Mass Observation and the early work of Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the rich and provocative fields of interaction between the early work of two founding members of the Independent Group, Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi, and, the documentary movement, Mass Observation. The photographs that Henderson produced in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the working class area of Bethnal Green have been ignored by art historians. In contrast, Henderson's close friend, Paolozzi, has received widespread critical acclaim. Paolozzi's collages, particularly those that he used as the basis of his 'Bunk' lecture at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in April 1952, have customarily been regarded as heralding a rebellious challenge to contemporary artistic expectations. The 'Bunk' collages, as they are now known, continue to be understood as radical works that initiated a more democratic approach to visual culture, and, more importantly, they are considered to be representative of that moment in the broader stream of British art history when the boundaries between mass culture and high art collapsed. For this reason Paolozzi is frequently dubbed 'The Father of British Pop'. This paternalistic nomination clearly suggests that it was Paolozzi who, by example, led the way in reorienting the relationship between mass culture and high art. Thus, in art historical accounts that deal with the trajectory of Pop Art in Britain, Paolozzi is seen as a liberatory figure whose anthropologically inclined interests in American mass media granted a license to those who were eager to release themselves from the shackles of high art.

While there is not doubt that for many attendants the 'Bunk' lecture of 1952 was an epiphanic moment, for at least one member of the audience this was not the case. Indeed, for Nigel Henderson, the occasion was one of recapitulation rather than revelation since the epistemological shift inherent in the 'Bunk' lecture was one that Henderson had been entirely conversant with since the
late thirties. Henderson’s working knowledge of Mass Observation, his familiarity with the documentary photographs of Mass Observation’s unofficial photographer Humphrey Spender, and the nature of his long association with figures such as Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Wystan Auden and Bertolt Brecht, positioned Henderson in such a way that, for him, the ‘Bunk’ lecture appeared rather ordinary.

By examining the early careers of Henderson and Paolozzi and by engaging in a comparative analysis of their early work it becomes apparent that many of the so-called groundbreaking aspects of Paolozzi’s work had long been embedded in Henderson’s attitude to making art. By approaching their work in this way, and by positioning their work within the wider context of the aspirations and achievements of Mass Observation, two significant challenges arise to current art historical accounts of British Pop Art. First, if Paolozzi continues to be understood as a liberatory figure who released the members of the Independent Group from the shackles of high art, then it must also be acknowledged that it was Henderson who had earlier removed those very same shackles from Paolozzi. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, if Paolozzi is to retain his title, ‘The Father of British Pop’, then it is Henderson who must be acknowledged as ‘The Grandfather of British Pop’ for it is his work, drawing as it does on a Mass Observation heritage, that articulates the epistemological shift so frequently attributed to Paolozzi.
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INTRODUCTION

On 12 December 1936, a letter, written by Cambridge school teacher Geoffrey Pyke, appeared in *The New Statesman and Nation*.1 Pyke opened his letter by asserting that it was impossible to determine the true nature of public reaction to the announcement of the affair between Edward VIII and Mrs. Simpson. Pyke perceived a state of confusion in distinguishing between the role of the press as a creator of public opinion and its role as a transmitter of unmediated opinion. He urged that the thousands of letters penned in response to the constitutional crisis be preserved and used as the basis of an anthropological investigation into British society. On 2 January 1937, a letter of response, titled 'Anthropology at Home', appeared in the same paper.2 The author of this letter was Charles Madge, a journalist for the *Daily Mirror* and Surrealist poet. Madge announced that a group had formed with the precise intention of undertaking such a study and volunteer observers were solicited to create a "mass science."3 The letter provided no indication of the group's methodology. Instead, Madge wrote of his intention to develop an investigative approach whereby scientific method would be allied with artistic form.

Through a coincidence, that must have been fascinating to the Surrealist leaning of Madge, this letter appeared on the same page as a lengthy poem by Tom Harrisson, an ornithologist and self-styled anthropologist who had recently returned to England after spending three years living amongst the indigenous people of the New Hebrides. Upon reading Madge's letter, Harrisson travelled to London to meet Madge and others who were similarly interested: Madge's wife, the poet Kathleen Raine; documentary film maker and founder member of the Surrealist group in England, Humphrey Jennings;

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3 Ibid., p. 12.
and David Gascoyne, author of *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (1935), translator of André Breton’s *What is Surrealism?* (1936), and, with Jennings, a member of the organising committee of *The International Surrealist Exhibition* of 1936.

