its source of nourishment':

> This state seems remarkably similar to the neurotic behaviour produced in human beings by exposure to conflicting or inconsistent education. In the model such ineffective and even destructive conditions can be terminated by rest, by switching off or by disconnecting one of the circuits. These treatments seem analogous to the therapeutic devices of the psychiatrist – sleep, shock and psychosurgery.[354]

Grey Walter's anthropomorphic reading of a situation that modern computer-users would recognize as a simple 'crash' reveals his underlying agenda of using these robots to begin to describe the machinery of human consciousness, rather than purely to advance cybernetic research. The neurosis of *M. docilis* shows the man-made mind responding to self-awareness, not as Narcissus, but as Frankenstein's creature:

> How was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror: and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification.[355]

Grey Walter's automaton is an essentially gothic apparatus, which enables the inner life of the mind to be made manifest, not via supernatural spectrality, but through the uncanny workings of technology. Indeed, Grey Walter himself draws this distinction: the impulse to impute supernatural life and agency to inanimate objects

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[354] Grey Walter, 'A Machine that Learns', p. 63.
[355] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Everyman, 1963), p. 117.

must instead be understood only as yet another mirror by which the mind can contemplate itself:

> We are daily reminded how readily living and even divine properties are projected into inanimate things by hopeful but bewildered men and women; and the scientist cannot escape the suspicion that his projections may be psychologically the substitutes and manifestations of his own hope and bewilderment.[356]

'Machine wins'? Lacan, Turing and the problem of consciousness

Speaking in his 1954 seminar 'A materialist definition of the phenomenon of consciousness', Lacan refers to Grey Walter's mechanical tortoises as useful metaphors in his effort to dismantle the Freudian ego. Although he doesn't refer to their attraction to mirrors, he does imagine what would happen if they were programmed to 'jam' unless they could see another machine of the same kind. He uses this to discuss the fascination and desire of the ego for the other:

> You see, by the same token, how a circle can be set up. As long as the unity of the first machine hangs on that of the other, as long as the other gives it the model and even the form of its unity, whatever it is that the first is oriented towards will always depend on what the other is oriented towards.'[357]

The advantage of using what he calls 'these courageous little animals' as his model is that 'it doesn't in any way idolize the subject'; instead, it shows that 'the subject is no one. It is decomposed, in pieces.'[358] In other words, by describing consciousness in mechanical terms, he is hoping to demystify the ego and depose it from its reigning position within Freudian psychoanalysis. The attempt to make things that are more like humans inevitably suggests the possibility that humans might be 'mere' things after all, since their claims to any kind of immaterial soul or essence

[356] Grey Walter, *The Living Brain*, p. 104.
[357] Lacan, *Seminar II*, p. 51.
[358] Lacan, *Seminar II*, p. 54.

can be challenged by a material construct which seems to present an equivalent type of consciousness without the need to provide it with any supernatural element.

For Lacan, the comparison between minds and machines bears fruit; in addition to tortoise robots, the metaphor of the computer enables him to show that the mind's capacity for language can be best understood as a machinic process. It is the autonomy of the machine, its detachment from consciousness, that makes it analogous to the symbolic realm. Ryle's logical objection to consciousness and indeed psychology rested on the improbability that the mind could be self-illuminating and self-reflective; for Lacan, it is the machine-like language-code of the symbolic that provides the 'light' that illuminates consciousness. Yet this does not solve the problem of the nature of the subject, but merely goes to prove that the subject is fragmented or even nonexistent: 'The machine is the structure detached from the activity of the subject. The symbolic world is the world of the machine. Then we have the question as to what, in this world, constitutes the being of the subject.'[359] This is not so far, after all, from Gilbert Ryle's contention that the 'ghost in the machine' concept falsely flatters an essentially biological human consciousness with intimations of the ineffable.

The dialectic of consciousness and materiality took another turn in the research of Alan Turing into artificial intelligence. At the same time that Grey Walter was seeking to map consciousness onto a material medium, Turing was busy attempting to demolish completely the distinction between matter and thought. Computers, as Turing conceives them, both refute and support Ryle's mechanistic description of thought, since they provide an instance of machinic, non-transcendental cognition but also demonstrate that thinking and learning are abstract processes which do not entirely succumb to materialist description. His famous 1950 paper 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' proposes to answer the question 'can machines think?' by using what he calls 'the imitation game', in which an interrogator directs questions to a human and a computer and must choose, by examining their typewritten answers, which is the machine. [360] This idea appealed to Lacan, who discussed Turing's still-hypothetical computers in relation to the codes of the symbolic realm and their detachment from physicality, and recognized that an

[359] Lacan, *Seminar II*, p. 47.
[360] Alan Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', *Mind*, 49 (October, 1950), 433-460.

important moment had been reached in humanity's ability to conceptualize the process of thought. The validity of the 'Turing test' has been debated ever since, but Turing's original paper can be read, not just as a computing thought experiment, but as a mid-century gothic text, which responds to the culture's growing sense of a disconnect between mind and body, signal and material, interior process and perceptible output. His stated intention in devising the game was to draw 'a fairly sharp line between the physical and the intellectual capacities of a man.'[361] But Turing seems conscious that he is setting himself up to be another 'modern Prometheus' when he attempts to outline scientific methods for creating artificial life by disassembling and analysing fragments of the human – which may be why he specifically excludes as a viable option Victor Frankenstein's chosen methodology of revivifying obsolete human fragments. Understanding intelligence in terms of its mere fleshly clothing, he points out, would involve a radical confusion of form and function:

> No engineer or chemist claims to be able to produce a material which is indistinguishable from the human skin. It is possible that at some time this might be done, but even supposing this invention were available we should feel there was little point in trying to make a "thinking machine" more human by dressing it up in such artificial flesh.[362]

His quasi-human creature might undergo a process of learning and development analogous to that undertaken by Mary Shelley's autodidactic monster, however; Turing speculates that the best way to make a machine that can imitate the brain of a human adult is first to 'try to produce one which simulates the child's':[363]

> Presumably the child-brain is something like a note-book as one buys it from the stationer's. Rather little mechanism, and lots of blank sheets. (Mechanism and writing are from our point of view almost synonymous). Our hope is that there is so little mechanism in the child-brain that something like it can be

[361] Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', p. 434.
[362] Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', p. 434.
[363] Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', p. 456.

> easily programmed. The amount of work in the education we can assume, as a first approximation, to be much the same as for the human child.[364]

Just as Orwell's Winston Smith saw the act of writing in a notebook as somehow essential to autonomous thought, Turing hopes that the artificial child-brain will use its blank sheets to formulate an autobiographical record which will underpin its intelligence. Whereas, for Grey Walter, learning was achieved by means of a circuit which prescribed invariable outcomes from given inputs, Turing's notebook image emphasizes the retention of data and the ability to use it in order to deduce further information and instruction. But, like the Thought Police, he is in no doubt that this process will be programmable and controllable; his assumption is that the immature brain resembles an ink-writing oscillograph, mechanically responding to sensory inputs and recording them as coded data.

Turing's optimism about computer memory and its ability to enable original thought falters, however, on the admission that a mechanical child-brain could never learn exactly like a real child:

> It will not, for instance, be provided with legs, so that it could not be asked to go out and fill the coal scuttle. Possibly it might not have eyes. But however well these deficiencies might be overcome by clever engineering, one could not send the creature to school without the other children making excessive fun of it.[365]

Turing clearly sympathizes with his bullied Pinocchio-robot, sent off to school to learn how to be a real boy, but he is making a serious point about what he sees as the essential similarity between machines and minds. Like Ryle, he argues against the idea that there is anything unassailably enigmatic going on within human thought processes, citing what he calls 'the solipsistic view' of the neurologist Geoffrey Jefferson's Lister Oration in 1949, in which he proclaimed that 'Not until a machine can write a sonnet or compose a concerto because of thoughts and emotions felt, and not by the chance fall of symbols, could we agree that machine equals brain.'[366] In

[364] Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', p. 456.
[365] Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', p. 456.
[366] Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', p. 445.

contrast to this cultural argument for human exceptionalism, Turing presents the image of onion skins to describe the hopeless task of trying to find the ghostly essence of creativity:

> In considering the functions of the mind or the brain we find certain operations which we can explain in purely mechanical terms. This we say does not correspond to the real mind: it is a sort of skin which we must strip off if we are to find the real mind. But then in what remains we find a further skin to be stripped off, and so on. Proceeding in this way do we ever come to the 'real' mind, or do we eventually come to the skin which has nothing in it?[367]

Nevertheless, there is a tension in Turing's writing between his insistence on the increasing perfectibility of a mechanical analogue for human thought and the inkling that there is a quality of 'human-ness' which can be discerned in disobedient machines, at the moment when they reject or supercede their programming. This, again, is an essentially gothic construction: the symbolic apparatus of gothic narratives often depends on the intervention of uncanny, recalcitrant things, especially those over-freighted with significance: Frankenstein's creature is perhaps the archetype of the unruly object, but Winston's dangerously overdetermined and disintegrating television/paperweight is another example. Gothicism refutes the idea of meaning as a simple code; it relies on slippage and elision between mechanical reality and mysterious intimation; it narrates the fragmentation and contingency of the subject and the ultimate illegibility of the thing-world. The out-of-order tortoises which so disappointed Brian Aldiss at the Festival of Britain Exhibition of Science, or the 'neurotic' ones in Grey Walter's learning laboratory, or even the 'jammed' ones of Lacan's thought experiment, all attest to the gothicism inherent in any project which hopes to manufacture a machinic subject, since this artificial consciousness turns out to be as bewildered as its human counterpart. In 1951, when Turing visited the Festival, he encountered the tortoises for himself, as recorded in an anecdote in Andrew Hodges's biography. Turing and a group of friends

[367] Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', p. 454.

> went to the Science Museum in South Kensington where the science and technology exhibits were housed. Grey Walter's cybernetic tortoises were on show, though they seemed to be going round in circles, and Robin [Gandy] said they were suffering from General Paralysis of the Insane. However, they observed one nice and unexpected touch: the feedback-dance that the tortoises performed in front of a mirror.[368]

Gandy's joking reference to a form of dementia which occurs in late-stage syphilis was presumably intended to emphasize the absurdity of a machine exhibiting the frailty of flesh and blood, but the impression left by the 'feedback dance' suggests that Turing, like Lacan and Grey Walter himself, was intrigued by the possibility of cybernetic self-reflection. He and his friends then moved on to the exhibition's most high-tech centrepiece, a computer named Nimrod supplied by the electrical engineering firm Ferranti, which was programmed to play the numbers game Nim. This basic game can be won in most cases by using a simple but somewhat counter-intuitive strategy, and an algorithm enabled the computer to beat most members of the public who took it on. As Bronowski's guide to the Science Exhibition put it, 'Although it will not always win, the machine cannot make a mistake!'[369] Turing, however, also knew the winning strategy:

> The Ferranti people were pleased to see Alan and said, 'Oh Dr Turing, would *you* like to play the machine? Which of course he did, and knowing the rule himself, he managed to win. The machine dutifully flashed up 'MACHINE LOSES' in light, but then went into a distinctly Turingesque sulk, refusing to come to a stop and flashing 'MACHINE WINS' instead. Alan was delighted at having elicited such human behaviour from a machine.[370]

Although the computer was mentioned only in a single paragraph in Bronowski's guide, Ferranti published a separate booklet, *Faster than Thought: The Ferranti Nimrod Computer* which explained Nimrod's design and capabilities to a non-

[368] Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (London: Vintage 2014), p. 562.
[369] Bronowski, *1951 Exhibition of Science*, p. 7.
[370] Hodges, *Alan Turing*, p. 562.

specialist audience.[371] The anonymous author stresses that the terms 'mechanical or electronic brains' should be avoided, because they might give 'the impression that automatic computers can think for themselves, which is not true'. However, the machine's autonomy is stressed in the list of 'three essential characters' which define computers, namely,

> (1) They can calculate.
> (2) They can 'remember'.
> (3) They can make decisions.

The random access memory (as it is now known) which allows computers to process data independently is highlighted as the key to their complexity and power. Although Nimrod itself only needed a simple circuit to equip it with sufficient memory for its single task, more sophisticated machines were already in use which employed cathode-ray tubes for memory storage, with data transformed into patterns on a screen which could then be read back by the computer.[372] In a sense, these memory-enabled machines are the first objects which can claim literally to have a personal history, and not just – as in the case of the uncanny objects of gothic tales – carry the imprint of human histories through time. Nimrod's communicative output is restricted to only two possible alternatives, but its malfunctional insistence on proclaiming 'Machine wins' – though amusing to Turing – had uncomfortable overtones of threat which were echoed in his 1951 lecture to the 51 Society at Manchester University, 'Intelligent machinery, a heretical theory', which ended with a warning that

> it seems probable that once the machine thinking method had started, it would not take long to outstrip our feeble powers. There would be no question of the machines dying, and they would be able to converse with

[371] *Faster than Thought: The Ferranti Nimrod digital computer. A brief survey of the field of digital computing with specific reference to the Ferranti Nimrod computer* (Hollinwood: Ferranti, 1951) <www.goodeveca.net/nimrod/booklet.html> [accessed 20 February 2014].
[372] The Harwell Electronic Digital Computer, fully operational in 1951, was one such machine. See E. H. Cooke-Yarborough, 'The Harwell Electronic Digital Computer' in B. V. Bowden, ed., *Faster Than Thought: A Symposium on Digital Computing Machines* (London: Pitman, 1953), pp. 140-43.

> each other to sharpen their wits. At some stage therefore we should have to expect the machines to take control.[373]

Once again, the question of whether autonomous objects model human consciousness or represent an alien other remains unresolved. Along with memory, language is at the heart of computers' troubling potential for autogenesis. The opacity of computer code to the human reader, which appealed to Lacan as a metaphor for the occluded workings of the symbolic system itself, was also reflected, perhaps unwittingly, in the name Nimrod – a Biblical figure traditionally credited with building the Tower of Babel.[374]

Even the fact that the leaflet provides a glossary of unfamiliar terms ('computer', 'digital', 'binary') suggests that technology is pulling away from ordinary human discourse. The explanation of binary, meanwhile, recalls the breakdown of Winston Smith's forbidden arithmetical touchstone: while Winston had finally to accept that 2 + 2 = 5, readers unfamiliar with binary numbers were presented with the apparently nonsensical sum 1 + 1 = 10, and forced to recalibrate their perception of common sense in order to make it true.

'Ghosts and bogies': machine intelligence and the supernatural

The idea that computer technology might change or enhance the mechanics of the human brain was something that clearly interested Turing. In his essay 'Digital Computers Applied to Games', he records an experiment which took place at the Science Museum during the Festival:

> The Society for Psychical Research came and fitted up a room nearby in order to see if operations of the machine could be influenced by concentrated thought on the part of the research workers, most of whom were elderly ladies. When this experiment had failed they tried to discover whether they in

[373] Turing, 'Intelligent machinery, a heretical theory', *Turing Digital Archive* AMT/B/20 <http://www.turingarchive.org/viewer/?id=474&title=6> [accessed 11 February 2014].

[374] In Dante's *Inferno*, XXXI.67, Nimrod is one of the giants who guard the Ninth Circle of Hell, and shouts out the nonsensical (and untranslatable) verse '*Raphèl maí amèche zabí almi*.' Virgil explains that 'every language is to him the same | As his to others—no one knows his tongue'.

> turn could be affected by vibrations from the machine and could tell from another room how the game was progressing. Unfortunately this experiment, like the first, was a complete failure, the only conclusion being that machines are much less co-operative than human beings in telepathic experiments.[375]

It might seem that Turing was simply mocking the psychic ladies' experiment, but even in 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', he was not afraid to tackle the uncanny potential of technologically enhanced thought. In one passage he considers at length, and with an apparently straight face, whether his 'imitation game' test for machine intelligence would be invalidated if the human participant were capable of extrasensory perception:

> These disturbing phenomena seem to deny all our usual scientific ideas. How we should like to discredit them! Unfortunately the statistical evidence, at least for telepathy is overwhelming. It is very difficult to rearrange one's ideas so as to fit these new facts in. Once one has accepted them it does not seem a very big step to believe in ghosts and bogies.[376]

A growing popular awareness that the electrical signals of the brain might be transmitted, mediated or made legible by technology resulted in the emergence of stories in which electronic appliances become haunted, although any sense of horror soon began to abate in the mid-century imaginary. By the time J. B. Priestley was writing his short story 'Uncle Phil on TV' in 1954, the technology was sufficiently accepted for the uncanniness to be put to comic effect.[377] In this tale of lower-middle-class internecine bickering, the Grigson family buy a television with the life-insurance money paid out when their unloved long-term house guest dies of a heart attack. As soon as they get the set home, however, they begin to see Uncle Phil in every programme they watch, at first just in the background, but eventually in close-up as he addresses them by name and accuses them of causing his death. The retributive haunting doesn't merely take advantage of the idea of television as a

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[375] Turing, 'Digital Computers Applied to Games', in Bowden, ed., *Faster than Thought*, p. 286.
[376] Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', p. 453.
[377] J. B. Priestley, 'Uncle Phil on TV', in *The Other Place and Other Stories of the Same Sort* (London: William Heinemann, 1954), pp. 70-102.

'medium' in the spiritualist sense; it implies a direct exchange between the aggravating uncle and the new set as a physical object dominating the room: 'Clearly there was a general feeling,' Priestley writes, 'that fate had been kind in exchanging Uncle Phil, whom nobody wanted, for this new wonder of the world.'[378] The joke is that the Grigsons haven't managed to get rid of Uncle Phil at all, and Priestley is keen to show that his haunting of the new technology arises from the similarity between him and it, as well as hinting at the medium's uncanny potential for surveillance. The Grigsons always disliked his 'determined refusal to leave the fireside even when they were entertaining friends, and hated to have him there watching them.'[379] His physical peculiarity, too, seems to be an omen of the stiffness of the televisual point of view:

> Some accident he'd had made him carry his head on one side, so that he always looked as if he was trying to see round a corner; and even this, to say nothing of the rest of him, got on their nerves.[380]

The accusatory presence of Uncle Phil may be a distant descendent of the all-seeing eye of Orwell's Big Brother, peering into the viewers' living space in order to find evidence of crime. Like Orwell, Priestley reverses the relationship between watcher and watched, but here the television acts more like a traditional haunted object than a mediating third space, its materiality offering a new 'body' for the aggrieved spirit of Uncle Phil. In this, Priestley was responding to a common complaint about the new technology: its intrusiveness into the spatial relationships of the family home. In 1949, *House and Garden* magazine published an article called 'Make Room for Television', which advocated putting the television near the fire 'where chairs are usually gathered' but warned 'Most of the day your set will sit lifeless in the room[…] As the cabinet is bulky and creates special problems of accommodation, its position shouldn't be obtrusive. Your room must be re-arranged for its new function.'[381]

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[378] Priestley, 'Uncle Phil on TV', p. 75.
[379] Priestley, 'Uncle Phil on TV', p. 72.
[380] Priestley, 'Uncle Phil on TV', pp. 72-3.
[381] Quoted in David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 305.

The less upmarket readers of the *Daily Mail Television Handbook* were treated to extensive advice about the best size of set for small rooms in flats, and the maximum number of viewers possible 'when an exceptional "high-spot" programme is announced':

> For a 9" tube receiver we can say five or six adults when seated and under comfortable conditions, plus several standing.
> For a 12" tube receiver, add two or three more, if space permits.
> For a 15" tube receiver, about the same as a 12" tube, plus a few in the back row who may be permitted to stand on chairs, etc.[382]

In 1947, a BBC audience researcher called R. J. E. Silvey had recorded a list of reasons why he would not buy a set if he did not already have one for his job; as well as poor picture quality, which meant that television quickly lost its novelty value when compared to cinema, he mentions 'by no means the least potent factor militating against television in my kind of home', namely 'the sheer palaver involved in having to watch it. It means putting the light out, moving the furniture around and settling down to give the programme undivided attention.'[383]

Mainly, though, he bemoans the lack of serious programmes for 'people like us' who 'just aren't Variety-minded'; his definition of 'my kind of home' includes clear class and intellectual judgements on the kind of home inhabited by people who might enjoy the programmes being broadcast. He was not alone in his dissatisfaction with the BBC's output, however. Readers of the *Sunday Pictorial* were also warned not to expect great things from a medium which had once seemed a threat to every other form of entertainment, but in reality had trouble keeping up with its rivals:

> Are the programmes bad?
> Yes. Transmission most days is only an hour in the afternoon and about two hours in the evening […] Afternoon programmes are mainly old American films. They are terrible […] Major sports promoters are bitterly opposed to television because they know attendances will suffer. Consequently most

[382] Coven, ed., *Daily Mail Television Handbook,* p. 46.
[383] *Sunday Pictorial*, 19 February 1949. Quoted in Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, p. 213.

> sportscasts are of amateur events […] Variety programmes are poor because the big combines put a television ban on their stars.[384]

In 1954, Priestley depicted the Grigsons anticipating the luxury of being fully and individually satisfied by what television has to offer: George Fleming, their son-in-law, sells it to them:

> What more d'you want? Gives you everything. Sport for me and Dad and Steve. Plays and games and all that for you women. Dancing and fashion shows too. Variety turns we'd all like. Serious stuff for Ernest.[385]

When they install their set, though, the reality is less ideal.

> Una turned it on, not having any trouble at all, and it began showing them a film that looked like an oldish cowboy film, which wasn't exactly their style, still it was wonderful having it in the sitting-room like that. The people were small and not always easy to see and their voices were loud enough for giants, which made it a bit confusing; but they watched it for quarter of an hour.[386]

Despite its poor performance as a source of entertainment, television makes great demands on the family's use of time and space:

> Joyce and Steve […] were in favour of what amounted to a continuous performance by the set. Dad and Ernest were dead against this idea, which they thought wasteful and silly. They wanted to make a sort of theatre of it, with everybody sitting in position a few minutes before the chosen programme was ready to start.[387]

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[384] Quoted in Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, p. 304.
[385] Priestley, 'Uncle Phil on TV', p. 74.
[386] Priestley, 'Uncle Phil on TV', p. 75.
[387] Priestley, 'Uncle Phil on TV', p. 77.

Like the readers of the *Daily Mail Handbook*, they are prepared to make the experience as communal as possible, calculating that they could 'manage a dozen' viewers 'if you brought up the old settee as a sort of dress circle.'[388] In the end, though, they opt to retain the privacy of their space, but they cannot avoid the intrusion of the set itself, which demands a complex programme of tuning and adjustment to keep it in proper working order.

Mid-century viewers pandered carefully to the needs of their sets. First they had to take into account the local topography in choosing and mounting their aerial, and then an engineer would be required to install the set and connect it to the network. Finally, they were responsible for undertaking a daily retune, as the *Daily Mail Handbook* explained:

> The BBC television Tuning Signal is radiated daily for about five minutes before each programme to enable viewers to adjust their Television receiver correctly in readiness for the start of the programme. For satisfactory reception it is important that the correct setting should be found.[389]

And once the set was in place, it tied the householders to their home in a quite emphatic way:

> All receivers will be zoned by manufacturers for use in conjunction with the particular transmitter nearest to the home of the purchaser and, bearing in mind that each transmission zone will have its own particular wavelength, it automatically follows that a receiver specifically tuned at the factory for the London area will not work in the Birmingham area, and vice versa.[390]

In this way conformity and social control were built into the very apparatus of television, and it was not long before anxiety about the loss of individuality began to shift from the medium to its message. In the same year that Priestley's story was published, Adorno, writing in America, delivered a powerful attack on the

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[388] Priestley, 'Uncle Phil on TV', p. 77.
[389] Coven, ed., *Daily Mail Television Handbook,* p. 22.
[390] Coven, ed., *Daily Mail Television Handbook,* p. 53.

standardizing influence of mass culture, as epitomized by television, which (like Orwell) he saw as a conduit of social brainwashing:

> Rigid institutionalization transforms modern mass culture into a medium of undreamed of psychological control. The repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance.[391]

The medium, he argues, creates its own generic context, which is the opposite of gothic in that it is designed to minimize shock and smooth out the violence of the subject's apprehension of the world. Adorno describes an entirely un-uncanny televisual landscape in which no psychic eructations could spring from any subterranean realm:

> Every spectator of a television mystery knows with absolute certainty how it is going to end. Tension is but superficially maintained and is unlikely to have a serious effect any more. On the contrary, the spectator feels on safe ground all the time. This longing for 'feeling on safe ground' – reflecting an infantile need for protection, rather than the desire for a thrill – is catered to.[392]

Like Orwell, he sees this bland cultural environment as inimical to individuality because it denies the possibility of internalization: 'inwardness, inner conflicts, and psychological ambivalence' give way to 'unproblematic, cliché-like characterization.'[393] This insistence on interiority may be at odds with the kind of quasi-mechanical ideas of consciousness which were emerging from scientific, psychoanalytical and philosophical innovations of the mid-century, but for Adorno culture was the essential mirror in which the subject could begin to see, not a perfect image of the whole self, but precisely the kind of non-identical mismatch between subject and object which would facilitate social and political rupture. Gilbert Ryle

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[391] Theodor Adorno, 'How to Look at Television', in *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge 2001), pp. 158-177 (p. 160).
[392] Adorno, 'How to Look at Television', p. 161.
[393] Adorno, 'How to Look at Television', p. 162.

had been Adorno's supervisor at Oxford University in 1935, while he worked on a dissertation which attempted a critique of the 'resigned, late bourgeois character of phenomenology'. [394] Adorno respected Husserl's thought as 'the final serious effort on the part of the bourgeois spirit to break out of its own world, the immanence of consciousness, the sphere of constitutive subjectivity' but only a dialectical reading such as his, he argued, could break down the false consciousness of phenomenology's bias towards all-encompassing rationality. It seems likely that Ryle's phenomenological argument against introspection would have been read by Adorno as part of this effort, but one of the key differences in their approach is their treatment of culture. Ryle saw fiction and history as proof that the behaviourist paradigm was sufficient to encompass consciousness; 'novelists, dramatists and biographers,' he wrote, 'had always been satisfied to exhibit people's motives, thoughts, perturbations and habits by describing their doings, sayings, and imaginings, their grimaces, gestures and tones of voice', and psychology should not 'suffer unnecessary qualms of anxiety' about 'describing the merely mechanical'.[395] For Adorno, the quality of culture and its approach to interiority were vital, and to be satisfied with mere descriptions of plausible human behaviour, such as were common in the bland output of television, was to harm society. For Adorno, the novelistic paradigm of the individual's struggle for autonomy may be essentially a 'middle-class "ontology"' but he sees its modern, mass-cultural iteration as 'increasingly authoritarian and at the same time hollow.'[396] He depicts the clichés of sitcoms and detective shows as a desperate attempt by the prevailing ideology to shore up the consistency and predictability of the population, since 'the more inarticulate and diffuse the audience of modern mass media seems to be, the more mass media tend to achieve their "integration"'. Thus, when 'the perennial middle-class conflict between individuality and society has been reduced to a dim memory, and the message is invariably that of identification with the status quo', then 'the less the message is really believed and the less it is in harmony with the actual existence of the spectators'.[397]

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[394] Letter to Max Horkheimer, quoted in Lorenz Jäger, *Adorno: A Political Biography*, trans. Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press 2004), p. 91.
[395] Ryle, p. 309.
[396] Adorno, 'How to Look at Television', p. 162.
[397] Adorno, 'How to Look at Television', pp. 163-4.

The position in America, where television uptake had not been interrupted by the war and it was already a commercial, multi-channel enterprise, was somewhat different to the beginning of the state-sponsored television age in Britain. In 1948, a *Times* leader had celebrated television as a medium that could be comfortably talked back to by a disobedient and recalcitrant audience. Reminiscing about the joys of silent cinema when 'if we shouted "Six to four the field!" as the sheriff and his posse galloped down a precipice […] we and our friends could be heard above the excitable tinkling of the piano', the writer mourns the noisiness of the talkies and dismisses the possibility of talking back to the radio as unfulfilling. But,

> Television is another matter. There the behaviour of the actors in a play often calls for those comments, ribald or otherwise, which we have to repress in the theatre. If the play is a good one the occasion does not arise; but if, as sometimes happens, it is less than good, implausibility and over-emphasis can be lampooned without anyone being the worse off.[398]

The BBC seems to have responded to accusations that its fare was bland or badly produced by raising the (gothic) stakes, until it was broadcasting such hard-hitting productions that Lord Morrison, among others, protested:

> Sir – How much longer is the British television service going to present Sunday evening plays of horror? For several months now these plays have been more and more morbid and brutal. Madmen, murders, shootings and stabbings, descriptions of eyes being gouged out, dead men arguing with each other […] Can someone please explain what useful purpose is served by these Sunday evening spectacles of brutality?[399]

Responding, the BBC's controller of television Norman Collins, wrote: 'Lord Morrison's letter is timely and, indeed, the corporation has received similar letters from certain of its viewers.' In his defence, he lists a number of upcoming productions, promising lighter fare:

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[398] 'Barracking Shadows', *The Times*, 29 December 1948, p. 5.
[399] 'Brutal Televised Plays', *The Times*, 21 March 1950, p. 7.