This meeting took place some time between 2 January and 30 January 1937. Here, the endeavour became more than a cluster of ambitious ideas. Mass Observation was born. The official formation of Mass Observation was announced in a second letter to *The New Statesman and Nation* dated 30 January 1937, signed by Harrisson, Jennings and Madge.4

The constitutional crisis of 1936 led to widespread recognition of enormous gaps between reported knowledge and actual events. In short, the masses became acutely aware of their profound ignorance on matters of national significance. Charles Madge recalled that, in reporting on the events leading up to the abdication of Edward VIII for the *Daily Mirror*, he was well positioned to realise that the press coverage was largely fabricated.5 This produced what Tom Harrisson later described as a “gap between leader and led, between published opinion and public opinion, between Westminster chatter and Lancashire talk [which had] built an invisible barrier, dangerous in our democracy.”6 Mass Observation sought to redress this situation by gathering information about the customs, beliefs and opinions of ordinary people.

Collecting information and establishing facts about ordinary people, particularly working class people, has a long history in Britain. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were several investigations

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into working class life. However, these studies were primarily concerned with obtaining statistical data and with exposing the living conditions of specific regions. Little attention was given to the attitudes, feelings and beliefs of the people being studied. Mass Observation differed from the more conventional condition-of-England exposés in two fundamental ways. First, Mass Observation was more ambitious in its intentions and in the range of subjects to be studied. Secondly, Mass Observation's mode of operation was consciously developed in a way that enabled ordinary people to speak for themselves. Hence, two principal methods of gathering information were adopted. Full-time observers were employed to provide objective reports on set topics and on a wide range of ordinary behaviour. And, diarists kept detailed subjective accounts of their everyday lives. This dual approach gave rise to a wealth of information that formed the basis of a vast knowledge bank in which objective facts intersected with personal thoughts and opinions. The empiric existed alongside the imaginative so that an alliance was forged between the scientific and the artistic.

In *Britain by Mass Observation*, published two years after the formation of Mass Observation, Harrisson wrote of the voicelessness of the majority and contrasted their "intellectual serfdom" with the power of the "intellectual few". Mass Observation sought to remedy this situation by communicating their findings to the widest possible audience.

One of the main objects of this sort of science should be to get its results out to the public, not bury them in specialist journals and special language, as is the custom, often necessary, in most branches of research. If social science means anything, that meaning can and should be made clear to the people that it is about.

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8 Ibid., p. 232.
By gathering information and by making that information available to the general public, to those who constituted the subject of inquiry, Mass Observation aimed to release the masses from their 'intellectual serfdom'. As Charles Madge wrote in the pamphlet *Mass Observation*, "The availability of facts will liberate certain tendencies in science, war and politics, because it will add to the general social consciousness of the time."9 For Mass Observation, power was equated with knowledge, and, if knowledge about the masses, could be placed in the hands of the masses, this would lead to a transformation of society and a redistribution of power.

The relationship between knowledge, power and societal transformation had been apparent from the inception of Mass Observation. In *The New Statesman and Nation* letter of 30 January, Harrisson, Jennings and Madge wrote:

The artist and scientist, each compelled by historical necessity out of their artificial exclusiveness, are at last joining forces and turning back towards the mass from which they had detached themselves.

It does not set out in quest of truth or facts for their own sake or for the sake of an intellectual minority, but aims at exposing them in simple terms to all observers, so that their environment may be understood, and thus constantly transformed. Whatever the political methods called upon to effect the transformation, the knowledge of what has to be transformed is indispensable. The foisting on the mass of ideals or ideas developed by men apart from it, irrespective of its capacities, causes mass misery, intellectual despair and an international shambles.10

Clearly, Harrisson and his colleagues saw themselves as part of a movement that had the potential to effect considerable change. For them, transformation of society was consequent on accurate knowledge of the habits, customs, aspirations and feelings of ordinary people. Although Mass Observation was

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10 Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, 'Anthropology at Home', p. 155.
never able to fully realise its intentions, its attempts to democratise communication had far-reaching consequences.