> The plays already scheduled include *Hobson's Choice*, with Mr Wilfred Pickles; *March Hare*, a comedy; *Promise of To-Morrow*, a new comedy specially written for television; a Shakespeare production for Shakespeare's birthday; *The Master Builder*, *Present Laughter*, *The Insect Play* and a Galsworthy revival.[400]

Clearly, Collins wanted to demonstrate a careful balance between the light entertainment of Wilfred Pickles and Noel Coward and the BBC's bid for serious cultural credentials via Ibsen and Shakespeare. The battle-lines were already being drawn up in the argument over the corporation's monopoly of broadcasting; a month later, the economist R. H. Coase launched a broadside in the form of a monograph, *British Broadcasting: A Study in Monopoly*, arguing that the lack of competition simultaneously gave the BBC too much power and weakened it through an ingrained institutional timidity.[401] In its review of Coase's book, the *Times Literary Supplement* agreed that, with the arrival of television, the nation's culture and economy were in equal danger:

> The glum may think we have invented a toy (like the hydrogen bomb) beyond our means. And perhaps without centralized control it may be impossible to recover the cost of the most costly technique of entertainment ever devised. Culturally, too, television may share something with the hydrogen bomb.[402]

As the 1950s progressed two landmark programmes showed that the BBC's willingness to screen 'evening plays of horror' on a Sunday had not abated. In 1953, *The Quatermass Experiment* featured a dematerialized life-form that floats through space until it encounters a pioneering space rocket from earth. This 'plankton of the ether' – perhaps a metaphor for television broadcasting itself – has no body of its own, being 'pure energy, without an organic structure'. Thus, it is able to penetrate the body of an astronaut, Victor Caroon, who returns to earth apparently physically

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[400] 'Televised Plays', *The Times*, 22 March 1950, p. 7.
[401] R. H. Coase, *British Broadcasting: A Study in Monopoly* (London: Longmans, for the London School of Economics, 1950).
[402] Review of R. H. Coase, *British Broadcasting: A Study in Monopoly*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 April 1950, p. 223.

normal, but gradually transforms into an alien thing, half man and half cactus.[403] The otherworldly life-form has turned the exploratory human subject into a kind of receiver for its remote-control signal, thus proving its technological superiority to Professor Quatermass's team of human scientists, who lost radio connection with the astronauts at the start of episode one. The ground control team tracking the missing rocket indeed resemble radar operators, or even neuroscientists, in their use of complex instruments whose outputs must be interpreted; they hunch intimately around sleek boxes and take readings from screens. But like Powell and Pressburger's Peter Carter, Carroon has detached himself from the earth in order to confront the enormity of space, and like Carter he crashes back into the domestic realm – in this case the cosy home of a harmless old lady – only to find himself drastically remediated by his journey, lost in translation after all.

Television's increasing interest in the gothic possibilities of its own technology came full circle a year later when the BBC broadcast a version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Adapted by Nigel Kneale, who had also written *Quatermass*, it caused such a sensation that five Conservative MPs tabled a House of Commons motion deploring 'the tendency evident in recent British Broadcasting Corporation television programmes, notably on Sunday evenings, to pander to sexual and sadistic tastes.' A countering amendment conversely deplored 'the tendency of honourable members to attack the courage and enterprise of the British Broadcasting Corporation' and another expressed thanks that 'freedom of the individual still permits viewers to switch off.' The *Times* leader-writer had no truck with anti-television sentiment:

> If anything had been needed to underline the tremendous possibilities of television, the reactions of the last few days have provided it. Orwell's novel has been in circulation for five years. It has been widely read and has made many thinking people uncomfortable […] [But] until last Sunday's broadcast it could be said that the impact of *Nineteen Eighty-four* on the British public had been only marginal. This is no longer the case. Despite their use hundreds of times in newspapers, in broadcasts and in other ways, such phrases as 'totalitarianism', 'brainwashing', 'dangerous thoughts', and the Communist

[403] Nigel Kneale, *The Quatermass Experiment* (BBC, 1953), script facsimile accompanying DVD, pp. 25-6.

> practice of making words stand on their heads have for millions of people suddenly taken on a new meaning.[404]

Television had won the argument. Orwell's gothic warning about its all-consuming media paradigm had not only been consumed by the medium's insatiable appetite for new content, it had been spat out again in remediated form, just as Adorno had described, rewritten to fit into the prevailing Cold War political agenda of the time.

Yet the mid-century's concern with the domestication of uncanny objects was not confined to technological novelties. In the next chapter, the domestic interior is invaded by objects from the past which bear such a clear imprint of past trauma that they can override the present. And whereas computers and television screens helped to initiate a new cultural understanding of the abstractions of the mind, the haunted furniture of works such as Marghanita Laski's *The Victorian Chaise Longue* began to redescribe the mid-century body.

[404] 'Nineteen Eighty-Four and all that', *The Times*, 16 December 1954, p. 9.

PART 2: INTIMACY

CHAPTER FOUR

Neophilia and nostalgia: The trouble with gentrification

Television was not the first uncanny object to disrupt private domestic space. Haunted furniture was an established feature of popular gothic from the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in stories which reflected the rise of suburbia and the new aspirations and mores it seemed to represent. It was no longer necessary for strange phenomena to manifest themselves in the ancestral homes of ancient families, as they had in Walpole, Radcliffe or Poe; nor were they necessarily expressions of a scientific or technological disquiet, as they were for Stevenson and later for Orwell. Instead, psychical disturbances – often female-gendered – might emerge out of the liminality of an upstart middle class who colonized developments thrust tactlessly into an older landscape in a way that reflected their occupants' attempt to bulldoze traditional social structures. This chapter will trace this strain of gothic to discover how it reflected and articulated the cultural turn of the mid-century, focusing in particular on two novels which straddle the divide between the prewar, modernist thing-world – in which subjects began to absorb and reflect the traces left by objects – and the postwar, liminal moment when objects began to stake out a more intimate claim on human subjectivity, opening the door for the consumerist ideology which was to define subsequent decades. Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948) will be brought into dialogue with Marghanita Laski's novella *The Victorian Chaise Longue* (1953) to show how both authors were interested in modern negotiations between lost, dazed and traumatized characters and the things with which they chose – or chose not – to surround themselves. First, though, it is worth considering the precursors of this mid-century domestic gothic in order to understand how it developed and expressed its moment.

It is Freud who first points out the uncanny frisson produced by the idea of haunted objects which might inhabit our most intimate spaces alongside us. Towards the end of his essay on 'The Uncanny' he mentions a tale published in *The Strand* magazine in 1917, which he read 'during the isolation of the Great War'.[405] He recalls:

[405] Freud, p. 151.

> a story about a young couple who move into a furnished flat in which there is a curiously shaped table with crocodiles carved into the wood. Towards evening the flat is regularly pervaded by an unbearable and highly characteristic smell, and in the dark the tenants stumble over things and fancy they see something indefinable gliding over the stairs. In short, one is led to surmise that, owing to the presence of this table, the house is haunted by ghostly crocodiles or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark, or something of that sort. It was a quite naive story, but its effect was extraordinarily uncanny.[406]

The tale Freud refers to – 'Inexplicable' by L. G. Moberly – conforms to the classic conventions of the haunted-furniture sub-genre, characterized by three essential elements: it features a young married couple making a home together; the source of its horror is a domestic object which acts as a conduit for emanations from another time and place; and its ghastly consequences arise from a conflict within the wife, who feels at once attracted to and repelled by an antique's heterotopian promise.[407] Unlike in the junkshop paradigm discussed in the previous chapter, the purchaser in this case is not necessarily warned off by a reluctant shopkeeper – instead, it is the wife's own reservations about the object that are ignored. In 'Inexplicable', the estate agent who shows a rental property to a house-hunting housewife goes out of his way to explain away the foul smell and the air of neglect attached to this 'solidly built, commodious-looking' house in 'the very unromantic suburb of Prillsbury'.[408] This dwelling is an unfurnished house, not a furnished flat as Freud remembers, and the young woman, May, is surprised that the ornate and beautifully crafted crocodile table has been left behind by a previous tenant and 'goes with the house', as the agent explains, 'as a fixture, or as lumber – whichever way one likes to look at it'.[409] May, who is the tale's narrator, immediately replies, 'I should prefer to look on it as a fixture' – indicating her preference for semantic certainty: she does not want the table to fall into the interstitial category of junk or lumber. Despite reacting

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[406] Freud, p. 151.
[407] For an analysis of how Freud's reference to this story elucidates the uncanniness of reading itself, see Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) pp. 133-141.
[408] L. G. Moberly, 'Inexplicable', in Jack Adrian, ed., *Strange Tales from the Strand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 183-196 (p. 181).
[409] Moberly, p. 185.

physically to the table on first sight – she 'shudder[s] and draw[s] away from it', and finds that a 'dimness' has 'temporarily descended upon [her] brain' – she is motivated by social aspiration which over-rules her doubts; she gladly takes possession of an object which offers, like the 'too good to be true' house, an opportunity to assume a grander air than she and her husband can quite afford.[410] The table's revenge takes the form of a sharp regression from the civility and gentility of May's aspirations: along with the stench and the terrifying shapes which slither around in the dark, its apparitions regularly trip up the unwary, especially when near the staircase and its symbolic potential for upward (or downward) mobility. Freud does not remark on these aspects of the story, and indeed declines to provide any detailed analysis of it, but he prefaces his account with some remarks 'of a general nature […] about animism and the superannuated working of our mental apparatus.' The uncanny effect, he writes,

> often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth.[411]

He remembers the example of the crocodile table because it features a carved image which comes to life – a figuration of an ancient force which jumps the threshold into reality and brings with it the repressed fear that rational modernity may be a fragile illusion. Given that this is a story about home-making, it is telling that Freud alerts us to the association of its uncanny effect with his own feelings of dislocation and homelessness by mentioning he read it while suffering from the shocks of war. Modernity wishes to assert its mastery of history by means of a style which breaks with the past: it must construct a homely sense of belonging entirely and unambiguously to its own contemporary moment, despite its constant awareness – as Walter Benjamin argued – of the piled wreckage of history which forms its context.[412] The residues of that wreckage, however – in the form of old objects that 'go with the house' – may force the repressed truth about time's mockery of modernity (and forward-looking social aspiration) back up and out into the

[410] Moberly, pp. 184-85.
[411] Freud, pp. 150-51.
[412] See Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 249.

consciousness of unwary couples who decide to move to a better neighbourhood. Throughout the story, May tries desperately to keep such thoughts repressed, doing all she can to dismiss the alarm of her servants and even her guests by desperately ascribing the strange phenomena they experience to an unseen and entirely blameless cat. Hugh's solution is more decisive: he acknowledges the table's ancient power and rids them of it through the primitive ritual of burning it. Even then, he is forced to concede that it may somehow persist. 'It's not a part of the house any more […] It's not a part of anything, except in so far as matter never dies, and the smoke is doing some useful turn elsewhere.'[413]

'Something awful will happen': 'The Haunted Mirror' and the murderous bourgeoisie

The nearness of things in daily use, which shape and mould human experience through intimate proximity, was the theme of several late 1940s and early 1950s attempts to encapsulate the mid-century transition between the shocking newness of wartime atomization and the hesitancy of a postwar recuperation seeking to balance nostalgia with a neophiliac appetite for the future. The idea that furniture and household goods might be haunted, either literally with a malevolent spirit, or metaphorically with the ghosts of lost certainties, was a powerful mythology.

One striking example is 'The Haunted Mirror', a short segment which forms part of Ealing Studios' 1945 portmanteau film *The Dead of Night* – a film more usually remembered for Alberto Cavalcanti's extended contribution 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy', in which the murderous rivalry between man and object is played out as a psychiatric crisis.[414] Directed by Robert Hamer, 'The Haunted Mirror' is no less interesting in its treatment of anxiety about the agency of inanimate objects. It concerns an affluent young couple and an antique looking-glass which, when brought home to their fashionably modern flat in Chelsea, insists on replaying an indelible recording of its gruesome past. Presented to her fiancé Peter by a young woman, Joan, this Chippendale antique is a trophy of shared taste, authenticity and luxury ('It's a beauty!' Peter exclaims. 'Very expensive,' she assures him.) But when Peter looks into the glass he sees, not the bright and

[413] Moberly, p. 195.
[414] *The Dead of Night*, dir. by Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Dearden, Robert Hamer (Ealing Studios, 1945).


Illustration removed to protect copyright

streamlined modern furniture of his own room, but a gothic, wood-panelled bedroom complete with elaborately carved four-poster and a roaring fire in the grate. And the scene is not just a passive imprint of the past: 'I feel as if that room were trying to claim me, to draw me in,' he tells Joan. 'If I cross that dividing line, something awful will happen!'

The decorative mirrors of the domestic interior serve a different function from the conceptual mirrors discussed in the previous chapter, which had been used by Lacan and others to elucidate the workings of consciousness. The haunted mirror in Hamer's film is not a metaphor but an active agent – it reflects the intimate and submerged story of Peter's long-dead precursor, and unleashes his own repressed antagonism to Joan. When she returns to the shop for more information about the troublesome mirror, she learns that it had been owned in 1836 by an invalid driven mad by being confined to a single room, who eventually killed his wife and himself. She returns to find Peter equally mad and apparently possessed by the mirror's former owner; when he attempts to strangle her, she can only break the spell by smashing the glass. This moment of symbolic fracture allows the couple to make a definitive break with the past and restores their pact with modernity. Their haunted mirror is a gothically malfunctioning example of the type described in Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects*, where mirrors are the sign of nineteenth-century interiority; they 'close off space, presuppose a wall, refer back to the centre of the room'.[415] '[T]he mirror is an opulent object which affords the self-indulgent bourgeois individual the opportunity to exercise his privilege,' he writes, 'to reproduce his own image and revel in his possessions.'[416] Peter's mirror does indulge the privilege of its bourgeois possessor, but only by reverting to the interiority of the nineteenth century and the man who looked into it then.

In Baudrillard's system, which he proposed in 1968, antiques (along with folkloric and exotic objects) are given a special status as exceptions to his general rule of modern domestic interiors. Contemporary interiors, in his scheme, are ideally filled with modular, mass-produced objects which lack the auratic power of uniqueness and inwardness with which artisan-produced items are endowed, but instead are able to act as shells for their possessor's postmodern identity, which is expressed dynamically within a system of relationships or 'moves in a game'.[417]

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[415] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, (London: Verso 1996), p. 21.
[416] Baudrillard, p. 21.
[417] Baudrillard, pp. 17-22.

Antiques, on the other hand, are 'marginal'; they 'fall outside the system we have been examining. They appear to run counter to the requirements of functional calculation, and answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism.'[418] An antique mirror, then, combines bourgeois self-indulgence and an inherent conflict with the dynamic selfhood required by modernity; in Hamer's film, the mirror's hold over Peter demonstrates the pull of an antiquated subjectivity which is – like the mirror's original owner – nevertheless an emasculated and murderously repressed version of manhood.

Baudrillard's ideal of rational modern furniture was in fact anticipated in the British utility furniture experiment which accompanied the rationing of household goods from 1942-52. Indeed, as Gordon Russell, who chaired the Utility Design Panel from 1943, wrote a decade later in *The Things We See: Furniture*, the utility movement was intended as a way to introduce modern ideas to wider society beyond the bourgeoisie:

> The interesting feature of the scheme was that there was a definite and conscious effort to grade up both design and general quality standards. […] There is no doubt that the British public has become accustomed to a better type of design than was common before the war. In fact, it is true to say that the later war-time utility designs would only have been available, had they been evolved before 1939, in the more expensive shops.[419]

At the time, however, the scheme had not gained universal support; in her memoir, Alix Meynell – an influential civil servant at the Board of Trade – recalls that it was the Board's president, Hugh Dalton, who had pushed it through:

> We officials argued at first that it would be going too far along the road to state control to limit the production of furniture entirely to approved Government designs but Dalton was right; his was the only way to avoid the waste of wood, which was largely imported, and of skilled labour, on unnecessary frills. We were very keen on 'clean lines and fitness for purpose'; claw feet, so often to be found in Victorian and Edwardian

[418] Baudrillard, p. 77.
[419] Gordon Russell, *The Things We See: Furniture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 50.

> furniture, was our symbol for all that we thought wasteful, *un*beautiful and to be avoided in utility furniture. We started with six main patterns ranging from the best and priciest made by Gordon Russell and usually sold through Heal's, to the everyday furniture mass-produced by Herman Lebus at his modern factory in Tottenham.[420]

Meynall later embraced the utility philosophy so enthusiastically that she personally instigated the production of 'white, undecorated, domestic crockery and handleless cups. I was unsympathetic to the suggestion that people would burn their fingers; it was a question, I said, of holding by the rim.'[421] Her insights suggest some of the reasons why people who were forced to scorch their fingers, and to buy the less expensive furniture from Tottenham, rejected utility as soon as the war was over. This was much to Russell's dismay, who accused the postwar furniture industry of 'indulg[ing] in an orgy of bad taste frequently accompanied, as bad taste so often is, by shoddy workmanship.'[422] In this context, the desirability of old objects, whose value and quality has stood the test of time, is understandable; but old objects tell their own stories, and may resist their new owners' attempts to recruit them as avatars of identity.

'Arrested energy': Immovable objects in Bowen's domestic gothic

Freud's early example of domestic gothic saw the hopes of aspirant modern youth successfully reasserted through Hugh's intervention, so that, by the end of the story, the rented house finally did express the couple's desired position in life, although for May 'it was many a long day before I could live down those weird experiences.'[423] As the century progressed, however, domestic anxiety developed in more complicated ways. Elizabeth Bowen's interest in domestic interiors and their ability to interpellate the human subject can be traced in the wartime stories collected in *The Demon Lover*. Writing a postscript in October 1944, Bowen looked back on the collection as a form of 'resistance writing' akin to the literature crossing the Channel

[420] Alix Meynell, *Public Servant, Private Woman* (London:Victor Gollancz, 1988), p. 212.
[421] Meynell, p. 216.
[422] Russell, p. 50.
[423] Moberly, p. 195.

from occupied France. 'Personal life here, too, put up its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it,' she wrote. 'To survive, not only physically, but spiritually, was essential.'[424] But Bowen was not interested in the preservation of a communal or national particularity: cultural artefacts were a reservoir of something emphatically personal. To understand this, she turned for an analogy to the material things that the dispossessed instinctively held close:

> Every writer during this time was aware of the personal cry of the individual. And he was aware of the passionate attachment of men and women to every object or image or place or love or fragment of memory with which his or her destiny seemed to be identified, and by which their destiny seemed to be assured.[425]

Bowen saw that individual self-expression had been curtailed, not just by the constraints on time and freedom imposed by the war, but by the very idea of communal effort and national emergency, which bound strangers to each other while severing the relationships between people and the things by which they were defined.

> You used to know what you were like from the things you liked, and chose. Now there was not what you liked, and you did not choose. Any little remaining choices and pleasures shot into new proportion and new value: people paid big money for little bunches of flowers.[426]

But while rationing and shortages of once-plentiful commodities clearly contributed to this sharp new emphasis on things, it was the nexus of intimate meaning projected into personal objects that interested Bowen as a writer. In the collection, her characters find themselves adrift in London's devastated cityscape, or tumble into a past – on a 'rising tide of hallucination' – that no longer offers the sunlit refuge of nostalgic certainty that it ought to promise. [427] And more often than not, the things they reach out for to anchor them reciprocate by reaching out,

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[424] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 220.
[425] Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 220.
[426] Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 219.
[427] Bowen, *The Demon Lover,* p. 218.

disturbingly, in their turn: in 'The Inherited Clock', a woman receives a valuable bequest which unlocks a buried memory of childhood trauma, in which her hand became enmeshed in the mechanism of the timepiece; in 'The Demon Lover', another woman returns to her shut-up London house 'to look for several things she wanted to take away'[428] but finds instead a ghostly message from her dead fiancé, threatening to reclaim her like a piece of lost property. Things are not what they used to be; they invite their human counterparts to look at them differently. Bowen writes of the 'new bare alert senses' that were sharpened by the darkness of the blackout, and of her stories as 'disjected snapshots' which isolate the particular, 'spotlighting faces or cutting out gestures'.[429] The chaos of fragmentation yields sharply refocused perceptions, and this enhanced vision reveals once-humble things to be as resonant as literary and cultural reaffirmations of identity, and just as urgently re-collected from their atomized fragments in the aftermath of disaster:

> People whose homes had been blown up went to infinite lengths to assemble bits of themselves – broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room – from the wreckage. In the same way, they assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems, from their memories, from one another's talk.[430]

These stories were written during the years when she was also composing *The Heat of the Day*; she describes them as 'acting like releases' for the pent-up thoughts which didn't find a place in that novel: 'Each time I sat down to write a story I opened a door; and the pressure against the other side of that door must have been very great, for things – ideas, images, emotions – came through with force and rapidity, sometimes violence.'[431]

What they share is a strong sense that London in wartime was a place where time had been frozen, but identities were in flux. The most strikingly gothic of the stories, 'Mysterious Kôr', describes London at night as 'the moon's capital', where 'the soaring new flats and the crouching old shops and houses looked equally brittle', and 'something […] immaterial seemed to threaten', so that 'people stayed

[428] Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 91.
[429] Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 223.
[430] Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 220
[431] Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 216.

indoors with a fervour that could be felt'.[432] Opening the collection, 'In the Square' describes a bright summer evening where the slanting sunlight 'was able to enter brilliantly at a point where three of the houses had been bombed away' and 'the extinct scene had the appearance of belonging to some ages ago.'[433] This is the story which seems most directly to be echoed in *The Heat of the Day*, with its central character of a woman living unencumbered by domestic niceties in a city populated by stripped-back survivalists.[434] In a summary that was published as part of the publicity for *The Heat of the Day*, Bowen described how the wartime distortion of time seeped into the private spaces of her protagonist, Stella Rodney:

> The possibility of there being no present, nothing more than a grinding-together of past and future, enters, at a point in the story, a woman's thought. Against that, there is the actuality of moments, and the power of a moment to protract itself and contain the world. All through *The Heat of the Day*, what might be drama runs into little pockets: this is a domestic novel. Within view of the reader there is no violent act. Persons hesitate or calculate; and at the same time are inseparable from history.[435]

Stella Rodney is a middle-aged widow who has used the opportunity of the war as an excuse to shake off the trappings of a social identity she was anyway forced to leave behind when her husband first left her in scandalous circumstances, and then abandoned her even more decisively by dying. Finding herself betrayed by the norms of domesticity, Stella has embraced the sense of ahistoricity which pervades the city; as Bowen writes, 'It was characteristic of that life in the moment and for the moment's sake that one knew people well without knowing much about them: vacuum as to future was offset by vacuum as to past; life-stories were shed as so much superfluous weight.'[436] Stella locates herself instead in a new 'habitat', the 'hermetic world'[437] of her affair with Robert, a stranger whom she met in the

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[432] Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 196.
[433] Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 9.
[434] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London: Vintage, 1998).
[435] Bowen, 'The Heat of the Day'. Publicity note, Harry Ransom Center archive, box 5 folio 5. Quoted in Allan Hepburn, 'Trials and Errors: The Heat of the Day and postwar culpability', in Kristen Bluemel, ed. *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, pp. 131-149 (pp. 133-34).
[436] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 95.
[437] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 90.

heterotopia of the blitz and who, two years later, has now been unmasked as a Nazi-sympathizing traitor by a blackmailer named Harrison. The fact that Harrison offers to keep Robert's treason a secret if Stella agrees to sleep with him contributes to her nightmarish sense of being trapped within the closed-off world she has herself been determined to construct. At the same time, the decisiveness of unspoken secrets attests to Bowen's sense of drama running into little pockets; the story hinges on the threatened return of repressed truths from these intimate and personal enfoldings.

Indeed, Stella's whole relationship with Robert has been conducted in an atmosphere of gothicism, having begun in the 'heady autumn of the first London air raids' when the dead refused to stay buried, [438] and 'the wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned':

> Most of all, the dead, from mortuaries, from under cataracts of rubble, made their anonymous presence – not as today's dead but as yesterday's living – felt through London. Uncounted, they continued to move in shoals through the city day, pervading everything to be seen or heard or felt with their torn-off senses, drawing on this tomorrow they had expected – for death cannot be so sudden as all that. Absent from the routine which had been life, they stamped upon that routine their absence.[439]

Like a ghost, Stella has also become untethered from her prewar routines, but she is determined to avoid stamping herself onto her new environment. The truth about her failed marriage – that she was the wronged party, despite taking the blame – has been put away along with her possessions, which she has placed into storage so that she can move into an anonymous – and, again, time-locked – furnished rental:

> Here in Weymouth Street she had the irritation of being surrounded by somebody else's irreproachable taste: the flat, redecorated in the last year of peace, still marked the point at which fashion in the matter had stood still – to those who were not to know this room was not her own it expressed her unexceptionably but wrongly.[440]

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[438] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 90.
[439] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, pp. 91-92.
[440] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, pp. 23-24.

This description of her flat not only establishes Stella's loss of faith in conventional constructs of selfhood, it also indicates that norms of female domesticity – represented here by fashion in home decoration – have been suspended while war rages in an unseen, external dimension. The blitz, already distant and sentimentalized in the middle years of the war, had created an illusion of communal purpose among the 'stayers-on', those 'campers in rooms of draughty dismantled houses or corners of fled-from flats'.[441] But by now this communal moment appeared 'apocryphal, more far away than peace. No planetary round was to bring that particular conjunction of life and death; that particular psychic London was to be gone for ever; more bombs would fall, but not on the same city. […] This was the lightless middle of the tunnel.'[442]

As in the *Demon Lover* stories, Bowen pays close attention to the other 'stayers-on': the objects which persist in time and seem to interrogate human agency, despite Stella's attempted rejection of them. Apart from the Weymouth Street flat, two sharply contrasted interiors reveal to Stella her own comparative weightlessness: the ancient house in Ireland, Mount Morris, which has been bequeathed to her son Roderick by a distant relative, and Holme Dene, the soulless late-Victorian manor house where Robert's mother and sister continue to live, despite it having been officially for sale for several years. Holme Dene's provisional status appals Stella, perhaps because it reveals the truth about her own relationship with the flat in Weymouth Street: 'How can they live, anyone live […] in a place that has for years been asking to be brought to an end?'; but Robert's reply suggests that his family considers objects and furniture to be mere props in an ongoing pretence of continuity:

> Oh, but there will always be somewhere else. […] Everything can be shifted, lock, stock and barrel. After all, everything was brought here from somewhere else, with the intention of being moved again – like touring scenery from theatre to theatre. Reassemble it anywhere: you get the same illusion.[443]

[441] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day,* p. 94.
[442] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 92.
[443] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 121.

It is at Holme Dene that Stella – already alerted to Robert's treason by Harrison – begins to understand that her lover is also adrift: 'She, like he, had come loose from her moorings; but while what she had left behind her dissolved behind her, what he had left behind him was not to be denied.'[444] Yet while Stella's family background of impoverished gentility gives her a sense of a fixed origin, even if she has no fixed position in the world, Robert's self-made, self-defining family offers no such armature of identity – an effect which is both suffocating and annihilating: 'Each time I come back again into it,' he says of his old bedroom, 'I'm hit in the face by the feeling that I don't exist – that I not only am not but never have been.'[445]

In contrast, Mount Morris emanates a sense of implacable permanence which also challenges its human inhabitants to confront their own dependence on, and vulnerability to, time. Its late owner, Cousin Francis, had responded to the weight of history by knitting himself into the material of the house, particularly in the library which he filled with objects which expressed his character (although not his wife's, who has been banished to an English asylum). Visiting Mount Morris not long after the funeral, Stella encounters the collection of meaningful junk gathered in the library, including

> colourless billiard balls, padlocks, thermometers, a dog collar, keyless key rings, a lily bulb, an ivory puzzle, a Shakespeare calendar for 1927, the cured but unmounted claw of a greater eagle, a Lincoln Imp knocker, an odd spur, lumps of quartz, a tangle of tipless tiny pencils on frayed silk cords…[446]

These objects immediately offer to resolve themselves into a pattern – the very fact that they are arrayed within a list makes their combination of the natural, the technological and the cultural tantalizingly suggestive. But in fact they are symbolic, not because they show signs of intentional curation by Francis, but because they have been curated by Bowen in order to testify to Francis's engagement with his domestic space, and to demonstrate Stella's surprising response to it. 'The room was without poetry if this could not be felt in the arrested energy of its nature – it was in here that Cousin Francis had had his being,' she notices.[447] When Stella later tells

[444] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 114.
[445] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 117.
[446] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 163.
[447] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 163.

Robert, 'It had not been possible to feel lonely among those feeling things,' she is admitting for the first time that she does feel lonely in her carefully anonymized London.[448] Freud located the uncanny in psychic symbols which sprang to life and demonstrated their own agency; Bowen finds a similar sense of agency in the objects, 'arrested' by death, which awaken with the shock of urgent symbols.

That Mount Morris, like all inanimate things, continues to exist beyond Francis's life-span gives it an uncanny quality which also infects Roderick when he visits the house. Roderick's presence in the novel has been intermittent – he is in the army and appears infrequently when on leave – but his assumption of his legacy is an important driving force in Bowen's narrative. He arrives in the dark and is stalked, not by ghosts of the past, but 'by the sound of his own footsteps over his own land'.[449] Taking possession of the master bedroom and laying his head 'on the old's man's pillow', he finds himself unable to sleep; he is haunted by thoughts of inheritance and succession, his possibly imminent death in battle, and the confounding persistence of the non-human: 'It was a matter of continuing – but what, what? As to that, there ought to be access to the mindless knowledge locked up in rocks, in the stayers-on.'[450]

By returning to the idea of 'stayers-on' which had first been applied to the Londoners who endured the blitz, Bowen brackets Roderick's belief in the wisdom of the ageless rocks with the reckless impermanence experienced by people like Stella in 1940. In the blitz, the stayers-on had identified themselves with the shattered fabric of the city, and had lost their own sense of integrity in the process; Roderick is just as wrong to expect the frozen timelessness of Mount Morris to model a right way of living. Rather, it is for Roderick to imprint his own way of living onto the place, as Francis had done. *The Heat of the Day* thus encapsulates a key stage of the mid-century turn in domestic gothic: objects do not necessarily have to infest houses with their fearful presence and trip up the assumptions of an aspiring bourgeoisie, as Freud's crocodile table did; in Bowen's world, it is the humans who are uncanny, not the things that furnish their houses. Merely by outliving their owners, things can turn human subjects into spectral presences, barely able to inhabit a space once the inanimate has laid claim it.

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[448] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 194.
[449] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 312.
[450] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, pp. 311-12.

Roderick's rebellion against this annihilation takes the form of lighting match after match in the darkness, asserting his freedom to use and destroy objects at will. The matches comfort him, not just with the light they bring, but because they are objects without any afterlife, fully consumed as soon as they have fulfilled their single function. Even so, as Hugh pointed out in 'Inexplicable', burnt wood may persist at some mysterious molecular level outside human perception. The next morning, Roderick wakes full of plans to mechanize and update the estate, but Bowen denies him any triumphant reassertion of his will, giving the last word to the dubious servant Donovan. Roderick's aspirations towards modernity may simply be a way to 'sink a terrible lot of money'.[451]

This late mention of capital serves to highlight how little importance money has had earlier in the narrative. Robert's treason, for instance, has not been achieved by bribery but by an ideological commitment to the brutal simplicity of fascism: as he puts it, 'I want the cackle cut.'[452] Within the novel's narrative logic, Robert's suicide seems to precipitate the end of the war: 'That day whose start in darkness covered Robert's fall or leap from the roof had not yet fully broken when news broke: the Allied landings in North Africa.'[453] After this, the postwar future begins to impinge on the hermetic existence of Stella, and is personified by the figure of Louie, a working-class girl whose search for love and meaning has been interwoven with Stella's, although the latter has barely been aware of Louie's existence. Like Roderick, Louie is young enough to invest in the future, and like him she is sure that spending money will enable her to assert her new identity. Having betrayed her soldier husband in a series of casual encounters with men, she has had a baby and faces potential disgrace. But when her husband is killed in action she is suddenly free to move out of London and assume the identity of a respectable war widow, 'an orderly mother' wheeling 'a still handsome second-hand pram'.[454] As the novel ends, she is 'progress[ing] gapingly along the windows of shopping streets. The baby's intention to survive put itself across her and taught her sense.'[455]

In 'Reimagining the Arts of War: Language & History in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* & Rose Macaulay's *The World my Wilderness*', Phyllis Lassner

[451] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 313.
[452] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 282.
[453] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 291.
[454] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 329.
[455] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 329.

argues that both novels are concerned with language, silence and lying, and express the negation of women's experience and utterance in war, and the necessity of self-invention in the face of this erasure.[456] However, this emphasis on language ignores the other, material side, of Louie's self-definition (and Stella's refusal of self-definition). The loss of identity concomitant with Stella's loss of possessions is the necessary precursor of the consumerism and massification which rushed in to fill this material vacuum after the war. Whereas, in *The World My Wilderness*, Barbary's attempt to conform to this consumerist imperative took the form of shoplifting and precipitated her literal and figurative fall, Louie is smoothly assimilated into the culture of retail desire by the social norms she has absorbed from the popular newspapers she avidly reads. For another novelist of the period, however, the postwar commodity had as much uncanny potential as the lost objects of the blitz: Marghanita Laski's 1953 novella *The Victorian Chaise Longue* demonstrates how the self-defining act of making a purchase can also bring to light the clashing temporalities of the human and the inanimate.

'True purposes': the thingly agenda of *The Victorian Chaise Longue*

In attempting to emulate forward-looking survivors like Louie, Laski's protagonist, Melanie Langdon, falls into the trap laid for her by a piece of haunted furniture, and finds herself stuck in an uncanny non-space and non-time. Louie had been guided by luck to her handsome second-hand pram, which she assertively 'learned to wheel, brake, tilt, even tow behind her'.[457] The smug and pampered young wife, Melanie, also wants to use her buying power as a way of repurposing old things, but she attempts a much more decisive intervention by disrupting the historical content of a stained Victorian couch, and unwittingly unleashes its past life into her own. Her junk-shop find is a time machine that absorbs her into itself and transports her into the past.

Unlike Bowen, whose gothicism runs into little pockets of the domestic, Laski playfully acknowledges the conventions of popular gothic in this story. The parallels

[456] Phyllis Lassner, 'Reimagining the arts of war: Language & History in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* & Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness*', in David Hershberg, ed., *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature: Literature and the Historical Process* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), pp. 30-38.
[457] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 329.

with ‘The Haunted Mirror’ are clear in the theme of an old object acting as a witness of, and irresistible portal to, the past; both also concern newlyweds and the negotiations between masculinity and femininity. *The Victorian Chaise Longue* also echoes the idea that confinement and illness imbue domestic objects with a concentrated form of congealed emotion and desire; at the start of the novel Melanie is recovering from a bout of tuberculosis, and for the first time is given permission by her doctor to move from her sickbed to the antique chaise longue in the drawing room, which she had bought just before she fell ill. This chaise turns out to carry a kind of curse; when she falls asleep on it she wakes up to find herself in 1864, where she is trapped inside the body of another sick, trapped young woman, Milly Baines. The overt political freight of the fable is a warning against any retreat from women’s hard-won modern independence: the passive and dreamy Melanie is forced to ‘remember’ the oppression suffered by the Millies of the previous century. Crucially, Laski chooses to draw this comparison in terms of the two domestic interiors and the objects that fill them: both spaces are described with a minuteness that reflects Melanie’s sense of enclosure and incarceration in both the 1950s and the 1860s, and tacitly connects the mid-century’s disgust at the congested thing-world of the Victorians with an ambivalence towards its own late-modernist tastes.

In fact, the chaise longue is a dubious object from the start, but not because it is old. On the contrary, Melanie and her husband Guy are very modern in their willingness to discover latent value in old objects which have fallen out of favour with the mainstream. They live in a Regency house in Islington, which was at the time a daring choice: such properties had been rejected by the previous generation, and the Langdons enjoy ‘the shocked incredulity of both sets of parents who had insisted that no one could live there, back of the railways, down by the canal, why it was no better than a slum’.[458] But the young couple have spotted that the area is on the cusp between romantic Bohemianism and middle-class respectability, and are

> able to point out that already an artist and architect had bought and reclaimed homes in this hidden forgotten Regency row […] and later two more homes had been reclaimed and converted, one by a young professor and the other by a senior Civil Servant […] leaving only one house still held firmly in

[458] Marghantita Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue* (London: Persephone, 1999), p. 9.

> working-class hands, the object of complicated plots hatched by the other owners on summer evenings.[459]

In short – although the term had not yet been coined – the Langdons are gentrifiers.

The word gentrification was first used by Ruth Glass in her 1964 introduction to a report by the Centre for Urban Studies entitled *London: Aspects of Change*, and Laski's description of the Langdons' hostile takeover of their canalside neighbourhood conforms exactly to Glass's disapproving characterization of this process:

> One by one, many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes – upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages, two rooms up and two down – have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences […] Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed.'[460]

The danger, Glass implies, is of a social Darwinism: 'London may quite soon be a city which illustrates the principle of the survival of the fittest – the financially fittest, who can still afford to work and live there'.[461]

By 1979, such gentrification was, in Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory*, a perfect illustration of his ideas about the dynamic of changing value, whereby material objects decline from being transient (currently valuable but subject to depreciation), to being rubbish (having reached maximum depreciation) but then, in some cases, can be plucked from the rubbish heap, re-appreciated, and placed in the category of 'durable', where they can stay forever, steadily accruing more value the older they get.[462]

Such 'durability' had, in prewar decades of the twentieth century, been ascribed only to those houses like Mount Morris in *The Heat of the Day* (or indeed

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[459] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 9.
[460] Ruth Glass, ed., *London: Aspects of Change, Centre for Urban Studies Report No 3,* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1964) p. xviii
[461] Glass, p. xx.
[462] Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) pp. 44-45.

Brideshead Castle) which were so far outside fashion that they would remain infinitely, and timelessly, valuable unless a final calamity befell them. By the time Laski was writing about the Langdons, however, a new kind of durability – re-understood as bourgeois desirability – was being ascribed to houses which had once been considered ruins or slums.

Like Laski, Thompson was to identify Islington as a primary case study, focusing on the streets and squares around Packington Street, near the Grand Union Canal, which were once prosperous, but were abandoned by the bourgeoisie who moved, like May and Hugh in 'Inexplicable', to the leafier suburbs now accessible by rail. He notes that this neighbourhood was once so dilapidated that when 'a winkle-stall-holder and her husband' were offered a four-storey Georgian house there, 'free, by their landlord, they refused to accept it.'[463]

The assumption that the working-class residents of a soon-to-be-desirable neighbourhood are simply unable to *perceive* the latent value in their surroundings is a conscience-salving elision of the truth (central to Glass's account) that they simply lack the wherewithal to pay for the renovations necessary to *realize* that value. In both Thompson and Laski, the gentrifiers congratulate themselves on their proper alignment of appearance and value, which they see as disturbingly asymmetric when the properties are in working-class hands. Their 'superior' vision restores a 'proper' order, just as the houses' external decorations are brought into harmony with each other, to form a robustly bourgeois mise-en-scène in which their owners can dramatize their supposedly quirky (but in fact rigidly codified) personal tastes. Thompson describes at length the contrast between the outward appearance of ungentrified properties ('the front doors are often unpainted […] sometimes the tenant has modernized his front door by flushing it with hardboard in which case it displays a rusty chromium-plated letterplate-cum-knocker made of pressed steel and a collection of assorted plastic bell pushes[…] the door number is often simply crudely painted on'[464] and the same house post-gentrification:

> Immaculately painted, Thames Green with orange front door complete with six fielded panels, brass dolphin knocker and huge brass letterplate to match. The leaded fanlight has been painstakingly repaired and, affixed to the

[463] Thompson, p. 42.
[464] Thompson, p. 42.

> brickwork at the side of the door, is a blue-and-white enamel number plate: a little touch of provincial France proclaiming that the owner drinks Hirondelle Vin Ordinarie with his Quiche Lorraine.[465]

Laski draws an intriguing distinction between house and front garden in describing the transformation of this public face, noting

> how much the houses had changed since the Langdons had first come there, two years ago. Then they had all looked alike, dirty brick and dirty paint and dirty lace curtains, and only the gardens were different, here a rockery and here a gnome and there some green-and-white miniature palings. Now the gardens were identical, each neatly paved with thick rectangular stones, and, set in each, spindly white-painted iron chairs and table, and it was the houses that had grown apart from their neighbours and changed, what with the grey front door and the turquoise, the shiny black and the consciously amusing light fumed-oak.[466]

Thompson goes on to peek into the carefully staged interior of such a reclaimed house – which he can do through the 'enormously enlarged basement window' – and notes that the bourgeois possessions combine new technology ('a two-bowl twin-drainer stainless steel sink with mixer taps and waste disposal unit') with a collection of gentrified junk-shop objects:

> We catch a glimpse of a stuffed pike in a bow-fronted glass case…. Some gilt letters in a bold type salvaged from a Victorian grocers' shop front, and a row of large blue jars with ground glass tops, similarly salvaged from an archaic chemist's and bearing in gold lettering the abbreviated names of assorted poisons.[467]

Such objects constitute a message that can be 'decoded' by the cognoscenti: 'Every feature, every lick of paint, once one has learned the language, [is] a clear statement proclaiming the presence of a frontier middle class.'

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[465] Thompson, p. 43.
[466] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, pp. 9-10
[467] Thompson, p. 43.

Not surprisingly, the pioneering Langdons were early exponents of this magpie trend:

> Antique-shops, or junk-shops, as they called them, were their common hobby. On Saturday mornings, dressed, so they believed, like people who haggled not from pleasure but because they must, they would leave the car well away out of sight, and wander up and down the Chalk Farm Road, the Portobello Road, St Christopher's Place, looking for the pretty sparkles that would embellish and cement the nest.[468]

On the day Melanie is diagnosed with tuberculosis, she has spent the morning indulging this hobby on her own, looking for an antique cradle for the unborn baby she is carrying. The cradle is key object for Melanie, just as the pram had been for Louie in *The Heat of the Day*. Motherhood serves a dual symbolic purpose for a bourgeois mid-century wife, re-establishing her domesticity in the wake of wartime disruption of gender roles, and at the same time looking forward to the future by establishing a new generation. Yet the unarguable newness of new life also brings with it the fear of superannuation, the shock of the idea that the moment of modernity may be passing on to those who are younger, and complicating the smooth progress of the generations with anxiety and tension. Whereas Louie's second-hand pram represents her aspiration to replicate as closely as possible the bourgeois version of 'orderly' motherhood to which she has no rightful claim, Melanie's quest for an antique cradle shows her reaching for a timeless aristocratic ideal, even if she has to purchase her own heirlooms instead of inheriting them. No mass-produced cot will do for Melanie: this object is to be a kind of vehicle, transporting her and her family into a fantasy of ease and privilege:

> She remembered the cradle of Napoleon's baby son, the King of Rome, that she had read of as a child, a cradle shaped like a boat with a gilded prow, and she imagined such a cradle standing on the needlework flowers of the rug before the drawing-room fire, rocked by her pretty foot to content the plump

[468] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 16.

> drowsy baby who sucked his thumb oblivious of the decorous sherry-drinking above his head.[469]

But this time the 'miracle fail[s]'. The cradle she finds in the Marylebone antique shop is 'Jacobean, dark carved oak and hopelessly unfashionable', and will, according to the shopkeeper 'probably go to America. There's quite a demand for them there, for keeping logs in, you know.' Melanie experiences a thrill at these words which emphasizes her belief in the essential, but amorphous, quality of authenticity which has the power to bestow value when perceived by the eye of the gentrifier: '"My cradle will have a baby in it," said Madeline proudly, and she enjoyed a moment of sympathetic superiority, the poor yet well-adjusted English who hadn't lost sight of true purposes.'[470]

The chaise longue's true purpose, though, is initially obscure. Melanie spots it 'stacked upside down on top of a pile of furniture, its clumsy legs threshing the air like an unclipped sheep that had tumbled onto its back'. She decides it looks 'rather exciting' but adds cautiously, 'Goodness knows what one would do with it.'[471] Laski evokes two images simultaneously in this first encounter with the upside-down chaise longue. The first is that of the immobilized sheep, symbol of a compromised natural order, protesting clumsily at the unseen force which has imposed this reversal on it – a clear indicator of how Melanie perceives the chaise, as an object in need of rescue; the second, at a deeper level, surely evokes Marx's famous commodity-table, which transforms from 'an ordinary, sensuous thing' into something with an uncanny independent agency, that 'stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will'[472] – an image of the problematically animated chaise as it turns out to be. The fact that the chaise has been reversed in space holds a clue to the reversal in time which turns out to be its main narrative and political purpose, but for Melanie, its inverted state makes it an icon of the process of gentrification itself, which turns back time, perceives value in rubbish, and remakes historicity as the prime signifier of a 'consciously amusing' modernity.

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[469] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 17.
[470] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 18.
[471] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 18.
[472] Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, trans Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin, 1990). pp163-4

The chaise tacitly evokes yet another image, too: that of Freud's couch, the symbol of psychoanalysis. Laski's emphasis on Melanie's fantasies and daydreams clearly signposts a Freudian subtext to the narrative. Like the cradle of Melanie's imagination, the chaise longue is to be a vehicle of desire, the embroidered berlinwork flower decoration on its felt echoing the 'needlework flowers of the rug' by which her dream-baby was to have slumbered obliviously. Yet the fantasy of motherhood falters when confronted by the problematic materiality of the object, with its 'brownish stain on the seat […] as if something had been carelessly spilt there':

> She tried to envisage the frail young mother in the floating clouds of negligee […] but the picture remained in unfelt words, and instead of it there was only her body's need to lie on the Victorian chaise-longue, that, and an overwhelming assurance, or was it a memory, of another body that painfully crushed hers into the berlin-wool.[473]

Here, the contrast between the stained *felt* of the upholstery and the *unfelt* words of the maternal fantasy with which Melanie is trying to comply suggests that codes of taste and behaviour can be confounded by the materials that are supposed to transport them into the real, which instead of bestowing gentility revert back to more primal needs.

To some extent, Melanie's problems with the cursed chaise longue can be attributed simply to a gentrification misfire. She has failed to follow the rules which demand that reclaimed objects must be appreciated at an amused distance, with the eye of irony. Instead, 'it was of love that Melanie had thought when she first saw the Victorian chaise-longue', Laski notes.[474] Even the junk-shop owner, perceiving her category-error – and conforming to the junkshop paradigm described in the previous chapter – tries to steer her away from the object of her desire. 'There isn't much demand for these late ones,' he warns. 'I've got a little Regency day-bed you might like.' Indeed, Melanie realizes that 'its Regency ancestor had probably been delicate and enchanting; this descendant was gross, and would certainly have been inadmissible in such a home as Guy's and Melanie's were it not for the singular

[473] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 19.
[474] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 15.

startling quality of the berlin-wool cross-stitch embroidery that sprawled in bright gigantic roses over the shabby felt, over the curved half-back and right from the top of the head-rest to the very end of the seat.'[475] Melanie and the dealer find themselves exchanging roles:

> '[The stain] hardly shows,' said Melanie, as if she were the salesman now. 'Have you got room for it?' he asked, he too accepting this reversal of roles, and discarding his proper duty of titillating and praising for the customer's part of hesitant withdrawal.[476]

The animated thrashing of the topsy-turvy chaise signals this unnatural reversal, and it also throws into the relief the deadness of Melanie's clotted bourgeois femininity, symbolized by the smothering layers of replica flowers and frozen cherubs which surround Melanie's sickbed. Tellingly, these are described at the very moment when she herself is turned into a kind of valuable domestic accessory by her physician, Dr Gregory, who advises her:

> 'We've got to go on exactly as we've been doing, no frolics, no excitement, the very utmost care and circumspection. You've got to treat yourself as if – ' his eyes roamed round the pretty bedroom, over the creamy silky paper on the walls, the shiny cream curtains printed with huge pink roses, the rosewood bedhead decked with cavorting French brasses, and then to the mirror on the lace-frilled dressing-table, rosy-flushed cherubs clambering in and out of wreaths of coloured posies, and there he found his analogy and ended, ' – as if you were a piece of Dresden china.'[477]

At this point Melanie's husband – an up-and-coming barrister – interrupts the consultation with a bizarre outburst in which he unpicks this simile in tones of 'mock – and yet not so mock – pomposity'. This is almost his only utterance in the whole novella, and it signifies the icy rigidity of his capitalist value structure:

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[475] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 13.
[476] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 19.
[477] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 3.

> ‘The use of the phrase Dresden china as a synonym for expensive fragility suggests that there were lamentable gaps in Britain’s nineteenth-century supremacy over world markets. And how strange that it should be the Germans, themselves almost synonymous with heaviness, clumsiness, everything that is the antithesis of the object of which we speak, who have provided the very phrase that leaps into your mind when you feel the need to warn Melanie that she must be the object of our incessant, our unremitting care –’ it needed a new breath, after all, to complete the sentence; Guy took it as unobtrusively as possible, and ended triumphantly, ‘ – as of her own.’[478]

The messy, female reality of motherhood has been edited out of this reading of Melanie: Gregory boasts that he and Guy have generously ‘presented [her] with a fine bouncing baby’[479] – a son she has hardly been allowed to see and who remains as hypothetical as the nursery she can only picture in plan-view, so that ‘she could never perfectly visualise the rooms and be sure how the nursing-chair looked in three dimensions but saw it always as a rectangular patch on a piece of paper with “nursing chair” in Sister’s writing inside it.’[480] Now the men deliver the infantilized Melanie into the cradle of the Victorian chaise-longue and stand ‘looking down on her in triumph’[481] like proud parents, or perhaps conquering cartographers – or indeed, like the British bomber pilots who pulverized Dresden during the war. In contrast to notions of male-sanctioned female delicacy, the chaise’s lumpen ugliness, its resistance to gentrification, is never in doubt. Doctor Gregory calls it ‘a monstrous thing’ and the fact that he finally decides that ‘those hideous roses’[482] may be just the thing for an invalid like Melanie can perhaps be explained by a confusion with the ‘pink roses’, ‘rosewood bedhead’ and ‘rosy-flushed cherubs’ of her bedroom.

But Laski’s narrative vehicle, the chaise longue, is not going to deliver the commodity fantasies of Guy, the infantilizing fantasies of Dr Gregory, nor even Melanie’s repressed libidinal desires: it is going to strike a blow at all three. Melanie drifts off to sleep ‘bathed in sweet soft air’, believing herself safely anchored in

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[478] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, pp. 4-5.
[479] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 6.
[480] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 10.
[481] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 20.
[482] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 20.

modernity as she enjoys the sight of bramble flowers in the 'bombed, still desolate waste' across the canal and listens to the 'soft continuous roar of traffic, the whine of the milkman's electric car'[483] and the muffled, reassuringly middle-class sound of a neighbour's daughter practising the oboe. But instead of being the threshold to an aspirational and fashionably reclaimed version of history, the chaise-longue transports Melanie's consciousness – permanently and fatally – into the body of a Victorian woman who is not only sliding rapidly down the social ladder, but is in the shameful position of being pregnant and unmarried and (Melanie somewhat belatedly realises) is at the very point of being viciously murdered by her sister.[484]

The ambiguous desirability of Laski's haunted chaise longue throws light on the problem Jean Baudrillard encountered in *The System of Objects*, into which antiques don't quite fit. In one example, he describes a magazine article about the restoration of an old ruined farmhouse, which involved replacing nearly everything except three wooden beams and two stone blocks. These remnants are vital to the owner-architect because they 'exculpate the whole enterprise from all the compromises struck by modernity with nature in order to make the place more comfortable.'[485] This temporal sleight of hand extends to the decorative objects within the house, including a warming pan which, it is claimed, is used for its original purpose in wintertime. 'If it is not used it will no longer be authentic, will become a mere cultural sign,' Baudrillard points out. 'If the warming-pan serves no purpose, it is merely a sign of wealth, and is thus of the order of *having*, of status, and not of the order of *being* […] The warming pan is therefore genuinely mythological; so, for that matter, is the whole house.'[486] Although he doesn't draw a clear distinction between the two categories, Baudrillard is explicating the difference between the mythological value of reclaimed junk and that of the valuable antique, which 'no longer has any practical application, its role being merely to signify.'[487] The antique which makes no claim to usefulness 'has a very specific function within the system, namely the signifying of time.'[488] The warming pan (or the cradle, or the chaise

[483] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, pp. 21-22.
[484] The text is not quite clear about whether Melanie dies at the end of the book: certainly Milly dies, but for Melanie 'at last there was nothing but darkness, and in the darkness the ecstasy, and after the ecstasy, death and life.' See p. 99.
[485] Baudrillard, p. 82.
[486] Baudrillard, p. 83.
[487] Baudrillard, p .77.
[488] Baudrillard, p. 77.

longue) in daily use enters the dynamic system of identity, and is of the order of being.

Laski's gentrifying couple specifically define themselves as junk-hunters rather than antique-worshippers. Melanie's ability to read the inscription of time in the historicity of junk relies on a highly contingent system of signification which attempts to fuse – dangerously, as it turns out – a modern assumption that the domestic objects she possesses are the infinitely adaptable vessels of her fluid identity, with ownership of a 'possessed' object which asserts its own auratic presence, and demands to tell its own story through its human possessor. Only belatedly does Melanie look beyond the chaise longue's mere oldness and into its history. Trapped inside Milly's ailing, shamefully fecund body, and about to experience the violent attack which accounts for the stain she tried to ignore in 1953, Melanie finds herself in a nightmare where authentic identity (Melanie's mind) can never be reconciled with external reality (Milly's body), and she loses the ability both to read narrative and to recount history. Milly's sister Adelaide constantly badgers her for information – the name of the baby's father – that she does not possess; yet her own twentieth-century story begins to recede in her mind so that she can no longer speak the words for modern concepts like aeroplanes:

> What did I say, she asked herself when the effort had been made, something about machines that fly, or was it aeronautic machines? Wireless, she screamed in her mind, television, penicillin, gramophone-records and vacuum-cleaners, but none of these words could be framed by her lips.[489]

Begging Adelaide to tell her about the chaise longue, she is subjected to a stream of family anecdote that she cannot comprehend because it is so at odds with her preconceptions ('she would never have bought the thing if she had known the kind of background it had, this vulgar tradesman's family, the reticences, the hints, Mother's legs and Chalk Farm and Clapham');[490] yet the acceptable nineteenth-century history she ought to know, and ought to be able to anchor herself with, also eludes her:

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[489] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 58.
[490] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 51.

> Instead of talking about these silly women and the weather and the bazaar, they should speak of Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale and – But what *should* they be talking about? she asked herself. What *did* happen in 1864? Not the Exhibition, of course, and the Crimea must be over. Is the Prince Consort dead? Who is the Prime Minister?[491]

Imprisoned within a synchronic anomaly, history itself has been switched off: 'I know what the Victorian age was like, of course I do, except that being here, it isn't like that at all. It's just like now.[492] Through the eyes of Milly Baines, Melanie is disabused of the charm and glamour with which she had invested her carefully chosen junk with value. She gazes at a typically overburdened Victorian overmantel full of 'so many small objects that she had only a confused impression of worthless trash'.[493] Looking at 'the conglomeration of crowded, tasteless, worthless objects […] the comment came that these were junk, what you'd see in a junk shop, a real junk-shop, jostled in an open tray on the pavement on Saturday morning, anything for half a crown.'[494]

But it's not just the chaise-longue's lower-class origins that imbue it with the power to misplace its incumbent in time; it is also its unfashionable date, since in the mid-century Victoriana in general was far from being reclaimed as fashionable. When Ralph Tubbs published his polemic of postwar modernization, *Living in Cities*, in 1942, Victorian design and architecture was precisely the bogey he wanted to vanquish: 'The overcrowded homes of the poor […] rapidly became worse,' he wrote of the nineteenth century. 'Speculators discovered a most profitable business in building potential slums for workers. The layout of the town had no relation to a properly ordered social life.'[495] Pictures accompanying this text show back-to-back terraces captioned 'Dreary houses', and a heavily frilled and cluttered interior which is captioned 'Homes were filled with meaningless decoration.'[496]

Gordon Russell's book *The Things We See: Furniture* took a similarly negative line: 'Some of [the Industrial Revolution's] worst features were unplanned, squalid, and filthy towns, poverty of a most degrading kind side by side with flaunted riches,

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[491] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 57.
[492] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 57.
[493] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 29.
[494] Laski, *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, p. 30.
[495] Ralph Tubbs, *Living in Cities* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1942), p. 16.
[496] Tubbs, p. 17.

and a kind of festering ugliness which spread over everything unchecked.'[497] He decries the age's pursuit of profit – 'the more money was made the uglier things became' – and its consequential reliance on inferior machine-made copies of once elegant furniture designs. For Russell, the ideal in furniture follows a modernist principle of form following function and a Loosian avoidance of ornament. As in the rest of the *Things We See* series, the mid-century is presented as an opportunity to cast off the past:

> It is worth noting that it is again in those things which had no ancestors, for instance the radio cabinet, that real advances in designing for machine production were made most rapidly. […] These skilled technicians – the engineers – have always been the guardians of precision workmanship and exceptional skill, and have never tolerated slapdash methods. Their whole training encourages them to calculate exactly in advance. Moreover, the engineer always has his eye on the future.'[498]

Barbara Jones, meanwhile, in her 1954 illustrated survey *English Furniture at a Glance* makes a distinction between the simplicity of ordinary Victorian furniture and the fussiness of its over-decorated iterations.[499] She separates the era into three phases, beginning with the Industrial Revolution, the 'exciting inspirations' of which were, she finds, largely ignored in favour of Puginesque gothic revival. 'A tendency to clutter began to make itself felt, for pretty oddments were within reach of many more people,' she admits, before brushing aside the knick-knacks because 'they are in any case not furniture.'[500] The mid-Victorian era precipitated by the Great Exhibition, she argues, has been unfairly coloured by the excesses of that spectacle:

> Clearly a giant penknife with 80 blades bore no closer relation to England in the 'fifties than the Test-match in butter at Wembley Exhibition bore to England in the 'twenties, but the impression is so strong that one's mental picture of mid-Victorian houses shows them crushed under giant sideboards,

[497] Russell, p. 29.
[498] Russell, p. 25.
[499] Barbara Jones, *English Furniture at a Glance* (London: Architectural Press, 1954)
[500] Jones, *English Furniture at a Glance*, p. 63.

> soaring state beds, drapery, fringes, gothic ornament, red plush curtains, marble statues and cases of stuffed frogs shaving each other.[501]

In reality, she argues, ordinary household furniture was generally modest, though it tended to be 'lumpish' and 'lacking […] the elegant starkness of the end of the eighteenth century', despite the occasional experiments of designers who 'had a nagging feeling that furniture should now be more exciting'.[502]

Melanie's erotic excitement at discovering her piece of Victorian junk can be understood if we read it through a Benjaminian lens, for fashion and death were never far from each other in the Paris's nineteenth-century arcades, coded as they were with subterranean meaning and haunted by cobwebby layers of stuff sloughed off during modernity's first stirrings.

> Here fashion has opened the business of dialectical exchange between woman and ware – between carnal pleasure and the corpse […] For fashion was never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver, provocation of death through the woman, the bitter colloquy with decay whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter. That is fashion. And that is why she changes so quickly; she titillates death and is already something different, something new, as he casts about to crush her.[503]

For Benjamin, newness was a kind of divination, with 'each season bring[ing], in its newest creations, various secret signals of things to come.'[504] But this kind of novel hermeneutics comes via the churn and return of history, not by uncritical nostalgia:

> Each time, what sets the tone is without doubt the newest, but only where it emerges in the medium of the oldest, the longest past, the most ingrained. This spectacle, the unique self-construction of the newest in the medium of what has been, is what makes for the true dialectical theatre of fashion.[505]

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[501] Jones, *English Furniture at a Glance*, p. 64.
[502] Jones, *English Furniture at a Glance*, p. 69.
[503] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 62-63.
[504] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 64.
[505] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 64.

The gentrification of old objects mimics this process of extracting the new from the old, but it scrambles the signals by creating a new vehicle for value without fashioning a new materiality to contain it. For Benjamin in pre-war Paris, the department store is the primary modern retail space and a direct descendent of the arcades in its dream-like interiority and its optical ability to focus desire. But in mid-century British culture, the department store is strangely absent, replaced by the nostalgic image of the old curiosity shop groaning with untold narratives and embedded in the mythology of what Angus Calder, in *The Myth of the Blitz*, calls Deep England.[506] A symbol of timelessness, the junk shop is also a vortex of retail fluidity, where value slips out of the grasp of economics – shopkeepers give warnings instead of sales pitches, yet shoppers feel an unbearable desire for something they don't want and shouldn't trust. The wartime breakdown of supply and demand brought on by rationing disrupted the eternal return of consumer society which Benjamin read in the ruins of the arcades. In its place came a desire not for novelty but authenticity, while reclaimed junk was arguably more desirable than priceless antiques because it bore witness not just to the past but to the new owner's excitingly modern eye. Indeed, junk's status as junk seems almost to guarantee authenticity, since no one bothers to fake a worthless throw-away. Nor is the retrieval of this authenticity quite the same as a straight retrieval of hidden value; it can magic up value in something – like the Victorian chaise longue – that wasn't worth much even when new. Like Aladdin's lamp, gentrified junk releases its uncanny power of wealth-creation and wish-fulfilment for the price of a quick clean-up. And by this logic, it follows that *haunted* junk is the most unambiguously and overwhelmingly genuine category of all. Its authenticity is so real, it's out to get you: it broadcasts its repressed narrative, and it inscribes its unhomeliness onto its new home: it consumes its reader instead of being passively consumed. Benjaminian 'aura' is weaponized; a deadly game-changer in the battle between people and things.