Sixteen years after the foundation meeting of Mass Observation, a meeting of a different kind took place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Here, in April 1952, an invited audience of approximately thirty-five attended a lecture by Eduardo Paolozzi. This lecture, in which Paolozzi barely spoke, is a celebrated event in post-War English art. Indeed, it has acquired a mythical status as a generative moment of Pop art in Britain. ‘Bunk’, as the lecture was suggestively titled, consisted of epidiascope presentations of collaged scrapbook images that Paolozzi had compiled in Paris, where he had been working in the late forties. In addition, he created temporary collages by placing onto the epidiascope randomly chosen images torn from their original contexts and sources. These images, placed side-by side, sometimes upside down and frequently overlapping each other, consisted of material from sources not usually associated with fine art: advertisements from recent American magazines, images of cars, showgirls, robots and skyscrapers, cover pages from Science Fiction magazines such as Astounding Science Fiction, military images and pictures of vast quantities of food.

The ‘Bunk’ lecture is important for two reasons. First, it is commonly understood to be the first meeting of the Young Group, later re-named The Independent Group. Although this understanding is slightly misrepresentative of the complex events surrounding The Independent Group’s formation, it is certain that a number of people present during that evening in April 1952 constituted a core within The Independent Group. Secondly, the nature of the material coupled with the manner of its presentation had a profound impact on the audience. For many, the occasion marked a historically significant shift in thinking about aesthetics. “It was the first time”, recalls the architect Colin St.
John Wilson, “that pictures had been shown - blam, blam, blam - without recognisable order or logical connection”.11

St. John Wilson’s comment is revealing. He suggests that the procedures used to present the collages to the audience were as significant as the subject matter of the collages. In presenting the images without any logical connection or preordained order, the structure of the lecture echoed the apparent randomness of the collages. The collage effect was further heightened through a series of technical errors that caused many of the images to project on to the ceiling, the side-walls and, more provocatively, on to the slightly moving backs and heads of members of the audience who thus became unwitting yet literal components of the collages. Moreover, Paolozzi’s refusal to offer didactic explanation allowed an intuitive and experiential apprehension of the material’s potency. In effect, Paolozzi created a visual environment in which the means of experience and the experience of meaning became inseparable.

Being disinvested of commentary, the images of recently designed Studebakers, B-17 and B-29 aeroplanes, Jane Russell and Fred Astaire, advertisements for Van Heusen ties and scantily clad women on the covers of *Intimate Confessions, Breezy Stories* and *Science Fantasy*, enabled an open-ended imaginative entry into America. In speaking about the impact of American magazine imagery, Paolozzi recalled the seductiveness of American commercial culture. For him, America offered limitless possibilities not felt in Britain.

The American magazine represented a catalogue of an exotic society, bountiful and generous, where the event of selling tinned pears was transformed into multi-coloured dreams, where sensuality and virility combined to form,...an art form more subtle and fulfilling than the orthodox choice of either the Tate Gallery or the Royal Academy...The fact that my friends and I were bound together by a form of poverty,

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living in rented rooms with no ice boxes, no cameras, and no fancy clothes, only added to the piquancy of these lush magazine images.12

Here, Paolozzi enthusiastically welcomed American mass media for its capacity to invoke pleasure and enjoyment, to aid in the construction of private dreams and to satisfy personal desires. Such responses to American mass culture lay at the heart of anti-American sentiment in Britain. In April 1951, the National Cultural Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain held a conference on 'The American Threat to British Culture'. In a special issue of Arena, a supplement devoted to the proceedings of the conference approached mass culture as an inferior and viable threat to high culture. Hollywood movies, comic strips, mass journalism and advertising were regarded as obstacles to serious creative pursuits. Coincidentally, a number of magazines Paolozzi used as the basis of his 'Bunk' collages were singled out as particularly contemptible: *True Confessions, True Story and True Romances.* In an article devoted to American mass media, Sam Aranovitch described these magazines as a "flood of filth"13 and American magazines, in general, were declared dangerous, precisely because of their capacity to generate desire. Aranovitch wrote, "The hopes and frustrations of the people are played on in a million variations, brushing aside the idea of struggle, insisting on the idea of wishing."14 Whereas Aranovitch dismissed American magazines as a distracting indulgence, Paolozzi clearly revelled in their vitality and in their ability to invoke a self-determining freedom.

Paolozzi's comments provide a poignant description of the stark contrast between the actualities of British life and the image of America conveyed in the magazines. He is acutely aware of the tensions that exist between the presence

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14 Ibid., p. 9.
of the image and the absence of the represented object and of the improbability of an exchange between the two.

England was very run down after the war...Rationing went on until the 1950s...There was an austerity in publishing. There was no Sunday supplements and no television sets. It was rather like what one would find in Czechoslovakia or Moscow now, a curious, starved, artificial society...There was a terrible poverty of ideas and intellectual activity.\textsuperscript{15}

For Paolozzi, as indeed for Peter Reyner Banham, America was, as the following makes clear, a land of dreams that suggested what life could ideally be, a Paradise whose commercial culture could only be accessed through imaginary activity.

One of the great trainings for the public's eye was reading American magazines. We goggled at the graphics and the colour-work in adverts for appliances that were almost inconceivable in power-short Britain, and food ads so luscious you wanted to eat them. Remember we had spent our teenage years surviving the horrors and deprivations of a six-year war. For us, the fruits of peace had to be tangible, preferably edible. Those ads may look yucky now, to the overfed eyes of today, but to us they looked like Paradise Regained - or at least a paper promise of it.\textsuperscript{16}

Paolozzi's 'Bunk' lecture of 1952 and the meeting at which Mass Observation was officially formed, have rarely been brought together in historical writings dealing with British art of the 1950s. Each has been treated independently of the other so that nodal points of contact between the ambitions and achievements of Mass Observation and the aesthetic underpinnings of the Independent Group have been overlooked in favour of accounts that seek to establish the Independent Group as an originatory force that rejected British culture of the thirties and forties. In such accounts, Britain in the 1950s is situated as a society and culture turned outward, cognisant of the development


and qualities of Parisian modernist art while consciously shunning British art and culture of the thirties and forties. Historians tend to emphasise the significance of European modernism and post-war American culture for British artists of the fifties at the expense of considering the value of British art and culture of the preceding two decades.

Art historical writings dealing with the Independent Group are largely based on the accounts provided by members of the Group. The assessments of Lawrence Alloway and Reyner Banham have been especially influential in shaping and informing subsequent writings. Although there are major points of disagreement between their accounts, notably, in relation to the political orientation of the Group, a fundamental premise about the historical position of the Group overrides internal differences of approach and viewpoint. Alloway, Banham and their colleagues were convinced of the necessity to challenge and overturn the aesthetic position of their British elders. This conviction served to unify the individual members of the Group. Indeed, in 1976, Richard Hamilton recalled in the film Fathers of Pop, "That it was a resentment of the ICA actually bringing these people together...and so we said, all right, we'll be together but we want to be independent of the ICA."17

In seeking to establish their independence, Alloway, Banham, Paolozzi, Hamilton, Toni del Renzio, and Alison and Peter Smithson promoted the view that they were dedicated to subverting the Institute of Contemporary Art's founding objectives and to replacing them with matters of more vital concern to a rising generation of artists, architects and critics. By positioning itself in an oppositional relation to their elders at the ICA, the radicalness of the Independent Group's restructuring of cultural values is heightened, while the value of British art and culture is downplayed. In this sense, the Institute of

Contemporary Arts and in particular its President, Herbert Read, function as a foil for the Independent Group.

Existing histories reiterate and uphold this view. In 1983, Dick Hebdige's article 'In Poor Taste: Notes on Pop' was published in *Block*. Hebdige wrote:

...Pop is interpreted as a kind of internal putsch, as a reaction occurring more or less exclusively within the confines of the art world. From this viewpoint, Pop is regarded as a more or less conscious move on the part of a group of ambitious young Turks, intent on displacing an older group of already established Academy painters and sculptors - in Britain, Henry Moore, Stanley Spencer, Graham Sutherland, et al;...18

Here, Hebdige echoes the position that Richard Hamilton had earlier outlined in *Fathers of Pop*. Hamilton stated:

The thing that I remember most about the binding influence of my friends and colleagues was a kind of resentment of the idea best expressed in little anecdotes like when Victor Pasmore came up before a conscientious objection tribunal...And Kenneth Clark sent a letter saying 'Victor Pasmore is one of the six best artists in England'; and as soon as he said 'the six best artists' you immediately knew who the five previous ones were: there was Henry Moore, John Piper, Ben Nicholson...and you could tick them off on your fingers and get to Victor Pasmore. And the idea that there was an establishment of this kind that could be so precise about what English art was, was anathema to me.19

Both Hamilton and Hebdige were keen to position the Group in terms of its relative distance from the 'establishment', a thinly veiled reference to the Institute of Contemporary Arts. More recently, Marco Livingstone continues the approach whereby the Group's achievements are contextualized by the ICA. In a catalogue essay for the 1991 exhibition *Pop Art* he wrote,