In the next chapter, things will acquire even more physical intimacy with the human subject, not just inhabiting and defining domestic spaces but, in the form of clothes, coming into close physical contact that describes and defines the human body. The uncanny garments of ritual and conquest which appeared in the mid-

[506] Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1992), pp. 182-83.

century created gothic disruptions in place and time, and the narratives told about them were threaded through with questions about power and resistance.

CHAPTER FIVE

Strange beauty: Costume, performance and power in 1953

In 1948, a student production called *The Masque of Hope* was presented to the future Queen Elizabeth when she visited University College, Oxford. Written by Nevill Coghill and devised and produced by Glynne Wickham, this specially commissioned piece referenced a dramatic form which flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it tackled contemporary concerns, celebrating nationalization and the NHS and featuring the abruptly contemporary figure of Black Market, alongside Fear, Gloom and Rumour, as one of the forces vanquished by the power of Hope, Joy, Liberty, Health and Labour. *The Masque of Hope* typified the mid-century's uneasy doubling of incompatible binaries: glorifying tradition while rejecting the past; revering monarchy while exalting in the breakdown of privilege; returning to old forms while improvising new content. Meanwhile, the production of *The Masque of Hope* materialized its ambiguous claim on modernity through its costumes: although the traditional characters wore highly decorated outfits based on traditional Jacobean designs, Black Market wore a bowler hat and bow tie; and many of the clothes were fashioned from the most contemporary of textiles, black-out material and sacking – the only fabrics which were not rationed at the time.

This tendency towards temporal hybridity was echoed five years later in a much grander production, the premiere of Benjamin Britten's opera *Gloriana*, which similarly played with early-modern forms and conventions, juxtaposing them provocatively with radically contemporary musical and thematic ideas. This chapter will trace the way performance and costume expressed this problematic attempt to reconcile the future and the past, as the very materiality of mid-century apparel began first to enable, and then to demand, new definitions of authenticity, class and national identity. These new definitions inform key cultural artifacts of the period, from Powell and Pressburger's 1948 fairy tale *The Red Shoes* and the 1951 Ealing Comedy *The Man in the White Suit* to *Gloriana* itself, as well as finding expression in the accoutrements of both the Coronation and the ascent of Everest in 1953. Considered together, these very different performances reveal a distinctively mid-century investment – literally a putting-on of clothes – in the power relationships and temporal duality inherent in significant garments.

The revivification of the past was a theme frequently brought into play in postwar discourse to offset the futuristic overtones of the prevailing rhetoric of recovery and progress. During the Festival of Britain, for instance, a resurgent interest in architectural modernism – which had been on hold during the war years – was tempered by incorporating updated elements of the traditional within the sleek Scandinavian-inspired pavilions – a compromise that came to be known as 'Festival style'.[507] Similarly, Humphrey Jennings's Festival film, *Family Portrait,* placed a determined emphasis on the survival of eternal British qualities even while urging its audience to embrace social and technological novelty; expressed in a series of voiceover paradoxes such as 'we adore innovations and love tradition', it defined the British character by its ability to combine the 'poetry' of imagination and symbolism with the 'prose' of science and progress.[508] Yet the very fact that this theme required constant reiteration suggests that it was not universally accepted as inevitable or desirable. This was apparent during Elizabeth's 1948 visit to Oxford at which *The Masque of Hope* was staged. This engagement was occasioned by the presentation to her of an honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree, after which she gave a speech praising the university as a place 'where the finest traditions of the past mingle so easily and unaffectedly with the march of events and of ideas':

> Here we can see, better perhaps than anywhere, that peculiar genius of the British people for blending the old and the new, without desecrating the one or blunting the ardour of the other, so that progress may be tempered with wisdom and tradition may be an object of respect rather than a cause of frustration.[509]

Frustration with tradition needed to be assuaged by devising a construct which could hold old and new in the correct balance. The ritual performance of the doctoral ceremony itself suggested performance as just such a construct, and gave Elizabeth a traditional stage from which to outline the standard idealized notion of past and future in harmony. Yet the masque at University College implicitly critiqued this

[507] For an account of the influence of Festival style, see for instance William Feaver, 'Festival Star' in Banham and Hillier, eds., *A Tonic to the Nation,* pp. 40-57.
[508] *Family Portrait*, dir. by Humphrey Jennings (Wessex Film Productions, 1950).
[509] 'Princess at Oxford', *The Times*, 26 May 1948, p. 4.

vision of transhistorical concord, not through its (inevitably somewhat anodyne) scripted sentiments, but by foregrounding the metonymic processes of its ironized, obsolete form. The past was presented as a set of trappings and conventions, antique accessories which carry no meaning other than oldness itself, disguising or costuming new ideas rather than nurturing them and bringing them into fruition. The future queen's position as another kind of ritualized object was likewise inscribed into the drama. By choreographing a stylized battle between allegorical figures in order to tell a modern story about social justice, Coghill not only co-opted the Golden Age mythology of Merrie England, he also recruited the future Queen as one of the allegorical performers. *The Masque of Hope* did not merely present a spectacle to the princess and her retinue, but transfigured the royal guests into actors in the drama. As *The Times* report noted:

> The Princess was received at the main gate of the college with a fanfare of trumpets and cheers. She took her place in a little pavilion flanked by chairs occupied by senior members of the University in the sunny, many-windowed quadrangle, and the masquers used their immemorial privilege of addressing their royal guest directly.[510]

By seating the princess prominently within the performance space of the 'many-windowed' Radcliffe Quad, and addressing her by name, the Masque invoked Elizabeth's own symbolic freight as a walking anachronism. The theatricality of the costumes, props and other trappings of performance which sustain the monarchy in the modern world were thus revealed, and she was implicated and incorporated into a moment which folded together three temporalities: the fictive time of drama, the progressive sweep of history and the contemporaneous moment of performance – in this case a unrepeatable occasional drama entirely reliant on the specificity of time and space for its meaning. The mid-century may have been a time of self-conscious aspiration for the future, but it was also a moment of anxiety about the fragility of past certainties – norms which might vanish if a sense of tradition and national identity was lost. The adoption of an early-modern dramatic form here reiterated the link between the two eras, yet the use of ritualized performance to express this

[510] 'First Royal Masque since 1636', *The Times*, 26 May 1948, p. 4.

insinuated a subtle critique of the processes of display, fictivity and artifice at work, not only in the theatrical celebration, but also in the reframing of the royal figurehead as a totemic object called upon to embody both antique changelessness and thrusting modernity.

'It's the Red Shoes that are running away': the uncanny power of costume

The same year that the future queen experienced her double performance in Oxford, she was also in the audience for a more intimate spectacle: a private screening of Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes*, attended by her parents and her sister Margaret and organized by Alexander Korda. In his memoir *A Life in Movies*, Powell relishes the effect the film had on its royal audience: '[Korda] told me they were all devastated by the ending of the picture, as they were intended to be, and thanked him with tears streaming down their faces for showing them "such a lovely – boohoo! – picture".'[511] The film takes its title from the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale about a vain and selfish girl whose red shoes are bewitched to punish her for her godless ways: they dance day and night and cannot be removed. Even when she asks a woodcutter to chop off her feet, the amputated shoes continue to dance and prevent her from going to church to repent. Finally a merciful angel arrives, bringing such grace that the girl's heart bursts with joy and she dies. In their very different version, Powell and Pressburger replace the tale's Christian morality with an aesthetic imperative, framing it around a conflict between art and reality which the film itself performs. Here, the bewitched shoes are not a punishment for vanity but become a symbol of the brutal sacrifices required by art; Moira Shearer plays a ballerina, Vicky, torn between the demands of her charismatic and demanding mentor Lermontov (Anton Walbrook) and the domestic role offered by her husband Julian (Marius Goreing). At the climax of the film, with both men demanding her absolute commitment to them, she runs from the theatre, wearing the red shoes, and leaps from a parapet onto a railway track to her death. On a psychological level, the explanation for this act is that she has committed suicide rather than choose between her two identities, but the film (and the source tale) strongly imply an uncanny

[511] Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies: An Autobiography* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) p. 651.

material intervention: Powell states in his memoir 'It isn't Vicky who's running away from the theatre, it's the Red Shoes that are running away with Vicky'.[512]

Indeed, the shoes' magical powers have already been established in the lavishly staged and expansively shot *Red Shoes* ballet which forms the film's centrepiece. Here, the shoes' demonic agenda is made explicit, although Andersen's Christian motivation is absent and the unnamed Girl, as danced by Vicky, is tormented by the shoes' demands simply because she has made the mistake of admiring them in a shop window. Their power is not limited to mere unstoppability either – from the point of view of the film, they appear able to subvert time and place: the ballet is ostensibly performed on an ordinary theatre stage, but the dance unfolds within a dreamlike, filmic space which extends and contracts according to the demands of the choreography rather than adhering to any realist constraints. The film thus foregrounds the artifice of staged performance, with the shoes acting as a focus for a prosthetic enhancement of reality and the ambiguous status of the actor/dancer's body. When Shearer puts them on her feet, she is called upon to represent a collection of nested identities: she is the ballerina Vicky as well as her various stage personas; she is the character of the Girl in the *Red Shoes* ballet, as played by Vicky as played by Shearer; and as far as the audience is concerned, she is also presenting the character of 'Moira Shearer', a newly minted film star in her first acting role, and thus another deliberately constructed identity. Clothes played a crucial part in this latter transition. Powell's memoir describes at length how Shearer reacted to her traumatic induction into the sartorial demands of her profession: she arrived on her first day already 'at the end of her tether. With our fittings and the ballet fittings and make-up tests, she had not had a second to herself for about three weeks.'[513] Her first day of filming began with Vicky's death-leap from the balcony:

> She is only in the air for about eight frames, but it is one of the most beautiful cuts in the film. By now the camera crew were her devotees. The whole sequence of her running out and dying on the track was completed by lunchtime. Moira spent the afternoon having fittings with Mme Jacques Fath and her dressmakers for the clothes in the film. Towards six o'clock she had

[512] Powell, pp. 650-51.
[513] Powell, p. 650.

> hysterics, went to bed and slept for twelve hours. Her career as a film star had begun.[514]

Powell's account suggests that Shearer's lengthy encounters with her new wardrobe were as exhausting and traumatic as the physically and emotionally demanding death-leap; by conflating the two, he implies that her 'hysterical' reaction is a much to do with the shocking redefinitive power of her new apparel as it is to do with stress or fatigue. It is the red shoes – the one constant feature which remains changeless throughout Vicky/Shearer's many transformations – that mark the body as the site of these multiple meanings. Yet, as gothic objects of the mid-century moment, these shoes also critique their own symbolism, calling into question the ritualistic power invested in costume.

Critics including Andrew Moor have commented that the role of Lermontov, as the demanding star-maker, echoes that of Powell himself, who is thus interpolating himself into the film's complex system of identity-doublings.[515] Lermontov often appears wearing sunglasses, and while this can be interpreted as a visual signifier of his shadowy nature, the glasses also signal a Powell-like vision which mediates the world through an aesthetic lens, and links Lermontov with the demonic optician in Powell and Pressburger's other ballet-film, *Tales of Hoffmann*.[516] Lermontov's quasi-supernatural ability to discern and develop raw talent in his dancers is also expressed in the screenplay through a sartorial metaphor: 'Not even the best magician in the world,' he says, 'can produce a rabbit from the hat if there isn't already a rabbit in the hat.' This debunking of the conjurer's trickery subtly problematizes the notion of the magic shoes as the implacable agents of the film's narrative: the hat appears to possess the magical power, but the audience knows it can only express the work of the magician who has carefully secreted the rabbit in its place. Likewise, the shoes appear to kill Vicky, but it is her own dual impulses, as artist and wife, that has done the preparatory work. Hat and rabbit, shoes and dancer form a dialectical image of the work of art as both the most intimate expression of

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[514] Powell, p. 653.
[515] See Andrew Moor, *Powell and Pressburger: A Cinema of Magic Spaces* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), p. 204.
[516] *Tales of Hoffmann*, dir. by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (The Archers and Vega Film Productions, 1951).

the agency of the artist, and the autonomy of the finished work which threatens her annihilation.

To the royal audience who wept their way through Korda's screening, Vicky's relationship with the costume and trappings of her public role might have had a particular resonance. In a key early scene, Vicky is invited to Lermontov's villa for what she thinks will be a party, and arrives dressed as a princess, in full-length evening gown complete with cloak and coronet. Instead of enjoying a social evening, she discovers that she is being recruited as the company's new prima ballerina and will have the lead in the *Red Shoes* ballet created specifically for her. Although her royal costume is inappropriate at the level of narrative realism, it is not, after all, a mistake: Vicky has been inducted into an artificial world, like royalty, in which her public identity – marked by theatrical spectacle and ritualized costume – attempts to obliterate her individual will and simultaneously implicates her in her own obliteration. Vicky – whose upper-class background is indicated in the film's first scene, when she is seen in a private box at the ballet – seems to have been stripped of the trappings of aristocratic finery when she enters Lermontov's ballet company and dons the practical workwear of the rehearsal room, but in reality she is merely exchanging one regime of symbolic apparel for another. Yet although she cannot escape this oppressive over-determination, the red shoes turn out to have unexpectedly subversive potential: they bring about a rift in the spectacle, first by shattering the hermetic space of the stage on which the ballet is supposedly performed, and then dragging its principle performer out of the theatre completely and flinging her to her death.

Jonathan Faiers' study *Dressing Dangerously: Dysfunctional Fashion in Film* identifies several categories of filmic garments which exceed the 'fundamentally recognized function of clothing to protect from the elements and preserve modesty' – clothes that 'manifest an excess of meaning' such as the *film noir* trench coat or the stained and torn costumes of melodrama.[517] Such 'objects of sartorial agency' establish a 'negative cinematic wardrobe', Faiers argues, which accesses directly the viewer's personal experiences with clothing, rupturing the narrative and 'interrogat[ing] the authority of mainstream film's ability to immerse the viewer

[517] Jonathan Faiers, *Dressing Dangerously: Dysfunctional Fashion in Film* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 6.


Illustration removed to protect copyright

within the film's action.'[518] He invokes Lacan's formulation of the term *suture* – as adopted by the film theorist Jean-Pierre Oudart – to describe the process by which a spectator is 'stitched' into the action of a film, and argues that the unstitched nature of dysfunctional garments creates 'an oscillation between our lived experience of clothing and the fantasy of cinematic clothing' that troubles this immersive suturing.[519]

In *The Red Shoes*, however, it is not the shoes themselves that come undone, but the woman wearing them; while Faiers sees sartorial dysfunctionality in terms of clothing that is lost or torn away from the body, the mythical red shoes are impossible to take off, even when cut from the legs with an axe. Their intimacy derives from the wearer's consenting decision to be enchanted and defined by them. The cinematic suturing achieved, according to Oudart's theory, by the montage effect of film's shot/reverse shot formulation is thus presented by the film as a warning against such tight fastening; the spectator is shown an image of her own destruction as she is all too firmly stitched into a spectacle initiated by Lermontov/Powell but followed through to its inhuman conclusion by the shoes' own thingly agenda.

'Clothes disappear'?: Libidinal transactions in *Corridor of Mirrors*

Terence Young's *Corridor of Mirrors* tells the story of a man, Paul Mangin (Eric Portman), who believes he is the reincarnation of a Borgia princeling and lives in a grand palazzo-style house somewhere near Regents Park.[520] When he meets Mifanwy (Edana Romney) in a nightclub, he is struck by her resemblance to a fifteenth-century portrait of the woman he believes betrayed and abandoned him in his previous life in Renaissance Italy. She in turn is seduced by his otherworldly charm and by the elaborate dressing-up games that they play in his corridor of

[518] Faiers, p. 6-7.
[519] Faiers, p. 7. Although mentioned in Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, the theory of the suture was elaborated in detail in Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)', *Screen* 18:4 (1977-78) [original French publication 1966]. See also Jean-Pierre Oudart, 'Cinema and Suture', *Screen* 18:4 (1977-78) [originally published in *Cahiers du cinema* 211 and 212 (April and May 1969)].
[520] *Corridor of Mirrors*, dir. by Terence Young (Apollo Films, 1948).

mirrored closets, all containing mannequins uncannily resembling her and wearing sumptuous gowns, robes, tiaras and jewellery that Paul has commissioned or collected over many years, apparently waiting to find the right woman to wear them. He begins to dictate every aspect of her appearance and behaviour and their sexless affair becomes more and more involving for Myfanwy until she discovers that another woman, Veronica, has been hidden in the house all the time, watching them. Veronica claims that, far from being unique, Myfanwy is merely one of a series of playthings and that Paul will soon tire of her. Myfanwy ends the affair and gets engaged to another man, choosing to break the news to Paul at an elaborate Renaissance-themed costume ball he is holding in her honour. The next day a woman, who had been drunk at the party, is found dead in Paul's house; he admits to murder and is duly hanged, and only later does Mifanwy discover that Veronica was the true killer and Paul was, after all, just a chivalrous eccentric with a penchant for old clothes.

The film has some interesting similarities to *The Red Shoes* in its fairytale overtones (this time it is Bluebeard that is evoked) and its makeover fantasy involving a man who wants complete control over his creation, and a woman who gradually cedes her autonomy as she comes under the spell of a fictional world and the very specific costume that goes with it. But whereas Vicky's personhood was to be abstracted and subsumed into Lermononov's artistic vision, Myfanwy's transformation is far more solidly material: at the very beginning of her affair with Paul she is alarmed by an image of herself as a faceless and sexless mannequin, but later she comes to accept this role, even describing herself as 'a wax doll – all head and shoulders'. The clothes, she implies, not only hide but have entirely replaced her body, so that sex becomes an impossibility; even her head and neck have been reduced to mere place-holders for a succession of accessories. This reification seems to be the primary intention of the libidinally repressed Paul, and it extends to himself, too, since he is also turned to wax; after his execution, his effigy is displayed in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's. Indeed, because the film is told in flashback while Myfanwy gazes at this simulacrum, the waxwork precedes the appearance of the living actor, who is introduced via a dissolve which blends wax and flesh into a single image.

Since Paul also dresses in antiquated garb, he is equally implicated in the negation of autonomous subjecthood into which he inducts Myfanwy, but it's also

his practice as a collector which brings him into dangerously close proximity to the object world. A collector has what Walter Benjamin called 'the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him, it is he who lives in them.'[521] The collector creates an artificial world in which he believes he can live freely, without reference to the rest of society; but this apparent liberty is a trap: he is consumed by his own collection. The film makes the hermetic isolationism of the collector explicit: the couple always stay inside the house when they are dressed up, because to go outside would break the spell; Paul's fatal crisis occurs when he makes the mistake of opening up their private world for a public party. Benjamin's collector experiences 'the most profound enchantment' of 'locking[…] individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them.'[522] But by finding Myfanwy, Paul is on the point of completing his collection and losing this acquisitive drive; he is thus destined to move definitively, via death, to the status of objecthood himself. In *The System of Objects* Baudrillard suggests that

> One cannot but wonder whether collections are in fact meant to be completed, whether lack does not play an essential part here […] If so, the presence of the final object of the collection would basically signify the death of the subject, whereas its absence would be what enables him merely to rehearse his death (and so exorcize it) by having an object represent it.[523]

Both Benjamin and Baudrillard emphasize that objects in a collection accrue value which is outside the system of mass-produced commodities: 'The purchasing done by a book collector has very little in common with that done by a student getting a text book,' Benjamin writes, and goes on to detail the thrill of auction bidding and the ways in which his own drive to collect has influenced his travels – 'How many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in the pursuit of books!'[524] But historical authenticity is not a necessary attribute for the clothes in *Corridor of Mirrors*, where the pseudo-sexual thrill of the chase is

[521] Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library', in *Illuminations*, pp. 61-69 (p. 69).
[522] Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library', p. 62.
[523] Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, p. 99.
[524] Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library', p. 64.

replaced by a painstakingly elaborate pastiche. In the original novel by Chris Massie, the collector, here called Douglas, has filled his wardrobes both with antiques and with replicas made to his own specifications because he has been unable to find sufficient original pieces:

> Have you ever thought, Mifanwy, how extraordinary it is that clothes disappear so quickly, as quickly as the fashions they illustrate? People preserve books and furniture from generation to generation, but clothes disappear. Have you ever wondered about that?[525]

In Young's film version, Paul is seen visiting a dressmaker to order clothes for Mifanwy, and there is less emphasis on his interest in genuine antiquities: he is presented as fabricating an elaborate fantasy around one true antique, the painting of the Renaissance woman whom Mifanwy uncannily resembles. The problem of which is the original – the portrait which Mifanwy is manipulated into impersonating, or Mifanwy herself as the painting's sitter, reborn – coalesces around clothing's negative dialectic and its libidinal transitionality: clothes must not be allowed to disappear in an act of intimate undressing. Mifanwy's costumes are commodities which both express and negate the fluidity, cyclical temporality and commodification of fashion, and at the same time they both stand in for and repress her desire for physical contact with Paul.

'Cheap material cannot please': sartorial status and human finery

During the year that *The Red Shoes* and *Corridor of Mirrors* were in development and production, art critic Quentin Bell published his own idiosyncratic account of the meaning of clothing in the mid-century, *On Human Finery*. While he was not concerned with theatrical costume as such, he analysed the mechanisms of sartorial display as a quasi-theatrical spectacle which had real effects on the human subject:

> Fashion for those who live within its empire is a force of tremendous and incalculable power. Fierce and at times ruthless in its operations, it governs

[525] Chris Massie, *Corridor of Mirrors* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), p. 46.

> our behaviour, informs our sexual appetites, colours our erotic imagination, makes possible but also distorts our conception of history and determines our aesthetic valuations.[526]

This complex of temporal, political and libidinal power is presented by Bell as something imposed onto wearers by their clothes and has serious consequences for their agency and status. Disorderly dress both denotes a loss of social status and implies moral degradation; 'so strong is the impulse of sartorial morality,' he writes, 'that it is difficult, in praising clothes, not to use adjectives such as "right", "good", "correct", "unimpeachable" or "faultless", which belong properly to the discussion of conduct while, in discussing moral shortcomings, we tend very naturally to fall into the language of dress and speak of a person's behaviour as being "shabby", "shoddy", "threadbare", "down at heel", "botched", or "slipshod".[527] Later, he draws a firm connection between sartorial morality and hierarchies of class and wealth – 'pecuniary standards of value', as he calls them.[528] Discussing the 'vulgarity' displayed in 'the ornate costume of the nouveau riche', he asserts:

> [A] certain minimal display of wealth is usually considered essential; no excellence of cut, hue, or design will serve to redeem the sin of poverty. A cheap material cannot please, only 'good' materials are permissible, and these must be expensively worked.[529]

As we will see later in this chapter, Bell was describing assumptions that were already being undermined by the invention of new materials and manufacturing techniques which would threaten such strictly enforced networks of value and meaning. Indeed, Bell himself saw these structures as irrational and in need of critical scrutiny: 'The study of clothes,' he points out in his introduction, 'is a study of monstrosities and absurdities. It is […] a borderline science important to the historian in that it exhibits in a pure form the pursuit of status, and particularly

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[526] Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery: The Classic Study of Fashion Through the Ages* (London: Allison & Busby, 1992), p. 62.
[527] Bell, p. 20.
[528] Bell, p. 153.
[529] Bell, p. 31.

interesting to the art historian in that here, if anywhere, we can trace a direct relationship between aesthetic and social feelings.'[530]

Bell's historical and sociological method includes tracing the history of what he terms 'sumptuosity' as a form of conspicuous consumption intended to signal status from the early modern period onwards. He is unconvinced by social or political influences on changing tastes; his explanation for the 'mechanism of fashion' is hydraulic: innovations adopted by the aristocracy eventually overflow and trickle down to the working classes, become 'vulgar', and fall out of fashion only to cycle back to the top in the form of another novelty. It is clothing which exists outside this system, such as military uniform and ceremonial regalia, which imparts lasting status; and it achieves this by referring back to a pre-modern time when apparel was rigidly codified and the trickle-down of fashion was outlawed:

> Until the emergence of modern capitalism every civilized country has enacted sumptuary laws for the preservation of class distinctions, morality, thrift and industry […] Nothing was spared in the effort to curb fashion, but the history of sumptuary laws is a history of dead letters. All that remains today […] is a kind of legal ghost: the regulations which still govern the dress of peers and peeresses when the Sovereign is being crowned.[531]

Taking place at the postwar turning-point of the century, then, the coronation of Elizabeth II crystallized the tension between timeless apparel and the flux of history. The ritual putting-on of clothes which conferred her status as monarch highlighted the dynamic process of meaning which took place when commoners, too, dressed dangerously.

'Dazed by ritual': Materializing excess at the Coronation

Maurizia Boscagli's recent post-Benjaminian analysis of the twentieth century's material turn, *Stuff Theory*, argues that clothes perform a dual function, both as a 'site of female spectacle' and as a 'mode of dissent against how subjects and objects

[530] Bell, p. 17.
[531] Bell, p. 23.

are supposed to relate'.[532] Clothes, she writes, 'partake of the duplicity of the talisman: as aesthetic objects they are charged with intimacy and thus occupy a potentially synaesthetic position in regard to the subject. Fetishistically invested, they *also* speak directly to, and of, desire and fantasy.'[533] According to Boscagli, consumer culture determines that 'the "use" of clothes is always unnatural, for it is contra use value, and is, instead, semiotic and libidinal'.[534] In certain instances, she argues, this dissonance creates 'rifts in the modern protocols of visuality, moments of break with the bourgeois systematization of subjectivity and materiality indexed by the spectacle itself.'[535] Such rifts occur when the wearers of clothes – and these are all women in Boscagli's deliberately gendered analysis – become conscious of this unnaturalness and perform it by misusing or subverting conventional dress. However, although she argues that 'the Spectacle increasingly intensifies during the twentieth century', and chooses literary examples from 1922 (The Nausicaa episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*) and 1983 (*Die Klavierspielerin* [*The Piano Teacher*] by Elfriede Jelenek), she passes over the mid-century hiatus in the commodity system and the rupture that this itself caused in the smooth workings of fashion's regime of gendered decoration and desire.[536] As the most spectacular female object of an all-pervasive cultural gaze, the queen at the moment of her Coronation raised questions about the agency and autonomy of the mid-century woman, in that her power and presence were explicitly symbolic, constructed from the royal trappings superimposed onto her body and carefully designed to promote themselves as objects in a fantasy of affluence, while preventing her from becoming an object of sexual desire. The Coronation gown, designed by Norman Hartnell and thickly embroidered with symbolic references to the Commonwealth countries, appeared to be a solid, impenetrable casing: 'When I first saw the dress on the stand at Hartnell's workroom,' one reporter confessed, 'I got the impression that it was made entirely of glass. Such is the effect of the thousands of seed pearls, each set in its equally small saucer of silver, which entirely cover the white satin bodice and skirt.'[537] Far from

[532] Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 82.
[533] Boscagli, p. 88
[534] Boscagli, p. 93.
[535] Boscagli, p. 91.
[536] Boscagli, pp. 107-08.
[537] 'Three girls made the queen's dream dress', *Daily Express*, 2 June 1953, p. 1.

subverting fashion, the royal personage retreated from it as much as possible and allowed her symbols to speak for her. The queen's metaphysical status depended on her invisibility as a woman.

During a coronation the crown – the traditional textbook exemplum of the trope of metonymy – implicates monarchy into the very mechanism of symbolic imagery; just as it condenses and concentrates the power of royalty within its own materiality, so it emphasizes the superstitious origins of the monarch's supernatural potency by foregrounding a totemic object. The material symbol of the crown also conforms to Freud's definition of the uncanny by summoning a superannuated (or even atavistic) cultural belief-system, and its autonomy and agency appear in the way it creates meaning and bestows it onto a human object. In Bill Brown's essay on trivia, 'The Tyranny of Things', he examines such royal regalia as a way of explicating 'the dialectic by which human subjects and inanimate objects may be said to constitute one another'.[538] Meaning within this system is always contingent, according to Brown – produced by the communal agreement of those who participate in the symbolism: 'Different subjects materialize the physical object world differently. And thus the appropriate analogy may be that the human subject must produce the material object no less than subjects must produce their king.'[539] Brown reads Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* as an examination of fetishization. In this fairy tale about sovereignty and symbolism, Prince Edward (son of Henry VIII) changes places with a poor boy called Tom, who happens to resemble him, and learns about the injustice and poverty blighting his kingdom. However, when he returns to the royal palace for his coronation, he is not recognized and can only prove his identity by producing the Royal Seal which he had hidden inside a suit of armour before he began his adventure. In Brown's reading, Tom, the imposter-prince – who has known all along where the Seal was but mistook it for a nutcracker – has bypassed the royal object's symbolic meaning in order to access its use value, while the coronation of the real prince is temporarily stalled by his inability to produce this repurposed, meaningless – and thus suddenly invisible – piece of ceremonial regalia.

> During the coronation crisis, the two boys and the court are locked in a moment of ritual without content. […] The 'trivial thing' that differentiates

[538] Bill Brown, 'The Tyranny of Things', p. 446.
[539] Brown, p. 457.

> the boys – that transforms their physical equality back into hierarchy – might thus be said to materialize the immaterial excess that differentiates a royal body from its brute physicality, the aura that is at once absent yet present: the royalty, phantasmatically transmitted by blood, that is in fact metaphysical, neither blood nor bone.[540]

Just as commodities congeal excess value in Marx's description of capitalism, so ritual objects congeal excess meaning within themselves, which is only released when subject and object fall into their correctly dialectical positions relative to one another.