Pop Art in Britain was created largely by very young men both as a direct reflection of their viewpoint on the culture and as a rebellion against the art establishment...Pop artists in Britain,...sought to inflict

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deliberate destruction on the elaborate preconceptions constructed by artists of the generation immediately before them.20

This dissertation does not set out to chronicle the achievements of the Independent Group since their work has been fully and ably discussed elsewhere. Anne Massey's discussion of the Independent Group has been particularly useful for its questioning and challenging of the myths that, until recently, have surrounded the Group and Graham Whitham's teleological account of the origins and development of the Independent Group has clarified many of the factual details.21 It is not the intention to cover the ground again here. Nor is it the intention to argue that the approach taken by Livingstone, Hebdige and others, is 'wrong', in any absolute sense. Rather, by comparing the early work of Henderson with the work that Paolozzi produced prior to the 'Bunk' lecture, and by considering their shared visual experiences, this thesis sets out to question the art historical merit that has been bestowed upon Paolozzi. This is not to diminish Paolozzi's significance but rather to uncover the informative and influential role that Henderson played in the early years of Paolozzi's career, to position Henderson as a conduit between Paolozzi and the debates of the thirties regarding the definitions of culture. For Henderson, many of these debates emerged within the context of his intimate working knowledge of Mass Observation and their socio-anthropological approach to creating a more democratised culture and it is within this context that Paolozzi's indebtedness to Henderson becomes most clearly apparent.

One of the defining characteristics of Mass Observation and the early work of Henderson and Paolozzi was their critically self-conscious attitude to the

present. All were preoccupied with investigating their immediate surroundings as a means to posing radical questions about representing everyday life. It was argued that this would lead to a shift in cultural values and, consequently, to a shift in social boundaries. It is precisely this, a continuity of stance and approach, more than likeness of style and form, that links the early work of Henderson and Paolozzi to Mass Observation and, indeed, to the broader documentary impulses of the thirties.

John Russell refers to Mass Observation in his introductory essay to *Pop Art Redefined*, a book written to accompany an exhibition of the same title at the Hayward Gallery in 1969. Russell accords with those who claim that the formation of the Independent Group in 1952 marked the beginnings of Pop in Britain. He asserts, “before that time, pre-echoes were few and largely accidental”, since in the 1930s there did not exist “that point of saturation, that super-profusion of messages from the mass media, which made the starting-point of Pop.”22 It is true that, in the 1930s, mass media imagery was not as pervasive as it was in the 1950s. However, Russell’s insistence on a causal relationship between the quantity of mass media imagery and the emergence of Pop is an over-simplification. Mass Observation was profoundly interested in the mass media. Indeed, Mass Observation had been propelled into existence by its fascination with the role of the mass media in shaping personal experience and structuring everyday life. That Mass Observation’s investigations into popular culture were taking place some fifteen years prior to those of the Independent Group, at a time when fields of vision were less dominated by mass media, does not exclude Mass Observation from the historical and cultural context of British Pop.

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Russell's discussion of British art and culture in the thirties is worth further consideration. After noting the existence of deep divisions between high culture and popular culture, and that the differences between them were not negotiable, he writes:

There was a higher life, and a lower one, and from the font onwards people were destined for one or the other. There were amateur anthropologists - Mass Observers, they were called - who looked into the patterns of humble life, much as tourists in New Mexico look into a Hop [sic] reservation. But in general it was not the thing to cross the tracks; and when people pelted along the Waterloo Road to see Coriolanus at the Old Vic, it never occurred to them to look into the little newsagent's on the corner.

But someone who did look into that newsagent's was George Orwell. 'The general appearance of these shops is always very much the same,' he wrote. 'A few posters for the Daily Mail and the News of the World outside, a poky little window with sweet-bottles and packets of Players, and a dark interior smelling of liquorice allsorts and festooned from floor to ceiling with vilely-printed twopenny papers, most of them with lurid cover-illustrations in three colours.' Among these papers he singled out 'the long series of 'Yank Mags' (Fight Stories, Action Stories, Western Short Stories, etc.) which are imported shopsoiled from America and sold at twopence halfpenny or threepence.'

Orwell disliked most of this, but he never patronized it. He applied to it precisely the analytical method which he applied to Dickens ... he looked at it, quite calmly and objectively, as something which structured the inner life of millions of people. For them, it was not an alternative to high culture; it was culture, in the strict sense, and the only one they had.

The view of English life put forward by Orwell in Keep the Aspidistra Flying had no parallel in English art. If one were scouring the 1930s for a portent-picture, Lawrence Gowing's 'Mare Street, Hackney' would probably serve best...

It is striking that Orwell's writings of the 1930s are given attention in a book dealing with Pop art. It is significant that, from all of the 1930s writers who were committed to social investigation, Russell nominates Orwell rather than, for example, Walter Greenwood, James Hanley, Lewis Grassic Gibbon or John

23 Ibid., pp. 25-26.
Sommerfield. Each was concerned with presenting social knowledge through direct observation, and, in this sense, Orwell was no different. What distinguishes Orwell’s work from these contemporaries is that, contrary to Russell’s claims, Orwell’s writing is patronising, it is emotive rather than calm, and, most importantly, it is both subjective and objective.

The significance of Orwell, for Russell, is not so much that Orwell ‘looked into the newsagent’s’, for Orwell was but one of many who did. Rather, Orwell’s appeal rests on the conviction that popular cultural forms such as the Daily Mail, the News of the World, twopenny papers and ‘Yank Mags’ structure and shape personal experience; they inform the ‘inner life of millions of people.’ For Orwell, popular culture was noteworthy because of its capacity to articulate alternative cultural identities and because of the possibilities it offered for widening the field of art and cultural criticism. Orwell advocates an expansionist aesthetic, a shifting in the very notion of what constitutes culture. It is this democratizing of cultural attitudes and values, his attachment to a specific sense of popular culture’s function as an element in a society’s self-definition, that Russell recognises as being in common with the Independent Group. What Russell fails to appreciate is that these were fundamental to Mass Observation’s drive towards egalitarianism.

Russell’s enthusiasm for Orwell’s writing contrasts with his lukewarm response to English art of the thirties. He asserts that Orwell’s Keep the Aspidistra Flying of 1936, with its detailed descriptions of advertising hoardings and frequent references to twopenny novels, presented a view of English life unparalleled in English art. Russell is clearly ambivalent towards Gowing’s Mare Street, Hackney (1937-38, Fig. 1). In his opinion, this painting typifies British art of the thirties because everyday life is rendered assimilable through technical conservatism.
The unacceptable had its place...but it was confined to the subject matter. That subject matter was 'redeemed'...by the traditional beauties of the execution...People who would never tread the streets of Hackney were willing,...to hang a Gowing: treatment was all. Common life was purified, dandified, and disinfected by art.24

Russell's choice of painting is curious. If Russell was searching for a parallel to *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, there are more fitting works. Consider, for example, Clive Branson's *Battersea Station* of 1939 (Fig. 2), a painting that features the same subject matter as *Mare Street, Hackney*: a double-decker tram working its way through the main street of a working class borough. But, whereas Gowing

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24 Ibid., p. 27.
retreats from revealing the specificities of a high street in a working class area, the attention to detail in *Battersea Station* conveys Branson’s genuine enthusiasm for his subject. Apart from the title, Gowing’s painting reveals nothing of its location: it is a painting of no particular place. Branson’s painting, on the other hand, is clearly situated in Battersea. A sign reading ‘Battersea Station’ stretches horizontally above the railway overpass that carries an advertisement for Hastings Ltd, a well-known building company specialising in the construction of engineering and factory buildings. *Battersea Station* is saturated with informational and promotional material: an advertisement for Bovril, a pub sign and a bus-stop sign, a hoarding with the word Lenin boldly written across it and several posters on the shop front advertising tea, coffee and nine pence dinners. To the lower left of these, a notice points the way to the Brigade, presumably the Workers Brigade. This bombardment of images constitutes a gallery, a streetscape so visually dense that it is reminiscent of the moment in the opening chapter of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* when Gordon Comstock looks through the window of Mr McKechnie’s bookshop and observes a tram gliding over the cobbled street against a backdrop of hoardings covered with advertisements for "QT Sauce, Tru-weet Breakfast Crisps (‘Kiddies clamour for their Breakfast Crisps’), Kangaroo Burgundy, Vitamalt Chocolate, Bovex."25 *Mare Street, Hackney*, on the other hand, is devoid of such signs. Whereas Branson makes no attempt to obscure the information conveyed by the advertisements and posters, the advertisements in *Mare Street, Hackney* are dissolved beneath a haze of greyish-brown paint and are thus rendered illegible. The name of the corner shop to the right of the painting is incomprehensible and the rectangular spaces halfway between the upper and lower decks on the side of the bus are suggestive of advertising posters, but they lack concrete detail. Similarly, to the left of the painting there are blank rectangular spaces above the shop windows and immediately behind these,

further down the street, is a protruding shop sign that, again, is a blank space. The one discernible sign in Mare Street, Hackney is the tram number.