In keeping with this understanding of symbolic value, the coronations of the twentieth century were larded with layers of new traditions. A monarch called upon to function as a symbol is best presented within a context replete with other symbols. As David Cannadine pointed out in his contribution to the essay collection *The Invention of Tradition*, the public performance of royal pageantry was not the ancient practice it purported to be, but was introduced with the coronation of Edward VII as a bulwark against social unrest and new democratic rights:

> In England, as elsewhere in Europe, the unprecedented developments in industry and in social relationships, and the massive expansion of the yellow press, made it both necessary and possible to present the monarch, in all the splendour of his ritual, in this essentially new way, as a symbol of consensus and continuity to which all might defer.[541]

Apart from the symbolic regalia worn and carried by the Queen herself, the trappings of other participants at the Coronation were also intended to materialize a differentiating excess; lengthy descriptions of the build-up to the ceremony dwelt at length on the excessively luxurious accoutrements of power:

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[540] Brown, p. 457

[541] David Cannadine, 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: the British monarchy and the "Invention of Tradition", c.1820-1977', in Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.101-164 (p. 133).

> In this roomy and lofty vestibule […] the robes and uniforms of many centuries began to assemble at 6am. The eye noted the Tudor anachronism of the Yeomen Warders and the axes carried by the Gentlemen-at-Arms which, on some Darwinian principle, have atrophied by disuse from weapons into glittering and tasselled ornaments; and then turned to the familiar red and blue and bearskins of the Queen's Company of the Grenadier Guards, who lined the walls.[542]

This anonymous *Times* correspondent wryly but tellingly emphasizes the superfluity of the layers of ornament here, which occlude the human beings inside them and turn them into so much wallpaper, even as they materialize their status; such atrophied anachronisms embody the same metaphysical surplus which imbues Elizabeth's crown and Twain's royal seal. And a later passage in the same report explicitly juxtaposes the use-value of a team of servants with the regalia of the leisured aristocracy:

> Two interludes which occurred just as tension was rising in anticipation of the arrival of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh were typical of the contrast between the formality and the informality of most of the scenes and moods in the annexe. First a party of women in white overalls moved briskly over the deep blue carpet with soft brushes, making great men do their will and move aside. Secondly, there was a stir of concern as it became apparent that a nobleman, with an indispensable part to play, had mislaid, or had mislaid for him, his coronet.[543]

Presented as comedy, these interludes in fact betray the fragility of the hierarchical distinctions supposedly marked by the white overalls and the coronet. The briskness of the women exposes the incompetence of the nobleman, who is not only incapable of looking after his own coronet, but depends on blundering – or recalcitrant? – servants who mislay it for him. Just as in *The Prince and the Pauper*, a missing token threatens the whole structure of the ceremony. Without the material symbol of the nobleman's phantasmatic potency, a revolutionary tide threatens to turn; the

[542] 'Informal scenes in the Annexe', *The Time*s, 3 June 1953, p. 6.
[543] 'Informal scenes in the Annexe', p. 6.

cleaners '[make] great men do their will', begging the question of who really has 'an indispensable part to play'. Like an actor in costume, the players in the ritual risk exposing the fetishization on which their double-identity depends, if they become separated from the clothes by which their role is instantiated.

The Coronation's presentation of a monarch as a mediated object, a symbol semantically fixed in a network of social and class tradition, is designed to emphasize and exalt her status and prestige. But in mid-century culture there was a strong countervailing assumption which resisted such inflexible systems of meaningful display. Just as, in Cannadine's words 'the archaic traditions of the Middle Ages were enlarged in their scope so as to include the modern splendour of a mighty [Victorian] empire,'[544] so, in 1953, the splendour of monarchy had been quietly reconfigured to conform to new empires which were seeking to serve and exploit the mass-market desires of an incipient generation of consumers.

The fantasy that sartorial power structures were unchanging was challenged by the new textiles and materials which were starting to reflect and enable postwar popular culture. The crowds who camped out in rain-lashed central London to catch a glimpse of the Coronation procession were likely to be sheltering under the new synthetic raincoats which heralded a mass-market aspiration for affordable utility. Lady Violet Bonham Carter noted in her diary the good humour of the crowds 'wrapped in soaked newspapers & plastic mackintoshes but burning with loyalty & full of good humour.'[545] But a newspaper correspondent reporting on the street-campers made a point of noting another coat's absence:

> The crowds, in which women predominated, were clearly uncertain whether to wear overcoats against the cold or mackintoshes against the wet. Some wore both: but the duffel coat, now de rigueur for so many occasions, was strangely absent.[546]

Duffel coats – introduced by the Royal Navy in World War I and reissued in their thousands to World War II servicemen – had flooded onto the army-surplus market

[544] Cannadine, p. 125.
[545] Mark Pottle, ed., *Daring to Hope: the Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter*, *1946-1969* (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 2000), p. 213
[546] 'Night Vigil in the Streets, *The Times*, 3 June 1953, p. 6.

in the postwar years, marketed by a glove and overall manufacturing company called Gloverall. By the mid-1950s this article of military uniform had become the uniform of a certain kind of non-conformist, having been adopted both by the dissident agitators of the left and by a certain type of no-nonsense urban creative. Hugh Casson's 1957 portrait of his friend and fellow Royal Academician Sir Robin Darwin depicts the artist wearing his own army-issue duffel coat with pride; Sylvia Townsend Warner's diary from the 1950s recalls a visit by the epicene scholar and translator Enid Starkie, who appeared wearing 'bright blue trousers, very baggy, a baggy scarlet duffel coat, a red beret, too large, and some bunches of red-gold hair.'[547] And the actress Sandra Caron, when offered a new mink coat by her sister, the singer Alma Cogan, chose instead the gift of a duffel coat because she wanted to look like 'a sort of beatnik'.[548]

Duffel coats, as salvaged objects, reactivate their historical surplus and transform one meaning (military utility) into another (the refusal of capitalist fashion). Plastic macs, in contrast, rely on and perpetuate the surplus value generated by capitalism. While the duffel coat is a heavy object, disguising the body and offering the illusion of uniformity, the plastic mac is flimsy and transparent, its cheapness suggesting that it should be taken lightly, thrown away and replaced by ever cheaper mass-produced versions of itself. The fashion correspondent of *The Times*, in 1955, summarized the appeal of the earliest plastic macs:

> Plastic raincoats which can be rolled up small and stuffed in pocket, handbag, or suitcase owed little to fashion when they were first introduced and everything to function. They were utterly unbecoming, but they served as convenient cocoons, dispensed with the need for a raincoat proper, and were cheap enough to be thrown away and replaced by a new one when the plastic began to tear away from the buttonholes and rain seeped through the stitching.[549]

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[547] Quoted in Claire Harman, ed., *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994).
[548] Carol Dyhouse, 'Skin Deep: The Fall of Fur', *History Today* 61:11 (November 2011) <http://www.historytoday.com/carol-dyhouse/skin-deep-fall-fur> [accessed 23 June 2015].
[549] 'Colourful outlook for rainy days', *The Times*, 17 October 1955, p. 11.

But while disposable synthetics were beginning to blur class distinctions among the middle classes, the position of commoners in relation to royalty remained carefully circumscribed in order to preserve the element of fetishization which characterized the coronation spectacle. For the royalist mainstream – whether fur-coated or plastic-macked – the Coronation not only situated the new queen within a sanctioned historical narrative of continuity blended with progress, it was a performance which carefully staged their response in order to assert the consensual nature of class hierarchy. Spectatorship at the event was precisely modulated according to status, with the aristocratic audience in Westminster Abbey co-opted as lavishly costumed extras in the drama, while the well-off bought tickets for grandstand seats along the procession route, leaving the masses to jostle for any vantage point they could lay claim to. A ticket-holder in the £30 seats – *Daily Express* columnist Eve Perrick – noted the strict dress code of the middle-class spectators, which was both aspirational and bathetically practical:

> We seemed to have, although it was all quite unofficial, a kind of regulation dress. No ermine, mind you, but nearly all the women wore mink. And in place of coronets the men had come prepared with little plastic cosies which they fitted over their light-weight trilby hats.[550]

Many non-ticket-holders found vantage points in the shopping districts of the West End. The royal route included Regents Street and Oxford Street, thus appropriating the resonance of spaces already imbued with acquisitive desire; the gold-and-glass carriage presented the new Queen like an expensively dressed mannequin in an ever-receding vitrine display or an inaccessible shop window. It's notable that Queen Sālote of Tonga briefly became a darling of the British press because she chose to brave the rain in an open-topped carriage, making her more accessible to the crowds than any of the home-grown dignitaries. It was popularity tinged with loss of status, however; Margaret Thatcher – who also had tickets for the stands and was protected from the elements – noted sniffily in her diary, 'The queen of Tonga never wore *that* dress again. Mine lived to see another day.'[551]

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[550] Eve Perrick, 'Eve Perrick had a £30 point of view – and still she got wet, cold and tired', *Daily Express*, 3 June 1953, p. 2.
[551] Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London: Harper Press, 1995), p. 78.

Meanwhile, for those not in London, the Coronation was a television event rather than a live spectacle. The *Daily Express* championed the new technology which not only caught a 'secret smile' from the Queen at the moment she was crowned, but also 'spread [it] across Britain into Europe and even behind the Iron Curtain into Berlin'.[552] Angus Wilson, writing in the *New Statesman*, described his experience as part of a communal television audience 'dazed by ritual' at a hotel in Essex. He was impressed by the way this experience broke down both his own 'innate Republicanism' and the 'Rotarian, have-the-next-one-on-me-old-boy jollity' of 'the saloon bar gang':

> It was fascinating to see them fight the strange beauty, the formal Byzantinism of the ceremony that appeared on screen. They were prepared, of course, for an occasional catch in the throat, a moment of lowered head, but the elaborate grace before them demanded less perfunctory reverence […] It was nice to see the 'gang' so put out when they least expected it.[553]

The phantasmagoria which so dazed the viewing public demonstrated the power of objects to produce metaphysical transformations, and because this phantasmagoria was itself mediated by the television screen it became even more uncannily powerful. Arguably, this moment summoned in the public a desire for objects which could perform a similar transformation on themselves – a desire never fulfilled by the eternal postponement of satisfaction offered by mass consumerism. Yet if the coronation promoted a consumerist motive force within society, it also provided its own critique in the way it turned the new queen into a spectacular ghost, an image on a screen, immaterial herself within the materialist spectacle of the occasion.

Wilson goes on to describe the way local communities answered this performative paradigm by staging their own productions and inserting themselves into networks of meaning more politically nuanced than the distant event in London: a historical pageant which mixed Tudor themes with Norman architecture and a

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[552] Robert Cannell, 'TV millions saw more than the Abbey peers', *Daily Express*, 3 June 1953, p. 2.
[553] Angus Wilson, 'There's nothing like a Coronation to test's one's scepticism, one's innate Republicanism', *New Statesman* (13 June 1953) <http://www.newstatesman.com/print/archive/2013/06/13-june-1953-theres-nothing-coronation-test-ones-scepticism-ones-innate-republicanis> [accessed 13 July 2013].

Victorian sensibility; a village sports day; a morris dance patronized by 'a large crowd contain[ing] a sprinkling of first-rate Osbert Lancaster intellectuals, including an old lady with grey earphones, purple ribbons round her hair and throat, a purple cloak, and a flatly benign expression that smiled at once upon a Co-operative Guild future and a Maypole past.' His piece ends with a description of a dinner at which the guests recount their experiences as performers at another pageant, in Toppesfield.

> I was told the hostess had been a great success as Roxana; another guest told me he had been playing Wamba the Jester, while a lady who arrived late explained how exhausted she was "what with the rehearsal of Benjie's opera and playing Katharine Howard".

The mention of Daniel Dafoe's *Roxana* and Raleigh's *Ivanhoe* suggest that this pageant had high cultural ambitions, but the throwaway reference to Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana* – and the fact that Wilson does not elaborate further on it – is indicative of the ambivalent response that particular dramatic spectacle provoked in Coronation year.

'As crooked as her carcase': the failure of royal glamour in *Gloriana*

Britten's contribution to the royal moment was not intended to elicit either a perfunctory catch in the throat or an upsurge of spontaneous royalism in otherwise Republican spectators; it was, in the words of librettist William Plomer, 'an original opera with a serious theme'.[554] The project had first been suggested by Lord Harewood, the Queen's cousin, in 1952, and he was instrumental in choosing the theme of the reign of Elizabeth I, suggesting Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth & Essex: A Tragic History* as source material.[555] But it was Britten who decided to frame this portrait of an elderly monarch, whose royal dignity is threatened by foolish infatuation, in terms of the material trappings of the queen's constructed identity and status, and her vulnerability to human failings without them. The opera presents the

[554] William Plomer 'Let's Crab an Opera', in *Electric Delights* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), pp. 180-85 (p. 180).
[555] See Peter F. Alexander, 'The Process of Composition of the Libretto of Britten's Gloriana', *Music & Letters*, 67:2 (April 1986), 147-158 (p. 150); Lytton Strachey, *Elizabeth & Essex: A Tragic History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930).

first Elizabeth as holding two incompatible identities in an uneasy balance: first she is the impermeable Renaissance monarch whose totemic glamour and rich apparel are worn as a carapace while plots, politics and intrigue swirl around her; then she is a vulnerable private woman in love with a man, Essex, who only professes to return her affection in the hope that he will gain preferment and influence. Six days after Elizabeth II had performed her role in the drama of the Coronation, the new queen was now once again in the audience instead of on the stage, but just as she had been literally hailed by the players in *The Masque of Hope* while still a princess, now she was being hailed symbolically by an opera which all too openly sought to suture her into the spectacle of the symbolically and physically divested monarch on the stage. The numerous brickbats hurled at the opera after the premiere arose partly from the sense that the living queen in the audience had been stripped bare by the treatment of her namesake – as indeed, metaphorically, she had been. Lord Drogheda, who was to become chairman of the Royal Opera House five years later, described the gala in his autobiography:

> Long remembered it was, but as a fiasco [...] *Gloriana* was quite long, the evening was warm, the intervals seemed endless, stick-up collars grew limp, and well before the end a restlessness set in. 'Boriana' was on everyone's lips. Most distressing was that in one scene the elderly Queen Elizabeth I removed her wig from her head and was revealed as almost bald: and this was taken, for no good reason at all, as being in bad taste.[556]

The scene in question – Act 2 Scene 1 – depicts the return of the Earl of Essex from his campaign in Ireland, where he has failed to defeat the rebellious Tyrone. Despite the protests of the Queen's ladies in waiting, he insists on pushing through into her private chamber for an audience. As the stage directions put it:

> He steps forward and sweeps the curtain back, disclosing the Queen seated at her dressing-table, wearing an old, plain dressing-gown […] Her red-gold wig is on a stand before her, among the paraphernalia of her toilet. She has a

[556] Charles Moore, 11th Earl of Drogheda, *Double Harness* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1976), pp. 239-40.

> looking glass in her hand […] Wisps of grey hair hanging round the Queen's face make her look old, pathetic and vulnerable.[557]

The visual effect of the shabby, de-wigged queen was striking. Like Essex, Britten had broken the first rule of a constitutional monarchy; in Walter Bagehot's phrase, he had 'let in daylight upon magic.'[558] And Britten, like Essex, was punished for it.

William Plomer responded to the bad reviews by attacking the opera's critics as envious mediocrities, whom he characterized as 'philistine and puritan art-saboteurs, iconoclasts and ignoramuses, and those who fear and hate anything which does not flatter their prejudices and pander to their appetites.'[559] He went on to dismiss the original gala audience as a group of shallow socialites, excessively interested in clothes and finery:

> An unmusical audience, consisting largely of important persons […] who were there for official or social reasons or out of loyalty and courtesy to the Queen […] Were these chatterers interested in anything beyond a plenteous twinkling of tiaras and recognizable wearers of stars and ribbons in the auditorium?[560]

Plomer's description suggests that the relationship between stage and auditorium was reversed at the opera's premiere: the audience themselves, with the Queen as their diva, sought both to provide and to consume a shallow and primarily sartorial spectacle, while, for Plomer, the players on the stage represented a more authentic version of reality. Indeed, he and Britten had been determined 'to shun anything that might smack of Wardour Street, Merrie England, Good Queen Bess, or the half-baked half-timbering of debased twentieth-century "Tudor" stylings', and had thus left an opening for a rival, crowd-pleasing phantasmagoria to be staged in the stalls and boxes. [561] But the idea that the lèse-majesté of the dressing-room scene was

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[557] Benjamin Britten, *Opera Guide 24: Peter Grimes/Gloriana* (London: John Calder, 1983), p. 118.
[558] Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1867), p. 86.
[559] Plomer, p. 181.
[560] Plomer, pp. 181-2.
[561] Plomer, p. 182.

merely a by-product of aesthetic high-mindedness, with composer and librettist too wrapped up in the purity of their art to consider protocol, is unconvincing given the brazenness of the irreverence.

In fact, clothing is central to the opera's commentary on the ceremonial fictions of the coronation it celebrated, and the second half of *Gloriana* plays out the rapid decline in Elizabeth's power explicitly through images of performance and costume. While Act 1 shows the queen in full control of her royal glamour, and determined to quell her love for Essex in order to 'die in honour, / Leave a refulgent crown!', Act 2 begins the unravelling of her carefully constructed persona.[562] The act opens with a masque in her honour – a crowd-pleasing interlude which nevertheless impedes the main narratives of love, ambition and duty and forces the Queen into a ritual role at a time when action is called for. At least one contemporary critic, John W. Klein, considered this supposedly meaningless digression a bigger mistake than any potential insult to queenly dignity later in the opera:

> [Britten] devotes practically one whole scene (which is almost entirely irrelevant) to pageantry. This was obviously necessitated by the exigencies of the festive occasion, but inevitably – from a purely dramatic point of view – it tends to weaken his work.[563]

Arguably though, this play-within-a-play reflects the events of 1953 somewhat pointedly. Like *The Masque of Hope* in 1948, it places the new queen into the heart of the drama by showing her proxy as a captive audience co-opted into a role within the spectacle, forced to sit and listen appreciatively to what Essex, in an aside, calls 'Tedious orations/ Dotards on their knees – / I for one could yawn myself to death.'[564] While the stage Elizabeth is hemmed in by duty, trapped inside an empty piece of theatre, her courtiers, including Essex, plot to take control of the kingdom, and it's from this position of weakness that Elizabeth takes the drastic step – in scene 3 of Act 2 – of humiliating her romantic rival, Lady Essex, for choosing the wrong dress for a dance. In this scene, Lady Essex has entered wearing a particularly fine

[562] Britten, *Gloriana*, p. 111.
[563] John W. Klein, 'Some Reflections on Gloriana, *Tempo* 29 (Autumn 1953), 16-21 (p. 17).
[564] Britten, *Gloriana*, p. 112.

gown in an attempt to persuade the gathered nobles of Essex's high status. But Elizabeth is furious at being outshone, and rather than fall back on the laws of sumptuary which (as Bell pointed out) specifically outlawed this kind of threat to her status, like a petulant child she plays a prank on her rival. When the ladies retire to 'change their linen' after a vigorous dance, Elizabeth steals the gown in question; the stage directions describe how 'the Queen suddenly returns, unheralded and unattended, and wearing Lady Essex's missing dress. It is much too short for her, and she looks grotesque.'[565] She taunts Lady Essex:

> Too short, is it not?
> And becometh me ill?
> […]
> If, being too short,
> It becometh not me
> I have it in mind
> It can ne'er become thee
> As being too gaudy!
> So choose another![566]

These bullying tactics do not strengthen the Queen's position; the conspirators agree that this is 'what comes of being ruled / By a king in a farthingale' and Essex's indignation leaves us in no doubt that his previous protestations of love for the Queen have been merely tactical when he exclaims 'Conditions! Conditions! / Her conditions are as crooked as her carcase!'[567]

The incident with the dress was very important to Britten. He borrowed it, almost word for word, from an unrelated scene in Strachey's book, in which the owner of the dress was Lady Mary Howard;[568] by transferring it to Lady Essex, and making it a crucial narrative turning point, he loaded it with political significance. Correspondence in the Britten archive shows that Plomer had wanted to have Lady Essex parade in the dress during an earlier scene in a private garden, but Britten

[565] Britten, *Gloriana*, p. 116.
[566] Britten, *Gloriana*, p. 118.
[567] Britten, *Gloriana*, p. 117.
[568] See Strachey, *Elizabeth & Essex*, p. 163.

insisted the incident be moved into the dance at court.[569] It seems likely that Britten wanted the dress incident to be concentrated in a scene of public power and status because he was making a point about how power is produced by costume. And the scene works in another way; along with the dressing-room scene which follows after the interval, it separates the actors on stage from their costumes, and places the material object centre-stage.

In her work on theatrical costume, Aoife Monks has argued that 'Costume is that which is perceptually indistinct from the actor's body, and yet something that can be removed. Costume is a body that can be taken off.'[570] Traditionally, audiences have been encouraged to see costume 'simply as the clothes of the character'[571] and thus 'inextricable from our engagement with the illusion on stage.'[572] But, just as Bill Brown's Things become visible when they malfunction or get in the way, 'sometimes costume remains stubbornly in view *as* costume, refusing to be meaningful, or exerting a power beyond its role in the fictional event.'[573] In *Gloriana*, this break-down in the totalizing illusion of theatre is given a further twist when Elizabeth's removable clothes are redefined as pieces of costume in royalty's ongoing theatrical performance, thus revealing not only that the actor is playing a character, but that that character is in turn an actor herself, playing a further character in another level of fictivity. Just as in *The Red Shoes*, this creates nested layers of identity, but whereas in Powell and Pressburger's film it is the impossibility of removing the shoes that contributes to their uncanny agency, in *Gloriana* the queen's ritual trappings repeatedly slip away from her and threaten to reveal the private self which might come unstitched from her royal status.

Heather Wiebe has argued that the dewigging of the Queen in the third act 'unveiled an uglier reality behind the Coronation's carefully produced fantasy of the Elizabethan era':

> The opera's peculiar darkness speaks to an ambivalence within the Coronation celebrations about the structures of British – or, to be more

[569] See Peter F Alexander, 'The Process of Composition of the Libretto of Britten's Gloriana', p.152.
[570] Aiofe Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 11.
[571] Monks, p. 10.
[572] Monks, p. 11.
[573] Monks, p. 6.

> precise, English – identity. […] It probed a problem at the heart of this construction of identity, faltering at the line between domestic and expansive versions of Englishness.'[574]

For Wiebe, the Coronation's 'self-consciously imperial character' was challenged by Britten's depiction of the first Elizabethan era, which right-wing commentators celebrated as the seminal incarnation of British achievement in culture and outward-bound imperial power.[575] Indeed, the arts in general, in her view, 'fit uneasily into the Coronation display as a whole.'[576] However, she tends to overestimate the extent to which the Coronation itself 'presented the age of Elizabeth I as the original imperial moment;'[577] as Cannadine has shown, the ceremonies and rituals were designed to bolster a Victorian construct of monarchy, not an Elizabethan one, and most references to the first Elizabeth were not politically aspirational but were blurred into a decorative fiction of 'Merrie England', along with maypoles and Morris dancing. What Wiebe does pinpoint, however, is the way in which Britten's music complicates the opera's claims to historical authenticity. She focuses on the musical significance of 'Happy were he', a melancholy lute song which Essex plays to Elizabeth, which is among the most beautiful moments in the opera:

> Happy were he could finish forth his fate
> In some unhaunted desert, where, obscure
> From all society, from love and hate
> Of worldly folk, then might he sleep secure.[578]

The lyrics are based closely on a poem that the real Essex composed, so that the song seems to offer an authentic Elizabethanism rooted in what Wiebe calls 'an English

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[574] Heather Wiebe, ' "Now and England": Britten's *Gloriana* and the "New Elizabethans"', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 17:2 (July 2005), 141-172 (pp. 144-45).
[575] Wiebe, 'Now and England', p. 145. For an example of such right-wing commentary, see Philip Gibbs, *The New Elizabethans* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1953).
[576] Wiebe, p. 150.
[577] Wiebe, p. 150.
[578] Britten, *Gloriana*, p. 110.

pastoral already cloaked in melancholy – austere, solitary, unattained and unattainable.'[579]

The postulated 'realness' of this moment creates a crisis of credibility within the fiction of the opera; a crisis which reaches its climax in the final scene, where the dying Queen, picked out in a spotlight on a darkened stage, stops singing and begins to speak quotations from the recorded speeches and letters of the historical Elizabeth I. Wiebe argues that these historical artefacts create 'a strange collapse of historical and personal loss […] a moment of collapse in an opera whose ostensible function within the Coronation was to celebrate historical plenitude and presence.'[580] I would argue, though, that this intimation of fictional collapse resonates also in 'lost objects' in the opera, namely, the wig and dress which become detached from their wearers. Essex's fantasy of a simple hermit's life, 'content with hips and haws and brambleberry', is based on a release from culture and a return to nature – a dream of objectlessness and an escape from surplus value and meaning. Perhaps the pervasive sense that this opera was somehow disrespectful to Elizabeth II arose, not just from its suggestion that her namesake was old, bald and weak, but from a more ambitious revelation of monarchy itself as a fiction which, like all fictions, must eventually collapse when confronted with history. Like the masquers in Oxford five years earlier, Britten was using the privilege of artistic licence to evoke the queen as a symbol of fictivity, and his message was not so much about nationalism and empire, but something more personal about the fragility of metaphysical excess and the obliteration of the self demanded by the metonymic trappings of status.

'It looks as if it's wearing you!': Science, synthetics and society in *The Man in the White Suit*

The spectacle of the Coronation itself was, as design historians Christopher Breward and Ghislaine Wood put it, 'a sophisticated design event, operating across the fields of photography, fashion and performance to project a new version of the Crown's role in the life of the state.'[581] In particular, they examine the Queen's Coronation

[579] Wiebe, pp. 170-71.
[580] Wiebe, p. 168.
[581] Christopher Breward and Ghislaine Wood, 'In the Service of the State: Change and Continuity in Design', in Breward and Wood, eds., *British Design from 1948: Innovation in the Modern Age* (London: V&A, 2012) pp. 40-63. p. 53.

portrait by Cecil Beaton, which shows the Queen in ermine, crown, densely embroidered gown and full regalia seated in front of a projected backdrop depicting Westminster Abbey. This, they argue, is a complex fiction and declares itself as such through its use of synthetic materials; the threshold between the flesh-and-blood monarch and the virtual background is marked by a curtain, a 'bolt of blue and gold "Queensway" rayon silk, designed for Warner and Sons by Royal College of Art professor Robert Goodden to decorate the Abbey interior'.[582] This 'embodies the contradictions: a synthetic rendering of age-old symbols drawn back in a technicoloured sweep, like set-dressing on a Hollywood film set.'[583] Arguably, indeed, this image not only 'suggests the contingent and artificial nature of a grand state event in a democratic age', but seems to emphasize the intransigent materiality of the royal regalia, and threatens the autonomous personhood of the sovereign wearing and holding the symbols of power.[584] The rayon curtain, which is intended to link the seated queen with the religious, historical and ceremonial context represented by the fake, blurry and unconvincingly lit abbey, instead threatens to close behind her, and leave her stranded in possession of some elaborate but meaningless baubles.

The tension between the fabric of tradition and the technological modernity represented by the rayon silk curtain had been played out in a more overtly political way in Alexander Mackendrick's 1951 Ealing Comedy *The Man in the White Suit*.[585] The film follows the fortunes of an idealistic chemist, Sydney Stratton (Alec Guinness) who upsets the status quo in a northern mill town when he invents a thread that doesn't break and never gets dirty. When he dons the first suit to be made of this pure white fabric, he is greeted by his employer's daughter, Daphne (Joan Greenwood), as the harbinger of a social justice enabled by clothes which are eternally pristine:

> It makes you look like a knight in shining armour. It's what you are. Don't you understand what this means? Millions of people all over the world are living lives of drudgery fighting an endless losing battle against shabbiness

[582] Breward and Wood, p. 53.
[583] Breward and Wood, p. 53.
[584] Breward and Wood, p. 53.
[585] *The Man in the White Suit*, dir. by Alexander Mackendrick (Ealing Studios, 1951).


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and dirt. You've won that battle for them. You've set them free. The whole world's going to bless you.

But instead of being the people's champion, Sidney remains the underdog, harried both by the textile consortium running the weaving industry, who see a threat to their profits, and the mill's workforce, who see a threat to their jobs. That the fur-coated industrialist and the dungaree-wearing shop steward should join forces against the Oxbridge scientist in his college scarf and cricket jumper is typical of the fundamental social conservatism which underlies many of Ealing's ostensibly anti-authoritarian tales of insubordination, such as *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) and *Whisky Galore!* (1949). The film strives to restore its characters to the traditional balance which has been disrupted by the novel material of the white suit. That the material has its own agenda, quite separate from Sidney's, is suggested by the fact that he disappears completely inside the suit when he wears it in low light, his face and hands blending into the shadows while the fabric's artificial whiteness sings out – an effect remarked on by Daphne who declares 'It looks as if it's wearing you!' Just as the queen's personhood is occluded by the shell-like trappings of the coronation vestments, Sidney becomes, in effect, a version of H. G. Wells's *Invisible Man,* who can only be manifested by means of his clothing.[586] When, in the film's climax, Sidney makes a desperate run from the combined forces of capital and labour who are determined to suppress his invention, his mad dash through the dark streets of the mill town is made ridiculous by the fact that he is wearing a suit that makes it impossible to hide. He is cornered, but as hands grab him, the white fabric falls apart like blotting paper. Technology turns out to be unreliable, the textile industry is saved, and Sidney – like the Emperor in his delusional New Clothes – is left standing in his underpants, revealed as a clown, until someone hands him an ordinary overcoat to wear.

Although Daphne has compared him to a knight in shining armour, Sidney's suit is not so much the emblem of a warrior, as the battleground itself. Yet only at the end of the film, when the luminous suit is threatening to give him away, does he realize he is in the wrong clothes. He bumps into his landlady, Mrs Watson, who is carrying the laundry she takes in to make ends meet, and begs her for a garment to

[586] H. G. Wells, *The Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2005).

cover himself. Instead of helping him, the kindly Mrs Watson refuses him, unleashing the rebuke that makes Sidney understand the folly of his aspiration, and strikes the keynote of the film's conservative condemnation of high-minded scientific utopianism: 'Why can't you scientists leave things alone? What about my bit of washing when there's no washing to do?' At this climax of its supremacy – in the next scene Sidney's suit will fall apart amid gales of laughter – the white suit is an emblem of all that is sinisterly alien about science and modernity. The character of Sidney, once loveable as an underdog, now looms over the tiny form of Mrs Watson, his face in dark shadow, as the suit which is 'wearing him' takes control and attempts, like an artificial life-form, to survive and replicate itself.

As well as commenting on the danger threatened by the thoughtless onrush of technological innovation, *The White Suit* was responding to a growing crisis in the real world of textile manufacture. The postwar slump caused by continuing rationing, recession and unemployment resulted in mass lay-offs of workers in Lancashire; in the summer of 1952, 33 per cent of spinning operatives and 22 per cent of weaving operatives were either unemployed or on short time.[587] The 'textiles crisis', as it became known, prompted Sir Raymond Streat, chairman of the Cotton Board, to call an international conference at Buxton in September which concluded that the low demand was caused by a combination of 'not just increasing Japanese competition, but also Korean War stockpiling, import controls in Australia and untimely price-fixing arrangements by the Yarn Spinners' Association.'[588] A US productivity team that toured the industry in the same year found 'large elements of both management and labour dominated by an inertia which prevents them from seeing the future clearly[…] Their main effort at the moment seems to be directed towards the protection of the least efficient producers and the preservation of antiquated arrangements.'[589]

As David Kynaston has written:

> The 1952 textiles crisis was a clear signal that it was time to stop privileging the great nineteenth-century export staples – coal, cotton, steel – and instead

[587] See David Kynaston, *Family Britain 1951-57* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 118.
[588] Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p. 120.
[589] Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p. 120.

> start prioritizing the new, scientific, high-tech industries that could realistically be seen as having a future.[590]

The shift in perspective towards technology and synthetic fabrics had begun during World War II. In the face of maritime attacks on supply lines, the importance of local sources of essential materials became apparent – materials which could be developed out of the new synthetic substances which had been discovered in the previous decade. The invention of PVC in 1933 was followed two years later by polyethylene – discovered by Francis Freeth at ICI in a Sidney-Stratton-like experiment conducted against company rules.[591] Nylon also came onto the market in 1935, and polystyrene in 1937; once the war began, these timely materials were eagerly put to use in radar sets, parachutes, insulators and much else. After the war, acrylics such as Dralon and polyester fabrics, marketed as Dacron and Terylene, promised a utopian combination of utility, cheapness and modern, vibrant colours. In her work on the Festival Pattern Group, which created textile designs for the 1951 Festival of Britain based on atomic structures revealed by X-ray crystallography, the design historian Mary Schoeser traces the process by which science inserted itself into everyday material culture. She cites not only the invention of artificial fibres like Nylon and Terylene, but the invention of cyclamates (artificial sugar substitutes) in 1937 and the introduction of the first credit card (the Diners Club card) in 1950, and locates these developments within a wider context in the 1950s, which saw both the 'natural' order and the 'old political' order being challenged, via developments as diverse as the first embryo transplant for cattle (1950) and the creation of NATO (1949).

But for individuals creating costumes and settings for themselves on the domestic stage, technologically enhanced fabrics also promised to overturn the social codes governing the status of materials. The introduction of rotary screen printing in the 1950s (replacing the use of copper engraved rollers) meant that dye could be applied to the fabric in layers, creating 'fine lines and crisp textural effects':

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[590] Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p. 121.
[591] Daniel R. Headrick, 'Botany, Chemistry, and Tropical Development', *Journal of World History*, 7:1 (Spring, 1996), 1-20 (p. 11).

> Printed texture is a very important element because it disguises cheap cloth and it was something that was done in the 1940s, when chevrons, herringbones, tweeds and so on were printed onto completely plain rayons just to give them a look of quality.[592]

In 1956, the former mining company 3M began marketing Scotchguard and for the first time it became practical to put printed fabrics on furniture, too, in order to emulate more expensive weaves. Whereas Quentin Bell in the late 1940s had unquestioningly asserted that the sumptuosity of a fabric could never be usurped as the key marker of taste and value, new synthetic fabrics and technological innovations were indeed about to displace the idea that 'a cheap material cannot please'. But it was not just the cheapness of a printed tweed – or the disposability of the plastic mackintoshes worn by the Coronation watchers in 1953 – that offered a new understanding of how clothing might transform its wearer. The ascent of Mount Everest showed that technical fabrics had the power to transport the human subject into hitherto inaccessible realms.

The crucifix and the cloth cat: disputed materials on the summit of Everest

In one sense, the Everest expedition was a riposte to the idea that the British were no longer capable of grand adventures, and no longer valued the individual achievements of an elite. The *Spectator*, in a review of *Gloriana* which Wiebe perceptively calls a 'thinly veiled attack on Britten's homosexuality', had accused the opera of betraying

> those magnificent Renaissance creatures, the Elizabethans, with their pride and ambitions, their reckless intrigues and their fierce contempt of death. The authors have not convinced us that they have really grasped the great heart of the Renaissance individualist; the whole man, hard and sensitive, artist and warrior in one.[593]

[592] Mary Schoeser, 'The Appliance of Science', in Harwood and Powers, eds., *Festival of Britain*, p. 124.
[593] A special correspondent (Frank Howes), '*Gloriana*: A Great Event in English Music', *The National and English Review*, 141 (1953), p. 35; Wiebe, p. 156.

Everest seemed to provide proof that the new Elizabethans could be as magnificent, reckless and individualistic as their forebears, and could seize new realms of experience in their manly grasp. And the fact that the 'conquest' was a symbolic one, rather than a military invasion, meant it could be enjoyed without disturbing the narrative of progress that had left the Empire behind. The inconvenient detail that neither of the two men to attain the summit, Edmund Hillary and Norgay Tenzing, was British tended to be swept aside in celebrations of an expedition that was planned and executed by a largely British team, and led by the British army officer John Hunt. Recent accounts – like Peter H. Hansen's – of the ascent have seen the party's international flavour as suggestive that 'Britain was attempting to redefine the "British Empire" as a "Commonwealth of Nations".'[594]

> When Tenzing reached the summit of Everest, he waved from his ice-axe four flags representing Nepal, India, Britain and the United Nations[…] While the team included men from the British military, public schools and universities, Hunt expanded his talent search to include a Blackpool travel agent, two New Zealeanders, and Sherpa Tenzing[…] If Hunt had wanted to make the expedition narrowly "all-British" he could have done so. That Hunt chose Hillary and Tenzing for the summit party reflects not only a recognition of their abilities but also an inclusive definition of "Britishness" consistent with the expansive definition of the Commonwealth articulated at the time of the coronation.[595]

Hunt's own account of the expedition, published in the *Geographical Journal* in December 1953, does indeed emphasize the meritocratic system of selection he employed when recruiting members of the team, although this mainly applied to the Sherpas, who were whittled down to a select few during the long march through Nepal and the preparatory climbs during which the camps along the ascent route were established and stocked with supplies. Hunt's language certainly smacks of imperial entitlement; he writes of the Sherpa men: 'We had arranged for twenty of

[594] Peter H. Hansen, 'Coronation Everest', in Stuart Ward, ed., *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 57-72 (p. 58).
[595] Hansen, 'Coronation Everest', pp. 61-62.

these splendid little men to do the most arduous carrying on the higher part of the climb',[596] and during the early stages of the expedition remarks that 'the marches were short, owing to the slow progress of our laden coolies, and we had time to bathe as we waited for our cook Thondup to prepare breakfast.'[597]

While he does not stint in his praise for the bravery and strength of Tenzing and the other Nepali climbers who reached the final stages, he did not, as Hansen implies, select Hillary and Tenzing as the intended summit party; the first attempt on the peak was tried by an English scientist, Tom Bourdillon, and a Welsh doctor, Charles Evans. Indeed, Tenzing's strength and stamina meant that he alone was originally intended to take part in both the first and the second attempts – first as part of the support team for Bourdillon and Evans, and only secondly as a climber attempting the actual ascent. In the end, he was too ill to form part of the first support team – and he was not alone among the Sherpa men to suffer from exhaustion. When he and Hillary did make their ascent, Hillary recalled, 'the high-altitude Sherpas chosen to carry our camp high up the south-east ridge had all fallen ill except Ang Nyma, so there was nothing for it but to carry everything ourselves.'[598] Clearly, the idea that the Everest expedition was a utopia of post-colonial fraternity is oversimple; but another important shift in British self-image can be traced through the clothes and equipment that enabled the climb to succeed. Significantly, the 1953 expedition was the first to embrace nylon's combination of lightness, strength and resistance to moisture. Whereas the unsuccessful Swiss attempt in 1952 had been equipped with various combinations of cotton, wool, silk and other traditional fabrics, Hunt's expedition adopted nylon-lined smocks and trousers, tents of a nylon-cotton mix and sleeping bags with nylon outer layers.[599]

Later, when news of the success of the venture reached Britain, reports of the ascent almost equated the contribution of British manufacturers with the climbers' heroic qualities, emphasizing that the novel equipment was 'manufactured after careful proving and experiment in conditions similar to those encountered or

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[596] John Hunt and Edmund Hillary, 'The Ascent of Mount Everest', *Geographical Journal*, 119:4 (December 1953), 385-399 (p. 386).
[597] Hunt and Hillary, p. 387.
[598] Hunt and Hillary, pp. 395-96.
[599] See John Hunt, 'Return to Everest: II – New Equipment for the British Expedition' *The Times*, 3 February 1953, p. 9.

expected at high altitude.'[600] But another piece of specialist technological apparel made an even more crucial difference: masks delivering supplementary oxygen to the climbers. Michael Ward, who was expedition doctor in 1953, recalls that this was controversial at the time:

> Supplementary oxygen had been used [by the 1920s expeditions], but it had not seemed to confer any benefit in terms of increased climbing rate, and indeed some mountaineers seemed to ascend as fast or faster without supplementary oxygen than those who did use it.[601]

The problem was that the weight of the equipment cancelled out the benefits of using it, but this was solved in 1952 by a combination of scientific advances in lightweight alloys, and by the research of Dr Griffith Pugh of the newly formed Medical Research Council. Pugh had worked for the mountain warfare training centre in Lebanon during World War II and went on to research the effects of extreme environments 'as a result of the Korean war and increasing British interest in Antarctica.'[602] The development of respiratory technology had also made progress thanks to wartime advances in diving and flying equipment, but it was Pugh who discovered the ideal flow rate of oxygen at high altitudes, which would produce a sufficient boost in work rate to compensate for the extra weight being carried. Although a number of later climbs have succeeded without oxygen – making use of the body's ability to acclimatize gradually to altitude – Ward is clear about the benefits of technology:

> Without adequate supplementary oxygen at extreme altitudes the body is on a knife edge [...] Prewar climbers at extreme altitude had suffered from hallucinations due to hypoxia; some had died from cold injury; hemiplegia had been reported; dehydration was extreme, fatigue overwhelming, and loss of weight severe. Muscle wasting was great: F. S. Smythe in 1933 could

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[600] 'Equipment for Everest: British Industry's contribution', *The Times*, 9 June 1953, p. 4.
[601] Michael Ward, 'The First Ascent of Mount Everest', *British Medical Journal*, 306 (May 29 1993), 1455-1458 (p. 1456).
[602] Ward, p. 1456.

> almost encircle the muscles of his thigh with the fingers of one hand. Fourteen deaths had been recorded on Everest up to 1952.[603]

But the introduction of technological enhancement did not necessarily imply a cancellation of hierarchies. Instead, as Hansen notes, this new empire of technology could be used to perpetuate old ideas about British superiority which were supposedly being contradicted by the 'Commonwealth of Nations' idea:

> On BBC television, Hunt described the ascent with a scale model of Everest, and the interviewer asked Bourdillon about the oxygen, Wylie about the porters, Hillary about the summit, and Tenzing about himself. Tenzing also demonstrated the oxygen mask and cylinders while Hunt described how they worked. After the ascent, scenes of Sherpas demonstrating the oxygen were repeated frequently, and represented visually an older ideology of European technological dominance that had formerly underpinned imperialism, but now bolstered images of British tutelage of the Commonwealth in the 1950s.[604]

In *The Prince and the Pauper*, the royal equipment had 'materialized the immaterial excess that differentiates a royal body from its brute physicality'; on the summit of Everest, oxygen apparatus allowed the climbers to escape the limitations of brute physicality and attain super-human powers. Although in theory such equipment could be worn by anybody, in fact it represented another equally fetishized surplus. Membership of the band of elite climbers was based only partly on merit – it also depended on education, nationality and access to Western technology. The implication was that Tenzing – like the pauper-prince Tom – was misappropriating the techno-regalia of the future empire, and had to be put back in his place by being presented as someone who could access its use value, but would never understand its surplus meaning.

Hillary's account of the climb participates in this narrative of technological dominance by describing how he had to intervene paternalistically in order to help Tenzing with his oxygen:

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[603] Ward, p. 1457.
[604] Hansen, pp. 65-66.

> I suddenly noticed that Tenzing, who had been going very well, was starting to drag. When he approached me I saw that he was panting and in some distress. I examined his oxygen set and, finding that the exhaust outlet from his mask was blocked with ice, was able to give him immediate relief.[605]

Tenzing's autobiography takes issue with this account – and other claims Hillary made about having to help him as he struggled up the mountain – in offended terms:

> Every so often, as had happened all the way, we would have trouble breathing, and have to stop and clear away the ice that kept forming in the tubes of our oxygen-sets. In regard to this, I must say in all honesty that I do not think Hillary is quite fair in the story he later told, indicating that I had more trouble than he with breathing, and that without his help I might have suffocated. In my opinion our difficulties were about the same – and luckily never too great – and we each helped and were helped by the other in equal measure.[606]

When Tenzing and Hillary reached the top of the mountain, they removed their masks for the 15 minutes they spent there, in order to conserve oxygen – and perhaps also to reassert their humanity at the moment of their triumph. The removal of the breathing apparatus, like the removal of the Queen's wig in *Gloriana* or the loss of the Royal Seal in *The Prince and the Pauper*, serves as a reminder that power is mapped onto the body of the human subject by a dialectical production of meaning contingent upon the placement, fit and operation of a prosthetic object. But the climbers also divested themselves of some other symbolic things during their short stay on the summit. Reuters reported that 'along with Sherpa Tenzing's gifts of sweets to the mountain gods, Sir Edmund Hillary left a small fibre crucifix at the summit of Mount Everest'. This synthetic crucifix, made of an early form of plastic derived, like rayon, from cellulose, had reportedly been given to John Hunt by a monk at the Benedictine abbey of Ampleforth, and was passed in turn to Hillary to

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[605] Hunt and Hillary, p. 398.
[606] James Ramsey Ullman, *Man of Everest: The Autobiography of Tenzing* (London: Reprint Society, 1956) p. 260.

be taken to the summit. Its symbolism and status was always contested, however: Hillary's first account of the incident, given to reporters, only mentioned that he had buried an envelope in the snow, and he later explained that he thought it was up to Hunt to say what was in it.[607] Neither Hillary nor Hunt was religious, and arguably it was the object's man-made material which carried its primary symbolism of conquest over the natural world. However, in Tenzing's account he emphatically denies any knowledge of this crucifix and seems to cast doubt on its existence:

> From my pocket I took the package of sweets I had been carrying. I took the little red-and-blue pencil that my daughter, Nima, had given me. And, scraping a hollow in the snow, I laid them there. Seeing what I was doing, Hillary handed me a small cloth cat, black and with white eyes, that Hunt had given him as a mascot, and I put this beside them. In his story of our climb Hillary says it was a crucifix that Hunt gave him, and that he left on top; but if this was so I did not see it. He gave me only the cloth cat. All I laid in the snow was the cat, the pencil and the sweets.[608]

This discrepancy in the accounts of the summit-offerings indicates both the heavy weight of symbolism shared by the objects in question, and the divergent symbolic systems within which they operated. For Hillary and Hunt, rational men of science, such superstitious practices had to be presented as irrelevant, and carried out only to humour others' beliefs: placing a synthetic piece of religious equipment in the snow was just about acceptable as a favour to friend, especially if it carried a submerged assertion of technological superiority in its material substance. To admit to burying a cloth cat, however, would threaten their status as serious adults and put them, in their eyes, on a par with Tenzing, whose uncomplicated religious action could have been ascribed to an insulting orientalist stereotype of non-Western naivety. On the other hand, it is possible to read Tenzing's recollection as a mischievous retort to Hillary's – and the entire British team's – attempt to assert British superiority and infantilize the Nepalese climbers. This childish piece of cloth is contrasted, in his account, both with the four flags he carried tied to his ice-axe, and with the red scarf which he wore to the summit: fabric materializations of profound notions of loyalty and

[607] See Hansen, p. 271.
[608] Ramsey Ullman, p. 267.

identity. The scarf and been given to him by the Swiss expedition leader Raymond Lambert, with whom he had attempted to scale Everest the previous year. These two men had enjoyed a close and equal friendship which Tenzing pointedly contrasts with his relationship with the British party, who always drew 'a line between them and the outsider, between sahib and employee'.[609] Just before the expedition set off, he had had to quell serious unrest among the other Sherpas, who disliked the idea that they were only being loaned their clothes and apparel by the British, whereas other nations had given them their equipment outright as part of their wages. But for his part, Tenzing's clothes and equipment declared his refusal to be entirely inducted into the British party:

> My boots, as I have said, were Swiss; my wind-jacket and various other items had been issued by the British. But the socks I was wearing had been knitted by Ang Lahmu. My sweater had been given to me by Mrs Henderson, of the Himalayan Club. My woollen helmet was the old one that had been left to me by Earl Denman. And, most important to all, the red scarf round my neck was Raymond Lambert's.[610]

Tenzing's resistance to the uniform dress code of the British expedition acknowledges the symbolic potency of clothing and its implicit challenge to human agency and identity. Hunt and the rest of the Everest party wished to construct a narrative of post-colonial equality enabled by futuristic technology, which would erase the resentments of an imperial past; instead, they found themselves trapped within old power structures which the technology only served to reinforce. In Coronation year, an ancient idea of British monarchy was produced by the symbols of status as a kind of dream, phantasmagoria or fiction. Almost simultaneously on the other side of the world, a dream of the future was being produced by the symbols of science and progress – a new phantasmagoria, but a familiar fetishization of power. Yet technology's darker aspect was already threatening an even greater and more troubling incursion into humanity's nightmares. In the next chapter, we will see how atomic power came close to abolishing the hierarchy which put subjects in control of the object.

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[609] Ramsey Ullman, p. 221.
[610] Ramsey Ullman, p. 257.

CHAPTER SIX

Bombs, prosthetics and madness: the troubling intimacy of things

A summer's day in 1940. The Brown family are at home in their neatly kept terraced house. They are all together in the sitting room: the children putting a record on the gramophone, the parents relaxing in armchairs, reading or knitting. Quietly and without fuss, they happen to notice that an incendiary bomb has fallen through their roof and landed in the bedroom upstairs. It nestles among their plain wooden furniture and begins to burn. Calmly, a voiceover explains:

> It burns very violently for the first minute but after that it *can* be tackled. Brown goes to ascertain the damage and goes to Smith next door for the pump they share. There's no panic. A bucket, always kept full, is placed outside the front door. Miss Smith arrives. She has received training from the local authorities which you too can receive. Brown decides to operate the pump away from the heat and smoke. You'll notice how Miss Smith keeps as near the floor as possible and plays a jet of water at the heart of the fire to get it under control. Brown Junior calls the Fire Brigade just in case.[611]

In this public information film, *How You Can Deal with Incendiary Bombs*, the image of the stable family unit and the cosy division of labour is part of a soothing propaganda rhetoric: under the patriarchal guidance of Mr Brown and the local authorities, even young women and children can tackle enemy bombs easily. These small incendiary devices are merely uninvited guests in the family home, unwelcome in the intimate context of the bedroom, but familiarly domestic in scale.

This early version of cosy wartime bomb-encounters did not go unchallenged. Later the same year, during the intense weeks of night-time air raids starting on 7 September 1940, Humphrey Jennings collected dramatic footage of specifically domestic disruption for the Crown Film Unit's propaganda short, *London Can Take It!*[612] Tailored for the American market, it made a point of showing plucky Londoners giving up their right to a private home life, donning ARP uniforms after a hard day's work, or queuing quietly outside public shelters. A voiceover, by US

[611] *How You Can Deal with Incendiary Bombs* (British Pathé, 1940).
[612] *London Can Take It!*, dir. by Humphrey Jennings (Crown Film Unit, 1940).

reporter Quentin Reynolds, described them as 'the greatest civilian army ever assembled':

> I have watched them stand by their homes. I have seen them made homeless, I have seen them move to new homes, and I can assure you there is no panic, no fear, no despair in London Town.

This rapid shift in emphasis from small bombs absorbed into and neutralized by the family circle, to large bombs battering the home front and expelling people from their domestic lives – if not through violent destruction then through their own sense of civic duty – acknowledged changing attitudes to the real devastation suffered by London on the 76 nights of the blitz. But as the war progressed and the air raids became more sporadic and geographically diffuse, the large-scale vision of public heroism against a dramatic nightscape, as promoted by Jennings's films, contracted back down to the level of the hand-sized, daytime object; but this time there was no soothing suggestion that they could be neutralized with a homely bucket and pump. Two more Ministry of Information films warned against the domestication of unfamiliar things: *Butterfly Bomb* (1944) shows a young boy in his family's garden, picking up one of the harmless-looking booby-traps – officially called SD2 bomblets – which were routinely dropped over communities in the north of England.[613] The boy is instantly killed as his mother watches in horror. *Dangerous Trophies: Unexploded Bombs* (1945) depicts a man cycling down a country road and stopping to pick up what he assumes is a dud device.[614] Despite being warned of the danger by a wise passerby, he resolves to keep it as a souvenir; promising glibly to 'take the fuse out when I get home', he pedals off with it, promptly exploding a few feet down the lane.

In wartime, the public were repeatedly warned that the danger of these death-dealing things depended on their small scale and apparent harmlessness; such objects invited domestication, only to reveal their true scope and agency once they had achieved close contact with their human victim. In bombs, the thing-world offers a treacherous intimacy, and it's this intimacy which was repeatedly examined and interrogated in the culture of the immediate postwar period. By then, the war was

[613] *Butterfly Bomb* (Ministry of Information, 1944).
[614] *Dangerous Trophies: Unexploded Bombs* (British Pathé, 1945).

over but another type of weapon was threatening the integrity of the human subject: the atomic bomb. This new technology redefined deadly intimacy; after the first blast had obliterated the area surrounding its point of impact, the bomb continued to kill insidiously, via radiation which could invisibly penetrate and poison the body. At the same time, despite its ubiquity in the political discourse of the Cold War, this was a bomb with which few were intimately acquainted, since its power lay in its abstract potential for devastation rather than its immediate physical presence in everyday life. This retention of potential and the suppression of the object's definitive conclusion finds echoes in the absences and narrative ruptures which characterize the postwar period's treatment of bombs as cultural objects. In this chapter I will argue that atomic culture resonates with anxieties about objects and intimacy, and that this motif crosses and recrosses the threshold between traditional explosives and nuclear technology. In the first chapter of this thesis, bombs created new ecosystems of undead life, and left behind object-witnesses and rubble that told human stories. This final chapter shows how a very different understanding of bombs developed as World War II was replaced by the Cold War. In films including Powell and Pressburger's *The Small Back Room* (1949), the Boulting Brothers' *Seven Days To Noon* (1950), and Michael Anderson's *The Dam Busters* (1955); as well as C. P. Snow's novel *The New Men* (1954) and Marghanita Laski's play *The Offshore Island* (1954), bombs leave no ruins behind them; instead, they take on a gothic aspect through their own ambiguous materiality, invading and compromising the fractured and ruined human body and giving birth to an uncanny absence and sterility.

'Now you see into the atoms themselves': scale and the problem of nearness

In 1946, the *Daily Express* released a polemical warning about the danger of the new technology in a film, *The Atomic Age*.[615] It was released after the tests at Bikini Atoll in July that year, when two atomic bombs were detonated in order to test their effects on naval ships. The film consists of footage from the two Pathé reports of the tests, spliced together with a voiceover which swings between horrified accounts of the uncanny power of these weapons, and hopeful speculation that the science behind

[615] *The Atomic Age* (British Pathé and *Daily Express*, 1946).

them will provide benefits to health and industry. A rolling title at the start of the film indicates its uneasy ambiguity:

> The *Daily Express* presents these Pathé newsreels as a reminder that a menacing shadow lies across the vista of a world enriched by man's fabulous discovery.
> Here we see once more the monstrous first-born child of the atomic age which in a moment of time, blotted out a great city and seared 92,000 people into oblivion. Yet it is still only a child, no more than eighteen months old…

The conjunction of nightmarish destruction with the image of a small child echoes the code name of the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima, 'Little Boy', and is later reiterated by the voiceover's description of the bombed ships lying 'devastated and toylike in a boiling ocean'. By evoking the reckless destructive energy of a toddler, the image does not so much excuse the atom bomb's mindlessness as warn against the idea that it is susceptible to reason, and suggest that it is all the more fearful because it touches the heart of family reality. While footage of the American tests safely distances the mushroom clouds by shooting them from miles away, Japanese footage of the casualties of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, also included in the film, emphasize the bodily intimacy of the damage inflicted: a woman's skin is marked with the pattern of the dress she wore when the bomb was dropped; a man's wristwatch is removed to show that it has left a paler area on his badly burned skin; someone places their feet in the shadow footprints left by a man vaporized in the blast, to show the exact posture of the victim at the moment of his death.

Repeatedly, the point is made that London or another city close to home could suffer the same fate:

> One bomb would kill 50,000 people, 400,000 would be made homeless. Many would die a slow death, as atom test animals are now dying at Bikini. We cannot afford to drift, as the clouds are drifting, into an atomic war. Here is the true challenge of our time: whether science is to be used to destroy us, or by releasing new sources of power, lighten the daily work of every one of us.

In fact, even advocates of the peaceful applications of atomic energy found it hard to use the idea of homely usefulness as an argument; it was to become increasingly important to stress that the technology could never be scaled down for personal use. In 1947, Prof J. D. Cockcroft, director of the Harwell atomic research and development plant in Berkshire, gave a talk to the Institution of Mechanical Engineers which explicitly spelt out the incompatibility of the technology with homely and familiar spaces:

> Speaking of the possibilities of using nuclear energy for heat and power production, he said that owing to the intense radio activity in atomic piles cement shields had to be used to protect the workers. There had been much talk about an atomic motor-car, but one of 30 hp would need a 6ft concrete shield. An atomic propelled aircraft of 10,000 hp would need a 100ft shield.
>
> He said he would not recommend small atomic piles for central heating.[616]

Instead, it was made clear to the public that atomic technology can occupy only one of two possible non-domestic spaces: either it is strictly corralled inside purpose-built silos inaccessible to unauthorized personnel, or it will drift dangerously through the air in a deadly cloud. The unassuming domestic invader had become an object of bureaucratic alienation.

The conceptual impact of nuclear weaponry is firstly one of dizzying scale – the vast zone of potential obliteration unleashed from the unimaginably tiny atom produces a kind of nausea which seems to challenge the concept of space and time as parameters defined by and arranged around the human. At the Festival of Britain Science exhibition in 1951, an introductory display plunged visitors into an immersive encounter with the new scale of the atomic age, where objects are not only unseeable but are on the brink of the unknowable. As the guide-catalogue described it:

> You come into the exhibition through five rooms which take you, step by step, into the heart of the matter. Going through these rooms you seem to shrink like Alice in Wonderland, and the things round you seem to grow

[616] 'Obstacles to use of nuclear energy', *The Times*, Wednesday, Jun 11, 1947, p. 3.

> larger and larger. There are pencil and paper in the first room. Now you find yourself apparently shrinking, first to the size of the pencil, and then to the thickness of the paper […] Another step, another thousand times smaller, and you see the structure of the graphite crystals which make up the pencil lead. And then the last step, you are ten thousand times smaller than you began, and now you see into the atoms themselves.[617]

This journey into the nuclear wonderland attempted to domesticate the atomic uncanny by framing it in terms of humble daily objects like pencil and paper, but it also acknowledged the strangeness of this conceptual leap. Writing implements also contain other worlds – they combine haptic familiarity with a creative potential to conjure up enormous vistas of new ideas. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart describes how the human subject is reconstituted by exposure to things that are very small or very big: 'While the miniature represents a mental world of proportion, control, and balance, the gigantic presents a physical world of disorder and disproportion.'[618] The new technology encompassed both extremes. It wasn't just the unimaginable miniaturization of the atom itself that the postwar imagination had to reconcile with the gigantic potential of bombs. They might appear in disguise, presenting themselves as compact, even domestic, objects like pen and paper, but then reveal themselves to be incomprehensibly bigger on the inside.

Within this dialectic of scale, it is the giganticism of nuclear explosions which first attracted philosophical exploration. In his 1950 lecture 'The Thing' Heidegger began with the observation that modern technology has abolished distance in both time and space, yet 'the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness'.[619] Heidegger assumed that new technologies made intimacy impossible, and he attempted to find consolation for this by contemplating the atom bomb not as an anomaly but as an exemplary object, the perfect Thing. Because its implosive force both gathers together matter and throws it violently outwards, it sums up the Thing's

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[617] Bronowski, *1951 Exhibition of Science South Kensington: Festival of Britain*, pp. 8-9.
[618] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 74.
[619] Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001), pp. 161-184 (p163).

uncanny distancelessness which is 'more unearthly than everything bursting apart'.[620]

> Man stares at what the explosion of the atom bomb could bring with it. He does not see that the atom bomb and its explosion are the mere final emission of what has long since taken place, has already happened.[621]

The bomb's violent scope and instantaneous effect make notions of relative time and space irrelevant; thus, the very existence of the atom bomb means that the absence of nearness should be contemplated philosophically rather than fearfully:

> What is this helpless anxiety still waiting for, if the terrible has already happened? The terrifying is unsettling; it places everything outside its own nature. What is it that unsettles and thus terrifies? It shows itself and hides itself in the *way* in which everything presences, namely, in the fact that despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent.[622]

The atomic bomb abolishes distance by expanding so rapidly that it accomplishes the feat of being in two places at the same time – it repels the human subject by 'placing everything outside its own nature'. For Heidegger, the Thing is that which gathers meaning and identity into itself, while simultaneously defining and excluding the human subject. In this, he was accessing a philosophical debate about how technology altered subject-object relations which had exercised modernist thinkers earlier in the twentieth century.

In 1928's *One Way Street*, for instance, Walter Benjamin had described the relationship between workers and technology as a compensatory one:

> Warmth is ebbing from things. Objects of daily use gently but insistently repel us. Day by day, in overcoming the sum of secret resistances – not only the overt ones – that they put in our way, we have an immense labour to perform. We must compensate for their coldness with our warmth if they are

[620] Heidegger, p. 164.
[621] Heidegger, p. 164.
[622] Heidegger, 'p. 164.

> not to freeze us to death, and handle their spiny forms with infinite dexterity if we are not to bleed to death.[623]

The reference to 'spiny forms' references Schopenhauer's 'Porcupine Problem' – the dilemma of spiny creatures who need to stay together for warmth yet are forced to keep away from each other's quills. The porcupines

> huddled together quite closely in order through their mutual warmth to prevent themselves from being frozen. But they soon felt the effect of their quills on one another, which made them again move apart. Now when the need for warmth once more brought them together, the drawback of the quills was repeated so that they were tossed between two evils, until they had discovered the proper distance from which they could best tolerate one another.[624]

Benjamin extrapolates this problem of intimacy onto relations between soft, warm humans and cold, sharp things. Describing the modern condition of urban and industrial workers who can expect no comfort from each other, but rather 'feel themselves to be the representatives of a refractory material world', he identifies a sense of hopeless yearning for union with the inanimate world that the human subject experiences as part of the metropolitan struggle for survival. In this version of modernity, ignoring these cold things is not an option: while they repel us, objects also have us in their grasp. People are slaves; they must labour to compensate for the impossibility of intimacy with the object world.

By the 1950s, however, intimacy with things was not only possible, it had become a new problematic and a different kind of work. Benjamin's workers were modernist subjects – fractured, alienated and reified by the mechanisms of modernity – but after the war, this version of subjectivity was already transforming into what would become known as the postmodern subject – contingent, conflicted and fluid. The reification critiqued by Benjamin and Georg Lukács yielded to an internalized

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[623] Walter Benjamin, 'One Way Street' in *Selected Writings Vol 1, 1913-1926*, trans. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 444-488 (pp. 453-4).
[624] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philososphical Essays Vol 2*, trans EFJ Payne, Oxford: 1974, pp. 651-2.

relation between the subject and the object which would later become the basis for Bruno Latour's concept of the quasi-object.[625] For Heidegger, however, the intimate compensations which Benjamin's workers were obliged to undertake were redrawn as a serene reflection of the self in the thing-world.

But the atom's giganticism had a political aspect which made serenity impossible. The terror inspired by the intimate complication of human and technological agency was more than a primal emotional response. The concept of deterrence was beginning to create a dialectic of absence and action; a nuclear bomb's mere existence, its mere *potential* for devastating action, was supposed to balance the existence and potential of an equal and opposite nuclear bomb on the other side.

'It was a personal matter': putting things in their place

At first glance, Powell and Pressburger's 1949 war drama *The Small Back Room* does not appear to be an atomic film, but its central narrative about a physically and emotionally damaged bomb disposal expert provided an opportunity to examine problems of intimacy and distance in relationships between the human and the thing which resonated with the era's growing atomic anxiety.[626] Based on Nigel Balchin's 1943 novel of the same name, the film follows a scientist, Sammy Rice, who works for a small team at the cutting edge of weapons research. The film's plot concerns his quest to understand a new type of German booby-trap bomb which has been killing children because it looks harmless but explodes as soon as it is touched. He speculates that, like the 'butterfly' bomblets in the public information film discussed earlier in this chapter, these may look deceptively domestic – 'I should think the blasted things are mocked up as teddy bears or candy bars!' – but this turns out not to be the case: the device Sammy is finally called upon to defuse achieves a different kind of intimacy. It gets close to him not by invading his domestic existence literally, but by coming to symbolize everything – every Thing – that is haunting and sabotaging him with its uncanny agency and quasi-subjectivity. Sammy is troubled

[625] See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
[626] *The Small Back Room*, dir. by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (The Archers, 1949).

not just by the enigmatic maguffin he must find and defuse (for most of the film the bomb is absent, since no one has found an unexploded example) but by several other inanimate but uncannily powerful things: a brandy bottle he keeps on his desk at home to remind himself of his potential for alcoholism, the telephone which constantly interrupts and intervenes in his life, and a prosthetic 'tin' foot which causes him great pain and constantly tempts him to reach for the analgesic of alcohol. Foot, bottle and bomb conspire to frustrate him with their distanceless absence; each 'presences' as something that cannot exist, or cannot be allowed to take place. Sammy's foot-pain is a phantom, the projection of flesh-and-blood feeling into a metal prosthesis, and it can only be alleviated by the obliteration of consciousness nestling within the forbidden bottle. Once unleashed, the alcohol will destroy Sammy's mental clarity and steady hand, which he will need if he is to defuse the bomb. The 'presencing' of the prosthetic foot (in the form of pain) threatens to set off a chain reaction of presence ending with the ultimate assertive 'presencing' of the bomb as it fulfils its function with its 'final emission'. This presence, in Heidegger's terms, exemplifies the cancellation of nearness: both the bomb and anything within its scope become instantly absent.

Tim Armstrong, in *Modernism, Technology and the Body: A Cultural Study*, describes how pre-war modernism adopted the idea of prosthesis to conceptualize the increasingly elided boundary between the machinic and the human which arose from the incursion of technology into everyday life.[627] In particular, he convincingly argues that the twin impacts of war and advertising produced the modernist body as fragmented object, a 'zone of deficits in terms of attributes (strength, skill, nutrition), behaviours (sleep, defecation, etc.), with matching remedies'.[628] Meanwhile, Vivian Sobchack has written about the tropological resonance of the post-modern prosthesis as an aspect of theories of cyborg or posthuman cultural theory, and questioned whether it represents a lost ideal of wholeness: 'Those who successfully *incorporate* and *subjectively live* the prosthetic […] sense themselves neither as lacking something nor as walking around with some "thing" that is added onto their

[627] Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[628] Armstrong, p. 98.

bodies.'[629] It is interesting to consider *The Small Back Room* in the light of these earlier and later cultural turns. Whereas the explicit and provocative otherness of the modernist prosthetic could be used to illuminate and understand the modern 'body-in-crisis',[630] and the cyborgian prosthesis is a visible challenge to outmoded categorical boundaries, during the mid-century it was the prosthetic's dual potential both to disrupt the body, and to disappear into it, which became a locus of gothic unease.

Only when Sammy has put the bomb in its place as an object to be decoded and dismantled, can his 'tin' foot achieve its proper nearness; by the end of the film he has accepted it as part of himself. This prosthetic nearness becomes indistinguishable from absence. Rather like the dirty window which became the emblem of Bill Brown's Thing Theory,[631] the thingliness of a prosthetic is only apparent when it causes difficulty or ceases to be transparent; Sammy's artificial foot is, for most of the film, both mechanically and socially present and problematic. The film is full of reminders of what human feet feel and do: Sammy conducts a crucial conversation about the bomb's fuse in a basement room which resounds to the pounding of footsteps above, while the feet are also seen as shadowy forms passing overhead on a translucent grating. Likewise, he has a regular date at a jazz club with his girlfriend Sue, where he sits by the raised dancefloor, surrounded by other people's feet, but cannot join the dance. Powell and Pressburger underline this social awkwardness by introducing into this scene a minor character, Gillian – a woman tellingly described by Sue as 'an incendiary bomb' for her lack of tact – who badgers Sammy to dance despite his firm refusals.

Sammy's friction with the material world reaches a crisis at the start of the film's final act, when his most potent things close in on him in his domestic retreat. Plagued by the pain emanating from his prosthesis, he succumbs at last to the bottle of brandy, in an incongruous Expressionist dream-sequence in which a giant bottle looms over him and threatens to crush him. This sequence foregrounds the artificial

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[629] Vivian Sobchack, 'A Leg to Stand On' in Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra, eds., *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 17-38 (p. 22).
[630] Armstrong, p. 98.
[631] See Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 4. 'The interruption of the habit of looking *through* windows as transparencies enables the protagonist [of A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*] to look *at* a window itself in its opacity.'


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and technological quality of film itself, as if to problematize the very notion of a seamless conjunction between human and thing-world; and it is at this very moment that the telephone rings with news that two unexploded specimens of the mystery bomb have finally been discovered. The solution to Sammy's conflict lies in successfully confronting this deadly technology; he travels to Chesil Bank, where he learns that his colleague has been killed while attempting to defuse the first bomb. The second lies half-buried in the shingle, and in the film's tense finale, Sammy grapples with it both physically and mentally, first struggling to loosen the cap that seals it, and then making a leap of deduction about its deceptively engineered interior. By correctly decoding the bomb's structure, Sammy's identity and sense of 'wholeness' are recuperated, but at a cost: this act of defusing the bomb is not just an intellectual challenge but a sweatily physical and intimate encounter. 'It was a personal matter,' he tells the army officer supervising the operation when he emerges victorious from the struggle.

In Andrew Moor's analysis in *A Cinema of Magic Spaces*, Sammy's battle with the bomb is read as part of a set of 'therapeutic stories' which shore up British identity and reaffirm a traditional concept of masculinity in the midst of postwar rubble and turmoil.[632] He draws a parallel between Sammy and the hero of *A Matter of Life and Death*:

> What is crucial is not just that Peter and Sammy are emblematic of the national culture's troubled readjustment to peace, but the way their narratives of healing, and their recuperative trajectories, stitch up their traumatic histories and send them optimistically into a land fit for heroes.[633]

I read both these films, however, as more ambivalent than this therapeutic agenda would suggest. As I have argued in Chapter 3, *A Matter of Life and Death*, with its preoccupation with transmissions of various kinds, is concerned with questions of dematerialization and spectrality, both in the human subject and in the wider culture. *The Small Back Room* seems not so much to look back on the trauma of World War II, as Moor suggests, but rather to look forward to the Cold War, where the culture and spectre of dematerialization is represented by the threat of nuclear obliteration

[632] Moor, p. 136.
[633] Moor, p. 135.

and the penetrative transmission of radiation. *The Small Back Room* ends with another representation of transmission and an exposé of the reification and fragmentation implied by the obliteration of space and time, life and death. When Sammy arrives at Chesil Bank for his climactic battle, he must first receive the posthumous report of his colleague, Dick Stewart, who – working alone to protect others in the event of an explosion – transmitted a running commentary of his unsuccessful attempt to defuse the bomb, via the field telephone. This was recorded in shorthand by a young ATS corporal, and in an excruciatingly poignant scene she reads it out – complete with Stewart's witty quips and asides – to Sammy in an increasingly halting and broken voice. When it is Sammy's turn to attempt to defuse the second bomb, he performs the same feat of ventriloquism as his dead comrade, relaying his own thoughts and memoranda via field telephone to the same young woman, who listens on headphones before speaking his words for the rest of the waiting army officers to hear. This unnamed female corporal – the dark counterpart of Gillian the tactless jazz-club 'incendiary bomb' – becomes aligned to, if not actually part of, the technology of Sammy's professional life. In a reversal of the technological interface that, for Kittler, would characterize the media age as one in which the apparatus intervenes in the transmissions of the body, the ATS corporal becomes incorporated into the apparatus, first as a human phonograph and then a human loudspeaker. But while she models for Sammy a technophiliac ideal of perfect assimilation of the human into the thing, this is not the solution he must access in order to stand on his own two feet as a whole man. Powell's handwritten screenplay emphasizes the triumph of his reintegrated subjectivity: 'He looks just like any happy man with two feet[…] No longer outside the world, but in it: no longer talking to a man in uniform, but with him, as an equal.'[634] The importance Powell placed on this moment of bodily reintegration becomes clear when the film's final scene is compared to the climax of Balchin's novel, in which Sammy can't find the strength he needs to unscrew a vital component of the bomb and is forced to ask for help from the military officer supervising the operation. Despite the bomb's successful neutralization and that fact that his brilliant analysis made a crucial contribution, he feels unmanned by personal failure. As the book closes he is left hunched in despair on a park bench back in London, watching the moon set:

[634] Quoted in Andrew Moor, p. 162.

> I sat and watched it going and I knew there was no answer. If I'd been a bit sillier or a bit more intelligent, or had more guts, or less guts, or had two feet or no feet, or been almost anything definite, it would have been easy. But as it was, I didn't like what I was, and couldn't be what I liked, and it would always be like that.[635]

Balchin's Sammy remains an unhappy hybrid, certain that his prosthesis denies him access both to a fully human sensibility and to the implacable disinterestedness of material objects. For Powell and Pressburger's Sammy, on the other hand, integration and acceptance of his metal foot depends on his ability to discriminate between different types of thing. By decoding and defusing the bomb, he has located the boundary between the transparent, incorporated prosthesis and the alien, technological Other – the same distinction Sobchack was to reiterate half a century later. By putting a limit on the troubling intimacy of a dangerously assertive Thing, Sammy attempts to put the thing-world back in its place and re-establish the possibility of distance which Heidegger would declare irrevocably lost.

'Shocked out of speech': Fragmentation and integration in *The Undefeated*

The Small Back Room was not the only film of this period to examine the encounter between human and prosthesis. Paul Dickson's 1950 docu-drama *The Undefeated*, made to promote the work of the Ministry of Pensions, stages one war veteran's experience of the compensatory power of replacement limbs overtly in terms of a psychological recuperation.[636] The film's protagonist, Joe Anderson, had been a wartime glider pilot whose legs were amputated after a crash, and who now also suffers from post-traumatic loss of speech. The voiceover informs us that the recuperation of his physical abilities must precede his mental recovery:

> He didn't speak about it because he couldn't. He'd been shocked out of speech by something that happened in the crash – something that only Joe knew about. The

[635] Nigel Balchin, *The Small Back Room* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 192.
[636] *The Undefeated*, dir. by Paul Dickson (Central Office of Information, 1950).

> doctors would have given a lot to know it too, but that would take time. Now the important thing was that Joe should walk again.

His rehabilitation begins when he is fitted with a pair of false legs and inducted into a tough physiotherapy regime to teach him how to use them. But the recovery is not completed until his doctor arranges a meeting with Joe's co-pilot, Lofty, whom Joe believed was killed in the crash. Seeing this man return, as it were, from the dead, enables Joe to return to life too – he breaks his silence to call out Lofty's name.

But as well as making the point that psychic integrity depends on the physical synthesis of body and material prosthesis, the film suggests a further relationship between human and technology. Joe is detached from his voice by the film's very structure; the voiceover narrating his story is presented as belonging to an unseen welfare officer in the Ministry of Pensions who remembers Joe's case – a man represented by a first-person camera which moves through London's streets and around the corridors of the Ministry, but is never seen. Only at the end of the film does the narrator reveal that he *is* Joe Anderson, that he is an ex-patient now working as a welfare officer, and that the story he has been telling is his own. This moment of self-naming mirrors Joe's naming of Lofty and produces a moment of radical integration of fragments: subject and object merge as the narrator and his protagonist align, and when the narrator is reunited with his/Joe's body, Joe finds his voice a second time as his newly vocal mouth synchronizes with the voiceover to say the words 'Joe Anderson'. This merging also fuses two actors together: Gerald Pearson, a real-life amputee who has played Joe's mute body, and the Oscar-nominated professional Leo Genn, who supplied the voice.

As in *The Small Back Room*, prosthetics have stood in, not simply for the human limbs they replace, but for the thing-world of technology in general; and like the Powell and Pressburger film, *The Undefeated* presents its audience with various paradigms of disembodiment and incorporation in order to explore the new object relations arising from the incursions of material agents into human discourse. The fact that Joe's glider, like Sammy Rice's bomb, is an explosive weapon of war underlines the anxiety that such incursions inspired. The crash scene is re-enacted by cutting from blurry actualité footage of a glider coming down, to a crisp and carefully staged scene of devastation. The camera roams across the wreckage, first lingering on sleek metal canisters – possibly bombs – that the glider was carrying

amongst its troop-supply cargo, and then moving to some scraps of paper bearing the remains of technical or navigational diagrams. Only then does it find Joe's agonized form, enmeshed in the twisted remains of his aircraft, which seems attached to his torso like a nightmarish prosthetic appendage. Joe's struggle to re-frame prosthesis as a benign incorporation is key to the film's purpose, yet it is constantly sabotaged by the mechanics of the film itself, which violates its subject's integrity at every turn by dismembering Joe into his constituent parts – voice/body, narration/silence, first person/third person, brisk official/wounded victim, Gerald Pearson/Leo Genn – tricks which film alone can formally achieve, and which therefore tend to stress the specifically *filmic* nature of the narrative.

Writing just before World War II, Benjamin had already selected film for special consideration in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', as a medium with revolutionary potential both to exemplify and break through the estrangement from corporeal reality inculcated by the totalizing phantasmagoria of fascist spectacle and commodity culture.[637] In one passage he compares the cinematographer to a surgeon, who 'makes an intervention in the patient' but 'abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating.'[638] Susan Buck-Morss has glossed this dialectical form of cinematic intimacy, which distances by penetrating, by extending Benjamin's surgical metaphor into an examination of anaesthetics:

> What happened to perception under these circumstances [ie during an operation using anaesthetic] was a tripartite splitting of experience into agency (the operating surgeon), the object as *hyle* (the docile body of the patient) and the observer (who perceives and acknowledges the accomplished result).[639]

The Undefeated enacts just such a split as it layers its subject/object divisions and elisions, and brings the audience into the equation as an equally unstable third term: the film invites us to experience the world through the narrator's eyes in the first-person-camera sequences, suggesting that we share a surgical distance from Joe as

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[637] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducability (Third Version)', in *Selected Writings, Vol 4, 1938-40*, pp. 251-83.
[638] Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 263.
[639] Susan Buck-Morss 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', *October,* 62 (Autumn, 1992), 3-41 (pp. 29-30).

an object/patient/mute *hyle*, while denying us access to the internal consciousness of Joe-as-narrator and the crucial information that it is the *patient's* point of view that we are sharing, even as we observe him observing himself going through his ordeal. For an amputee like Joe, the integrity of the synaesthetic system which Buck-Morss describes as extending beyond the body into the external world of stimulus, is interrupted by the permanently 'anaesthetized' prosthetic limb, and not until this sensorial blockage is overcome can the dynamic interchange between subject and object be restored.

For audiences, Sammy Rice's fragile victory may have offered a comforting resolution to the kinds of neurological shocks which for Benjamin categorized modern life, and which would certainly have been acknowledged by a population still learning to live both with real blitz damage and potential nuclear devastation. But Powell and Pressburger's film, with its curious Expressionist interlude at its heart, also highlights the artificiality of cinematic rhetoric at the very moment when Sammy succumbs to the anaesthetic intervention of the brandy bottle, and makes a point of shaking us out of any phantasmagoric stupor. Similarly, research conducted by the Central Office of Information records that audiences watching *The Undefeated* were both troubled and stirred into a new kind of wakefulness:

> About a quarter of the audiences found that the film made them feel in some degree uncomfortable or ill at ease […] Many seemed to regard these feelings as salutary, in that it gave them an opportunity for expressing sympathy and gratitude in respect of men who, they thought, might be too easily forgotten.[640]

Thus the film serves to act as a cognitive prosthesis, supporting audiences in the proper remembrance of the dismemberments and amputations of the war; but it's a prosthetic that insists on its presence as an artefact, reminding them also that a technological thing-world is occupying the absences of human aesthetic experience. In Benjamin's terms, the film distracts this forgetful audience even while supposedly reminding them of their forgetfulness:

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[640] Quoted in Katy McGahan in *Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement, 1930-1950*, London: BFI, 2010 (booklet accompanying DVD), p. 69.

> Reception in distraction – the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception – finds in film its true training ground. Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception […] because it encourages an evaluating attitude in the audience but also because at the movies, the evaluating attitude requires no attention. The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one.[641]

Buck-Morss highlights the importance of war in the final turn of Benjamin's argument ('All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war')[642] and by making the point that aesthetics has its etymological basis in sensory experience, draws out the internal contradiction of a warrior aesthetic which supposes an 'autonomous, autotelic subject' who is 'sense-dead':[643]

> The truly autogenic being is entirely self-contained. If it has a body at all, it must be one impervious to the senses, hence safe from external control. Its potency is in its lack of corporeal response.[644]

The creeping 'metalization of the human body' celebrated in the Futurist manifesto became an urgent cultural problem in the bomb-films of the postwar period, not just because of the ongoing industrialization and reification which Benjamin hoped would be exploded by film's prosthetic access to the 'optical unconscious', but because a new category of thing – the tiny atom with its vast scope nestling within it – was manifesting a different kind of thingly agency, as well as a surgical ability to intervene in the human body. [645] At the same time, the concept of deterrence was beginning to create a new dialectic of agency and action; a thing's mere existence, and its potential for devastating action, was supposed to make its potential action a political impossibility. Unfortunately, the icy paradox of mutually assured destruction depends on the sterile purity of machine logic – and atomic culture began to create new stories about what would happen when human subjectivity was re-inserted into the zero-sum equation.

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[641] Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 269.
[642] Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 269.
[643] Buck-Morss, 'The Work of Art', p. 10.
[644] Buck-Morss, 'The Work of Art', p. 8.
[645] Futurist manifesto quoted in Buck-Morss, p. 4.

'If I'd known it was going to be like this, I'd never have started': Boffins as human prosthesis

The Boulting Brothers' 1950 film *Seven Days To Noon* seems to scrutinize such concerns about deterrence and human agency. [646] It concerns a nuclear research scientist, Professor Willingdon, who is appalled by the implications of his own work and steals a nuclear bomb with the intention of blackmailing the government into declaring a programme of unilateral disarmament. He carries the bomb in a small, plain suitcase: a visual signifier which mirrors the autotelic self-containment of the reified human agent who carries it. Willingdon himself is a blank. His past life and motivations remain unexplored and his robotic adherence to the concept of deterrence is presented as a monomania which cuts him off from considerations of the interests of his fellow human beings: in trying to end the possibility of nuclear war, he has put himself at the mercy of the very object he claims to detest, and sacrificed his own agency in order to carry, hide and further the interests of the suitcase bomb.

As well as emptying Willingdon of his humanity, the film focuses on another kind of absence: the gradual emptying out of London as martial law is declared and evacuation enforced. Anti-nuclear films like Pathé's *The Mighty Atom* had visualized the destructive power of atomic weapons by showing a map of London with a four-mile circular area marked on it to indicate how much of the city would be vaporized if a bomb were dropped on Tower Bridge; *Seven Days To Noon* employs a similar image in a scene in which a committee of military and political leaders plan their response to Willingdon's threat. Blankness, absence and obliteration infuse every aspect of the film. Even at a narrative level, it refuses to deliver any of the usual markers of the thriller genre in terms of fast-paced incident, ratcheting tension or complex characterization; scenes repeatedly fizzle out, their dramatic potential nullified. Instead, the film lingers on the details of the city's rapid militarization, and the brutality of the evacuation, which is enforced via house-to-house inspections performed at gunpoint. In one scene a man takes advantage of the dark, deserted city and robs a jeweller's shop; picked out by a spotlight while making his escape, he is summarily executed by an army sniper.

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[646] *Seven Days To Noon*, dir. by John Boulting and Roy Boulting (London Films, 1950).

The emotionless mechanism of bureaucratic diktat emerges as the most chilling protagonist in the piece; here it is the human which presences as absence when the timid and misguided scientist displays a mindless lack of agency in his role as the bomb's reified human prosthesis, which echoes the cold logic of the state. In *One Way Street*, Benjamin had already outlined the tendency of objects to enlist the human as a kind of flesh-and-blood prosthesis, compensating for their lack of warmth, and the loneliness of the enslaved subjects of industrialization is at the heart *Seven Days To Noon*, with Professor Willingdon akin to Benjamin's 'bus conductors, officials, workmen, salesmen' who 'feel themselves to be the representatives of a refractory material world'.[647] The cold aloofness of the bomb's inhuman logic is finally penetrated by Willingdon's daughter, who approaches him during his final desperate stand-off with the authorities and appeals to his memory of family life. That this climactic scene takes place in a blitz-ruined church is also significant: the porous walls of the ruin suggesting the fallaciousness of his fantasy of a totalizing and hermetic one-ness between him and the bomb he carries.

The figure of the obsessive scientist had by the mid-1950s begun increasingly to co-exist with the soldier as the archetypal human forced to grapple with the thing-world. Whereas Joe Anderson was a military man who had to put his trust in the scientific theories of his doctors, and Sammy Rice was a technical expert whose conflicts with the military would be resolved by the end of the film, Professor Willingdon was finally hunted down and disarmed by men in uniform who relished the chance to return the city to the state-controlled certainties of a wartime footing. In 1955 the two figures of scientist and soldier were again brought together in Michael Anderson's *The Dam Busters*.[648] On the surface, this film provides an image of perfect co-operation between the two archetypes, with the eccentric inventor Barnes Wallis reliant on the dashing heroics of Wing Commander Guy Gibson in order to bring his theory about the bouncing bomb to fruition. But, like *Seven Days To Noon*, this is also a film about the way martial technology creates lacunae in human relations which the thing-world then fills.

Like Willingdon, Barnes Wallis has an idyllic home life which the film sketches in during the early scenes, only to show him rejecting it and leaving it behind. Like Willingdon, too, Barnes Wallis's mental health is shown to be

[647] Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 454.
[648] *The Dam Busters*, dir. by Michael Anderson (ABPC, 1955).

jeopardized by his work, although in this case his obsession is successfully harnessed to the war effort. His progression away from home and family is clearly signposted: his early experiments with his bomb concept are conducted on a domestic scale with the help of his children, using a catapult and a water-filled trough. As the film progresses, the setting of his tests becomes further and further removed from the quaint English cottage in which we first see him: first he transfers his prototype into an industrial space full of technicians and equipment providing precise measurements, then he moves to Chesil Bank (scene of Sammy Rice's personal battle with a bomb) for full-scale testing under military supervision.

By the time Wallis has been entirely swallowed by the military environment of the Bomber Command airfield, all suggestions of domesticity have been replaced by an atmosphere of public-school banter and an ascetic lifestyle of communal meals and plainly furnished barracks. The one discordant note of warmth and affection is sounded, not by a human, but by Guy Gibson's dog. It is the dog which greets Gibson when we first glimpse him, climbing out of his aeroplane after a successful mission; it is the dog who sits at a table opposite him in his room while he relaxes and reads a newspaper. This faithful companion stands in for the wifely domesticity which Gibson denies himself, while the rest of the men in his company must make do with letters from home. These missives are echoed by the unopened valedictory letters left behind by the men killed in the bouncing bomb mission at the end of the film, and by the killed-in-action letters Gibson declares he is going off to write just before the credits roll. The absence of these dead airmen is represented only by words and by the material signifiers they leave behind: instead, it is the dog's death which is shown and lingered over. As the men receive their final briefing for the Dambuster mission, the dog is roaming around the base, being turned away at every door by men telling him 'He's not in his office', 'Not in here, go on!'. Finally the weary dog reaches the outer gate of the airfield and is killed by a speeding car which rushes on without stopping. When the news is brought to Gibson he immediately links the dog's death with the mission ahead: 'I'd like you to bury him at midnight on the grass verge outside my office,' he orders. 'I'd like you to do it then, just about the time we're going into the job over there.'

The film's heavy emphasis on the death of the dog is a counterweight to the lightness with which the deaths of the men are brushed off. The dog represents the natural side of humanity which must be repressed if the men are to be subsumed into

the technology of war. The motif is again of a troubling intimacy with things which fill in the absence of human relations: while Barnes Wallis works feverishly in his role as the bomb's proxy and human agent, the airmen succumb to a prosthetic attachment to their planes and weaponry, typified by the face-masks they wear which mediate their communications with each other and with the men in other planes. Without these masks, they are as mute as Joe Anderson, and they are silent in another crucial way too: the mission and the new technology is shrouded in secrecy. The men in the elite Dambuster squadron are socially and physically cut off from their comrades by this need for confidentiality, and the silent scenes at the end of the film, where the camera lingers on the dead men's abandoned possessions, is the logical conclusion of this severing of humanity and language. The film's ambivalence towards the military technology it is supposedly glorifying is expressed by the very man who invented the bomb, in the final conversation between Wallis and Gibson. 'Is it true? All those fellows lost?' Wallis asks. 'Fifty-six men. If I'd known it was going to be like this, I'd never have started.' Gibson, the trained soldier, recommends a dulling of the senses as the remedy for this human feeling: 'You mustn't think that way […] Why don't you go and find the doctor and ask for one of his sleeping pills?'

Just as in *The Undefeated* and *The Small Back Room*, though, the anaesthetic regime of medicine, narcotics or jingoism is undermined by the film's own determination to remind the audience of its fictivity. Barnes Wallis's bouncing bomb, the essential object driving the narrative, never manages to insert itself frictionlessly into the cinematography, but is represented by a combination of mismatched actualité footage and special effects in which the bomb has clearly been painted onto the negative by hand – a measure demanded by the Ministry of Defense in order to preserve the finer details of its design. This cartoon bomb gives rise to explosions created by bluescreen matting, with a 'hole' introduced into the footage of the detonation site, through which an image of an explosion is projected. Thus the key moment in the film – the destruction of the German dam – is framed by clear markers of artifice and artificiality. Wallis's homely garden experiment has culminated in a phantasmagoria of patriotic triumphalism, but that phantasmagoria


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has been 'exploded' – in Benjamin's terms – by 'the dynamite' of film and its undisguised technological manipulation of space and time. [649]

'Doing what the machine wants': C. P. Snow's *The New Men*

Film's attraction to narratives of prosthetic intimacy and cinema's potential for thingly self-commentary explains the prevalence of this medium in cultural responses to mid-century technological anxiety. One writer who did attempt to address these questions in a novel is C. P. Snow. *The New Men* (1954) is narrated by a staid and passionless civil servant, Lewis Eliot, and it tells the story of the rise of his younger brother, Martin, a second-rate nuclear physicist who reaches the heights of his profession at a secretive nuclear research plant through a ruthless willingness to capitalize on the mistakes of his colleagues. [650] Martin is one of the 'new men': an 'alien' as Lewis describes him, able to 'accept secrets, spying, the persistence of the scientific drive, the closed mind, the two world-sides, persecution, as facts of life.'[651] Snow repeatedly links this new mindset – which combines machievellian politicking with unreflective devotion to scientific progress – with a kind of mechanistic lack of humanity. 'People who know about government machines all end up by doing what the machine wants, and that is the trouble we have got ourselves in today,' says Arthur Mountenay, an older scientist whose qualms about the use of nuclear weapons mean he is gradually pushed out of the sphere of influence. [652]

When a scandal erupts about physicists who have been spying for the Soviets, Martin seizes his chance to demonstrate that he has absorbed the new realpolitik of nuclear research, while his maverick boss Walter Luke only absorbs the radiation that arises from their deadly work. During Walter's first attempt to synthesize plutonium, one of the protective concrete containers cracks, exposing him to a radioactive leak. Visiting Luke in hospital, Lewis is struck by his deathly appearance:

[649] Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 265.
[650] C. P. Snow, *The New Men* (London: Stratus, 2001).
[651] Snow, p. 231.
[652] Snow, p. 160.

> For a moment I remembered him as I had first met him […] Then he had been ruddy, well fleshed, muscular, brimming with a young man's vigour […] Now he was pale, not with an ordinary pallor but as though drained of blood; he was emaciated, so that his cheeks fell in and his neck was like an old man's; there were two ulcers by the left-hand corner of his mouth; bald patches shone through the hair on the top of his head.'[653]

Unlike the amputees in *The Undefeated* or *The Small Back Room*, Luke has not lost a part which can be prosthetically added back onto his body, but has been subtracted – 'drained' – by the vampiric, intangible thing which he has incorporated. Although able to say a few words, he is mostly silent and uncommunicative ('Luke lay quiet, his face so drawn with illness that one could not read it') and his primary worry is that he will be made sterile.[654] The myth of autogenesis described by Buck-Morss as 'the fantasy from which aesthetics springs' finds its opposite in the broken figure of Walter Luke – not a warrior but an intellectual, not encased in metal but all too porous, not capable of expression and self-reproduction but silent and non-reproductive.[655] Instead, it is the 'breeder' reactor which is capable of creating something other than itself, and which capitalizes on human greed, curiosity and ambition to build an environment inimical to human life:

> Martin led me to the hangar. It was empty, not a single human being in sight; it was noiseless, the pile standing silent in the airy space […] He did not see the curious, sinister emptiness of the place […] He took me to the control room, a cubbyhole full of shining valves with one kitchen chair placed, domestic and incongruous, in front of a panel of indicators.[656]

The incongruity of the domestic chair emphasizes the alienation demanded by this technological regime, and while Martin embraces his role as a 'new man' early in the book, it takes a cult-like initiation in the auratic presence of plutonium for Lewis to access this new form of inhuman intimacy. Martin lets him into the innermost heart

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[653] Snow, p. 137.
[654] Snow, p. 138.
[655] Buck-Morss, p. 7.
[656] Snow, p. 122.

of the research plant and shows him 'a floppy bag' with 'one corner […] weighed down, as though by a small heavy object, it might have been a lead pellet.'[657] For Lewis this is a moment of unexpected, life-affirming intimacy:

> [Martin] looked at the bag with a possessive, and almost sensual glance.
>
> I had seen collectors look like that.
>
> 'Touch it,' he said.
>
> I put two fingers in the bag and astonishingly was taken into an irrelevant bliss.
>
> Under the bag's surface, the metal was hot to the touch – and, yes, pushing under memories, I had it, I knew why I was happy. It brought back the moment, the grass and earth hot under my hand, when Martin and Irene told me she was going to have a child…. I had been made a present of a Proustian moment, and the touch of the metal, whose heat might otherwise have seemed sinister, levitated me to the forgotten happiness of a joyous summer night.'[658]

Lewis has reversed the revolutionary process described by Benjamin in the 'Artwork' essay, breaking through the Atget-like scene of the empty hangar (with its potential to trigger a disruptive insight into the danger of the project), in order to find comfort in the auratic singularity of the authoritative object, a prosthetic illusion of intimacy. But what are we to make of this peculiar appropriation of Proust's sensory epiphany? While Lewis accepts this joy as a gift, the reader is clear that something sinister has indeed happened here, some annexation of the human via the hot touch of metal. But while Benjamin's workers in *One Way Street* had had to compensate for the coldness of industrial things, in the atomic age it is an uncanny warmness and intimacy that threatens the human. Lewis is comforted by the tactility of the plutonium pellet – like Professor Willingdon's suitcase, it conforms to the human hand and so appears to be in the same category as the domestic, knowable objects of the everyday. Lewis has been transported to a moment full of the promise of a new life in gestation, but it is infertility and death that the plutonium is really gestating.

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[657] Snow, p. 217.
[658] Snow, *The New Men*, p. 217.

'"Or something" doesn't exist': Use-value as resistance in *The Offshore Island*

Marghanita Laski's play *The Offshore Island*, written for the BBC in 1954, pitches atomic alienation against the power of heroic and 'natural' human communities.[659] It uses the setting of a group of nuclear survivors to argue for a pure essence of humanity which emerges once commodity capitalism, technology, and geopolitical concerns have been removed. Over three acts, it depicts the attempts of the Verney family – Rachel and her teenage children James and Mary – to hold onto the small pocket of uncontaminated land they have nurtured for ten years since a nuclear war destroyed most of Europe. When American soldiers arrive, the family are told that they are being rescued and will be taken to the consumer paradise of America; by the end of the play, it is clear that this is a lie: American and Russian armies have in fact joined forces to cleanse Britain of any last survivors and plan to drop more bombs in a scorched-earth agreement designed to make sure that the territory is of no use to either side. Far from being saved, the Verneys gradually learn that they, along with any other 'contaminated persons', must either die where they are or be deported, forcibly sterilized, and incarcerated in 'reservations' in remote parts of North America.

Dramatically, the play fails to rise above its strident political agenda, but it is of interest in the context of other mid-century attempts to assimilate the threat of atomic apocalypse into the prevailing culture of progress and consumer desire. When placed next to Laski's *The Victorian Chaise Longue*, it highlights an implicit connection between new patterns of consumption emerging in the 1950s, and the annihilation of all consumption which seemed to be the inevitable outcome of the Cold War. In Laski's novella, Melanie's gentrified junk had insisted on the recursiveness of history and refused to succumb to the social amnesia of commodities severed from their origins. In *The Offshore Island*, a pure kind of use value has been restored, since the origin of every precious manmade object is tracked precisely by the resourceful survivors, who exploit the ontological fluidity of things liberated from economic exchange, and are thus capable of endlessly and freely repurposing them. In the opening scene, for instance, James and Mary argue over a knife that James is using to cut out pieces of a rubber tyre he has salvaged. 'Couldn't you have used your penknife or something?' Mary asks. 'My penknife has become a screwdriver,

[659] Marghanita Laski, *The Offshore Island* (London: Cresset Press, 1959).

and "or something" doesn't exist,' he replies.[660] In this radical return of wartime make-do-and-mend, the family recycle the component parts of old commodities like their car, television set and telephone, which no longer serve any function. These things take on the gothic attributes of uncanny revenance which the play's sentimentalist, Mary, finds uncomfortable; she wishes these commodity 'skeletons' could remain 'alive as themselves' rather than reappearing in pieces, their parts given new uses and meanings. [661] James, the pragmatist, argues that an object is only 'alive because it's being used'.[662] Like the shattered bodies of those who have been injured by conventional bombs, the repurposed commodities can overcome their dismemberment by rematerializing in new forms, but neither James nor Mary has come to terms with the atomization produced by nuclear weapons, which radically disincorporate and reincorporate bodies and things at a molecular level. They are presented with only two options by the American invaders: either succumb to their alienating system of control and industrial incarceration, or become so much atomic dust. Yet as a conversation between two of the soldiers makes clear, this latter option has been chosen by all the survivors they have met.

It is Mary who is most tempted by the Americans' offer; as she did with Melanie Langdon, Laski is interested in critiquing the role of women as the primary targets of, and conformists to, the fantasy that material objects can communicate personality or confer status. Pathetically, Mary has learned these norms only imperfectly, from old magazines; nevertheless, when she exchanges her string of pearls for a necklace made of shells, she has to be reminded that 'they're both valuable now, aren't they, shells and pearls alike, according to how much you fancy them.'[663] The honest, post-technological shell-necklace is contrasted with the 'long glittering ear-rings' presented to Mary by the Americans in an attempt to win her over to the idea of going with them – a gift Rachel sharply refers to as 'beads for the savages'. The provenance of these ear-rings is not made clear, but when, in the final act, the Americans cynically relieve Mary of the mink coat she has produced in an effort to impress them, there is a strong suggestion that such relics are routinely confiscated.

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[660] Laski, *The Offshore Island*, p. 2.
[661] Laski, *The Offshore Island*, p. 6.
[662] Laski, *The Offshore Island*, p. 6.
[663] Laski, *The Offshore Island*, p. 27.

In the end, however, both the Verneys' survivalist tools and the Americans' seductive commodities are overshadowed by the sterilizing immensity of absence promised by the atom bomb which has been sent to disinfect the space of both natural and cultural productiveness. Infertility is a constantly reiterated theme of the play: Rachel and her occasional partner Martin – the Verneys' distant neighbour who visits twice a year to barter food and information – discuss the lack of successful pregnancies among the survivors, as well as the three miscarriages Rachel has had after Martin's visits; despairingly, they make plans for Mary to move to Martin's small community while James becomes a partner for Martin's daughter. These plans would be futile even without the Americans' enforced sterilization programme, however: fallout from the original war has made procreation impossible. Just as in *Seven Days To Noon*, the atom bomb has incorporated the human subject in order to reproduce only its own inherent blankness.

Laski has set up two opposing thing-worlds in the play: the empty glitter of commodity culture and the threadbare dignity of utopian self-sufficiency. But the Americans' surprise entrance at the end of Act One, wearing face masks and protective suits and communicating with an unseen authority via radio equipment, emphasizes their disalignment from any kind of human system and their assimilation into a radically alienated thing-world. Set against this terrifying inhumanity, mere reification and commodification seem quaint. Laski wants to present commodities, with their supple ability to tap into hidden channels of desire, as the deceptive gateway to the cold intimacy of the nuclear object. Benjamin meditated on the 'spiny forms' of the industrial thing-world which require human agents to warm them up; mid-century writers were fearful of being ineluctably subsumed into an enveloping cold.

'Stop worrying': phallic weapons and comic bombs

The Americans' sterilization policy, and the prison camps set up for contaminated Europeans, of course evoke the Holocaust's combination of eugenics and mass slaughter; for Laski, atomic weapons were allied not only with sterility and a facelessly destructive bureaucracy, but with fascism and Nazism too. This ideological othering of atomic weaponry was characteristic of the moment when atomic research ceased to be, culturally speaking, the preserve of scruffy, lab-crazed

boffins driven by obsession and intellectual pride, and instead became associated with megalomaniacs inside windowless, technologically advanced lairs, cut off from reality and the lives of their millions of potential victims. Ian Fleming – politically as far removed as possible from the leftwing, CND-supporting Laski – was one of the first to codify this formula in popular culture. In his 1955 James Bond thriller *Moonraker*, he describes the ideal spatial and ideological environment for a rogue nuclear warhead: an underground plant built by a diehard Nazi, carved into a cliff face and lined with concrete and gleaming steel, where monk-like, shaven-headed technicians in identical uniforms labour to bring the ultimate weapon to life.[664] Inside this sterile space, the Moonraker atomic rocket represents a fantasy of sexualized machinery, ready to seed the world with death:

> For several minutes [Bond] stood speechless, his eyes dazzled by the terrible beauty of the greatest weapon on earth […] Up through the centre of the shaft, which was about thirty feet wide, soared a pencil of glistening chromium […] The shimmering projectile rested on a blunt cone of latticed steel which rose from the floor between the tips of three severely back-swept delta fins that looked as sharp as surgeons' scalpels. But otherwise nothing marred the silken sheen of the fifty feet of polished chrome.[665]

The evil mastermind behind this bomb, Hugo Drax, has been posing as an English philanthropist who survived a near-fatal explosion during the war. In fact, we learn that the German bomb which disfigured and nearly killed him was planted by his own men, and when his wounded body was mistaken for that of an English soldier, he adopted this false identity as cover for his elaborate atomic plot. Thus he has not only deceived his adopted country, he has betrayed the heroic narrative epitomized by *The Undefeated*: he is a bomb lover, not a victim, and his chosen prosthesis is monstrously phallic agent of revenge. His secret target is London, but as Bond's sidekick Gala reflects, it is obliteration and absence that Drax desires:

> The thin needle of the rocket. Dropping fast as light out of a clear sky. The crowds in the streets. The Palace. The nursemaids in the park. The birds in

[664] Ian Fleming, *Moonraker* (London: Penguin, 2004).
[665] Fleming, pp. 108-09.

> the trees. The great bloom of flame a mile wide. And then the mushroom cloud. And nothing left. Nothing, nothing, nothing.'[666]

In order to defeat Drax, Bond and Gala must negotiate an industrialized space which is designed to repel the human: they must crawl through painfully narrow ducts, swing from gantries and tolerate blasts of heat and steam before Bond can achieve his intimate encounter with the bomb itself. When he reaches it, he renders it harmless by re-setting its gyroscopic navigation system in a surgical operation which is reminiscent of – but more triumphantly straightforward than – Sammy Rice's tense excision of the booby-trap's fuse. In both cases, implacable technology must be countered by manual labour: both men use their hands to disrupt the inner workings of an outwardly inscrutable object. While Sammy's hands compensated for his missing foot, Bond begins the scene with his hands themselves disabled: Drax has bound them with rope before leaving Bond and Gala to die in the rocket's blast-zone. In one of his less plausible feats of physical prowess, Bond escapes this bondage by means of a blowtorch which he operates with his teeth; once free, his warm hands can touch the cold bomb and force it to accommodate the human.

Towards the end of the Cold War in 1984, Jacques Derrida wrote an emotive essay, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)' which yoked nuclear weapons and language together to express the void of meaning at the heart of deconstruction and différance.[667] For Derrida, nuclear war is 'a phenomenon whose essential feature is that of being *fabulously textual*, through and through':

> Nuclear weaponry depends, more than any weaponry in the past, it seems, upon structures of information and communication, structures of language, including non-vocalizable language, structures of codes and graphic decoding. But the phenomenon is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it.[668]

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[666] Fleming, p. 179.
[667] Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)' *Diacritics* Vol. 14, No. 2, Nuclear Criticism (Summer, 1984), 20-31.
[668] Derrida, p. 23.

He goes on to argue that literature is uniquely threatened by the 'remainderless' annihilation of mutually assured destruction because it is the most purely technological (that is, textual) form of expression: 'That is why deconstruction […] belongs to the nuclear age.'[669]

As I have argued, however, nuclear narratives of the 1950s addressed this fabulous quality of presence and absence as much through gothic overdetermination as through a postmodern deferral of signification – or rather, it might be said that the links between gothicism and postmodernity can be clearly traced in the narratives of the mid-century. The tension between two ways of understanding a nuclear bomb – as an all-too-present autotelic object preparing to breed death, or an absent, coded symbol of codedness itself, is demonstrated by the two iterations of Peter George's 1958 novel *Red Alert* [aka *Two Hours To Doom*], which mark a transition in the cultural treatment of bombs-as-things at the start of the 1960s.[670] George's earnest thriller concerns an unhinged general, Quenten, who deliberately orders an unauthorized nuclear strike on Russia in the paranoid belief that it is the only way to vanquish America's enemy. This scenario was freely adapted by Stanley Kubrick for the 1964 satire *Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.[671] In George's original, the emphasis is on the chain of command which Quenten has imposed on the B-52 bomber wing under emergency 'Plan R'. This plan makes all communication with the bombers impossible without a code which only they and Quenten know, which means that it is impossible for anyone else to tell them to abort their mission after the initial order is given. As in *Seven Days To Noon* and *The New Men*, the bomb has co-opted a human agent as a kind of prosthetic extension of itself, inspiring a cold-blooded obsession that obliterates warmth, compassion or reason. However, it is Quenten's own hand that defeats him: after he commits suicide, his secret code is deciphered just in time by Major Howard, who interprets the general's doodles on a notepad:

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[669] Derrida, p. 27.
[670] Peter George [aka Peter Bryant], *Red Alert* (New York: Rosetta, 2000).
[671] *Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, dir. by Stanley Kubrick (Columbia Pictures and Hawk Films, 1962).

> It was funny, he thought, flipping the pages and glancing idly at the scrawls and doodles there, how much of a man's subconscious is revealed when he scrawls on a pad. His conscious mind may be busy with other things. But his subconscious often prompts him to scrawl thoughts which are hidden deep beneath the surface.[672]

As in *The Undefeated* and perhaps *The Small Back Room*, human psychology is both the cause of, and the solution to, the object-world's attempts to commandeer human agency and make it subservient to techno-logic. But in *Red Alert*, the bomb itself, as a thing, barely makes an appearance except as an abstract threat, whereas by the time Kubrick came to adapt the novel, the missile's stubborn thingliness was placed firmly at the centre of the action. He turns a minor incident in the novel, in which a missile temporarily sticks in the damaged bomb-release mechanism of the B-52, into the film's mock-triumphant finale, as the bomber's cowboy commander Major 'King' Kong rides the missile, whooping, into oblivion.

Meanwhile, the character of Strangelove – entirely Kubrick's invention – represents an ironic resolution of the conflict between warm hands and cold technology. Strangelove's disobedient, Nazi-saluting limb is not a prosthesis but an alien invader insisting on its own version of history, and symbolizing an over-assertive thing-world; its fascist eruptions clearly signify Kubrick's attitude to the autotelic object. Meanwhile, the elusive three-letter code which will cancel the attack becomes part of a sinisterly overbearing technological interface between human and thing – like the bomber crew of *The Dam Busters*, the B-52 crew are entirely occupied with the minute adjustments required by their equipment, while Major Kong's lack of autonomy is emphasized by the fact that he can only read out pre-determined orders from a book as they fly towards certain death. Back in the War Room, technology is overtly fetishized; the politicians and generals sit in front of giant screens, while communication with the Russians is mediated by a telephone hotline.

Indeed, the idea of telephonic interventions into human communication, so central to *The Small Back Room*, is curiously echoed at the start of *Dr Strangelove* when army chief General Turgidson communicates with the Pentagon from the

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[672] George, p. 124.

lavatory in his bunker by shouting his answers to his bikini-clad girlfriend, who then relays them into the phone, listens to the response, and then shouts it back to Turgidson. The mediation of *The Small Back Room*'s corporeal/corporal girl/phone apparatus was a chilling reminder of the creeping otherness which the thing-world was seeking to impose on the human subject. By 1964, this prosthetic incursion could be played for laughs, but it also serves to foreground Kubrick's decision to return to the thing and insist that his audience contemplates its potential for intervention. In the figure of the Strangelove – whose very name suggests an alien intimacy – we find a filmic riposte to Heidegger: to accept philosophically the atom bomb's inevitable presencing – to 'stop worrying and love the bomb' – is presented as the idea of a fascist madman.

Kubrick's comic treatment of Cold War atomic politics was symptomatic of a general shift in attitudes towards the uncanny objects of modernity. The 1960s thing-world was, in a sense, just as threatening to the human subject as it had been in the immediate postwar period, and perhaps more so; but as the century matured and consumerism took hold, gothic warnings about the animation of the inanimate lost their sense of deep unease and became more playful. This thesis concludes by assessing the impact of mid-century gothic and the ways in which it influenced the next cultural turn.

Conclusion: Beyond the mid-century

There was no end to the ways in which nice things are nicer than nasty ones.

Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (1954)[673]

This thesis has argued for the existence of a postwar moment, lasting roughly ten years from 1945-55, which was distinct from the later 1950s and the emerging cultures of youth, protest and neophilia which flowered in the 1960s. What, then, became of mid-century gothic? If its stories of alien objects capable of infiltrating and intervening in the human realm contained a warning against the creeping interchangeability of people and the consumer goods which offered to define and placate them, then this warning was often drowned out by the normative bellow of advertising and mass culture. As the 1950s progressed, and the Cold War made great geopolitical struggles a question of abstract, bureaucratic concern rather than 'a personal matter', a new appetite for distracting pleasures took hold. The heroes (and, more rarely, heroines) of literature's Angry Young Men movement and cinema's New Wave refused to be bullied by over-assertive objects, and instead set out to prove that they could seize hold of them and repurpose them at will. An early example of this new attitude can be seen in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954). Jim Dixon's epiphanic realisation that 'nice things are nicer than nasty ones' marks the moment when this turn begins in British literature. Amis presents his banal observation as a revolutionary insight because he wishes to make explicit his own rejection of the norms against which Dixon – a stroppy young historian – is rebelling; yet, as the examples discussed in previous chapters show, there was already a strong antinomian impulse in mid-century gothic's interest in recalcitrance. *Lucky Jim* made its point by retrospectively defining the postwar decade as an era of dull conformity and excessive obedience, when in fact – as Doris Lessing observed in the quotation from *The Four-Gated City* cited in the Introduction – really 'the air had cleared well before'.[674] Perhaps the more telling cultural difference between the

[673] Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 243.
[674] Doris Lessing, *The Four-Gated City*, pp. 307-08.

earlier and later periods is the way non-commodities receded from view as objects worth paying attention to. The mechanism of shifting desire and partial satisfaction can already be seen in Dixon's proto-countercultural rebellion, which is expressed in terms of a restless need for personal fulfillment, rather than any considered position of political dissatisfaction.

In one of the key points of the novel, Dixon is invited to a social weekend by his head of department, and disgraces himself by sneaking off to get drunk in the local pub and then setting fire to his bed by falling asleep with a lit cigarette. The house of his host, Professor Welch, is replete with the solid English furniture and folksy knick-knacks which represented bohemian good taste to the previous generation; Dixon literally burns through these layers of cultural sediment and awakens the next morning with a hangover but a characteristic lack of angst. Buoyed by the attention of a pretty girl who offers to help him, he approaches the task of disposing of the charred remains with glib pragmatism, cutting away the burnt areas of sheets and blankets with a razor blade, repositioning an expensive rug in order to disguise the scorch marks, and hiding a damaged table among the other junk in a nearby lumber room:

> He unrolled a handy length of mouldering silk and spread it over the table-top; then arranged upon the cloth thus provided two fencing foils, a book called *The Lesson of Spain*, and a Lilliputian chest-of-drawers no doubt containing sea-shells and locks of children's hair; finally propped up against this display a tripod meant for some sort of telescopic or photographic tomfoolery. The effect, when he stepped back, was excellent; no observer could doubt that these objects had lived together for years in just this way.[675]

Dixon's ad-hoc curation of this mismatched set of objects is intended only to conjure up a sense of random junk gathered together for no purpose; unlike, say, the objects assembled for Jones's *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, or the bombsite debris collected by Henderson and Paolozzi for *Patio and Pavilion*, Dixon's exhibits are designed specifically to discourage the 'tomfoolery' of close looking. Instead, the mere fact of their superannuation is enough to provide camouflage for the recent conflagration.

[675] Amis, p. 74.

Dixon is the archetype of a generation entirely unburdened by postwar trauma; moreover, he is the opposite of Benjamin's revolutionary dreamer, awakened into consciousness by the piled wreckage of history. Dixon is a chimera, prone to pranks and disguises, and his drunken sleep does not provide access to radical rupture but merely catapults him into a scene of meaningless devastation which is all too easily consigned to an irrelevant past. Far from being haunted by uncanny debris, he is himself the impish spectre invading the Welches' personal and domestic space with his own mischievous and destructive agenda.

While mid-century gothic depended on a particular anxiety about time, Dixon's decision to live for the pursuit of 'nice things' coincides with his stark rejection of history, both as an academic career and as a force in his inner life: he ends the book on a moment of triumphant laughter which openly mocks the past and its claims to ongoing relevance. This kind of ahistorical insistence on grasping the available pleasures of the now was precisely the impulse which also interested Roland Barthes from 1954-56, when he was writing the essays on consumer culture which would be collected as *Mythologies*. Myth, Barthes wrote,

> abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.[676]

This view contradicts Adorno and Horkheimer's more gothic reading of mythology in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where enchantment was understood as both the precursor and potential antidote to rationalism and reification, continually redefined in order to subsume each newly superannuated layer of the once-cutting-edge. For Barthes, mythology does away with such dialectical complexity, coating mass culture with an approachable veneer of quasi-natural contemporaneity. His essay on the *Blue Guide* book on Spain notes that 'History is hardly a good bourgeois' and is therefore without traction in commodity culture; he proposes that more up-to-date

[676] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013) p. 256.

guidebooks should ignore old churches and monuments in favour of 'the urbanism, the sociology and the economy which trace today's actual and even most profane questions'.[677] A guide to modern culture, he argues, must primarily track and critique the workings of the dominant system of consumption; it can safely ignore the past, and indeed is required to do so in order to illuminate the eternal now of mass commodification.

Whereas, in mid-century gothic, human subjects struggled to assert their individuality through their relationships with variously uncanny, recalcitrant or inscrutably technological objects, Barthes describes a mediation of the human which depends on the abolition of individuality and the triumph of a system of communal preferences encoded and regulated by consumerism. His review of the 1955 Citroën DS car, for instance, treats it as a magical object 'from another world' which seems to have no origin or history, and is outside the system of production and capital. Yet while seeming entirely new on the outside, inside it conquers the potential aggressiveness of its technological futurism by assuming a familiar domesticity: 'The dashboard looks more like the worktable of a modern kitchen than a factory control room'.[678] Provocatively, he calls this car 'the almost exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedral', not for any ambition towards grandeur and sublimity but for the anonymity of its artists and the fact that it is 'consumed in its image, if not in its use, by an entire populace'.[679] Of course, gothicism in its original medieval form, as well as in later revivals, was always defined by a shocking unruliness rather than by the kind of glassy smoothness that characterized the Citroën car, but Barthes's evocation of the gothic in this essay, and the implication that the same class hierarchies are at work in the reception of luxury consumer durables as operated in pre-modern monumental architecture, suggests that mid-century unease could still be discerned by the attentive critic, even in the shiny dreamworld of the automobile show room.

In 1944, Elizabeth Bowen had observed blitz survivors piecing themselves together by collecting old fragments from the rubble; in 1964, Herbert Marcuse noted that 'The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their

[677] Barthes, p. 137; p. 136.
[678] Barthes, p. 171.
[679] Barthes, p. 169.

soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment.'[680] *One-Dimensional Man*, his influential study of consumerism and its ability to penetrate the personal, shows how the new became more important than the old during the intervening decades, yet his study echoes many of the concerns which underpinned mid-century gothic's unease about the thing-world. Clearly, despite the new attitudes represented by the likes of Jim Dixon, such disquiet persisted into the 1960s. It is there, too, in Harold Pinter's 1960 play *The Caretaker*, though it has lost its gothic overtones in favour of a sense of the absurd.

The eternal present of consumerism, which offers to solve any longing for a better future by proffering an endless supply of fleeting pleasures, increases the sense of temporal and spatial dislocation in the play. Pinter depicts three men locked in an endless battle to define themselves and each other, who are thwarted by their inability to come to terms with the past, present and future. Davies the tramp constantly refers back to his difficult past; because he has become untethered from his possessions, and from the crucial 'papers' he left in Sidcup, he has lost his identity and can only piece himself together temporarily via a series of found objects which (he frequently complains) never quite fit him properly. Aston, who offers him shelter, is suffering from the cognitive effects of shock therapy and lives only in the present because he can no longer organize his thoughts with sufficient clarity to remember the past properly nor to progress with his future plan, which involves building a shed in the garden. Aston's brother Mick, in contrast, always expresses his vision of the future confidently, although that vision changes from moment to moment. He makes extravagant claims about the transformation he will work on the flat they share, in terms culled from interior decoration magazines:

> Yes. Venetian blinds on the window, cork floor, cork tiles. You could have an off-white pile linen rug, a table in… in afromosia teak veneer, sideboard with matt black drawers, curved chairs with cushioned seats, armchairs in oatmeal tweed, a beech frame settee with a woven sea-grass seat, white-topped heat-resistant coffee table, white tile surround.[681]

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[680] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), p. 11.
[681] Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker* (London: Methuen, 1985) p. 60.

This is an unattainable fantasy: instead of such harmoniously assembled furnishings, replete with their fetishized material attributes, Mick's flat is in fact piled with old rubbish, as described in Pinter's at-rise description of the stage setting:

> To the right of the window a mound: a kitchen sink, a step-ladder, a coal bucket, a lawn-mower, a shopping trolley, boxes, sideboard drawers […] a couple of suitcases, a rolled carpet, a blow-lamp, a wooden chair on its side, boxes, a number of ornaments, a clothes horse, a few short planks of wood, a small electric fire and a very old electric toaster.[682]

Like *Lucky Jim*'s Dixon, Mick is hoping to consign such old junk to a forgotten past, but he is finding it hard to extricate himself and his flat from this mound of stuff. Pinter shows how human relationships break down in the context of material uncertainty and inadequacy of meaning. Uncanniness and overdetermination are ratcheted up into an insistent, baffling irrationality – an effect that is just as shocking and frightening as a gothic intervention. Individual agency is compromised on an intimate level by forces seemingly outside, and yet intimately imbricated with, the human.

Postwar things seemed remarkable in their ability to anchor themselves in space and time, creating vortices in the flow of history. Yet if an object's tangible presence might be assumed to be a marker of its incontrovertible reality, what happens when it has to express the future, not the past, and becomes the inadequate avatar of unattainable desire? The past can sometimes be held in the hand as a relic, and the present is to hand all the time; but the future has no materiality; and when an attempt is made to materialize it, something else happens: its promise melts away or stagnates clumsily, so that the object is always unsatisfactory, disruptive. As the twentieth century progressed, the uncanny was increasingly associated with a technological other, and science fiction took the place of gothic as the genre which critiqued the totalization of mass culture. In contemporary culture, with the emergence of autonomous digital objects, the twenty-first century has searched for new ways of understanding the thingliness of things and their relationship with the human. Yet by paying attention to the mid-century's preoccupation with nasty

[682] Pinter, p. 6.

things, we can regain a useful perspective on nice things' power to shock and unsettle us. Uncanny agency and alien intimacy continue to focus our sense of unease wherever the animate and inanimate come together.

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