A comparison of these two paintings reveals a fundamental difference in approach and attitude. Branson’s concern is to reveal diversity and complexity; to present a broad perspective without losing sight of the particularities and realities of the everyday world. Battersea is represented as vibrant, stimulating and prosperous. It pulsates with a powerful energy. Branson’s painting alludes to a multiplicity of perceptions, ideas, images, sensations, events, and experiences. In sharp contrast, Gowing’s Hackney is bleak and mundane, a place where the absence of social relations is paralleled by an absence of advertising imagery. For Branson, such imagery is central to the material fabric of urban life. Indeed, in contrast to Gowing’s painting, the advertising images in Battersea Station appear to animate social experience. This relationship between popular culture and social experience is absent from Mare Street, Hackney. Gowing denies the potential of advertising imagery to generate understanding and meaning. In Mare Street, Hackney, commonplace facts and raw particularities are unintelligible, and thus remain mysterious. They are concealed beneath layers of grey paint and this enables the painterliness to serve as a mediation between fine art and everyday subject matter. Russell is quite right when he declares that in Mare Street, Hackney Gowing purifies and disinfects common life. However, had Russell looked elsewhere, he would have discovered there were a number of artists who, like Orwell, refused to temper their work.

If Mass Observation was determined to provide the masses with a voice, it was equally concerned with the role that seeing played in documenting everyday life. Writing in 1960, Tom Harrisson privileges sight over speech:

...the whole of verbal statement is only a fraction of the total subject matter of a living, realistic social science.
...the anthropologist who wants to go deep should try and spend long periods not so much listening to (let alone questioning in) words, but watching and recording exactly what he sees. Perhaps the most important - and as far as I know unexploited - piece of technical equipment for any sort of scientist is the ear plug.26

Seeking to establish a kaleidoscopic, all-embracing museum of knowledge about all forms of human activity and behaviour, painters and photographers were recruited to produce visual accounts of everyday life. Euston Road artists Graham Bell and William Coldstream produced paintings for Mass Observation's Bolton project and Julian Trevelyan contributed photographs and collages. The most comprehensive body of visual material produced for Mass Observation was the hundreds of photographs by Humphrey Spender. These works, more than any other, challenge Russell's claim that, during the thirties, there was no artistic parallel to Orwell's Keep the Aspidistra Flying.

Indeed, Spender's photographs of Bolton go beyond the idea of visual images serving as a mere parallel to text. This becomes apparent by considering the role of photography in another work by Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, published in 1937, at the height of the documentary movement. In its original edition, The Road to Wigan Pier contained a portfolio of thirty-two photographs that documented the dire living conditions of the poor.27 Yet, these photographs reveal little that has not already been recorded by Orwell. While the photographs may have been incorporated to provide Orwell's shocking account with a heightened sense of veracity and authenticity, the fact that the photographs have been excluded from all subsequent editions, with the exception of the 1958, 1986 and 1989 editions, questions their necessity. Spender's photographs, on the other hand, complement and intersect with Mass Observation's written reports. More importantly, the photographs articulate what cannot be revealed by speech. Harrisson alluded to the crucial

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27 The photographer is unacknowledged and remains unknown.
role of visual imagery in Mass Observation when he wrote, "It was because we distrusted the value of mere words that we were so keen to employ artists and writers, and photographers." This lack of trust was based on the belief that accounts that relied totally on words remained incomplete. "What people say is only one part - sometimes a not very important part - of the whole pattern of their thought and behaviour."

Mass Observation's mapping of popular culture and everyday life constitute a vital link with the early work of Henderson and Paolozzi. Nigel Henderson had long known about Mass Observation through his association with Bell, Coldstream, Trevelyan, Jennings, and Harrisson, who was a regular visitor to the Henderson household in Bethnal Green. Henderson's familiarity with Mass Observation is apparent in the photographs he took in Bethnal Green between 1949-1952. As with the photographs Humphrey Spender took for Mass Observation, Henderson's visual documentation of everyday life in Bethnal Green complement and intersect with detailed observational reports being compiled by his wife Judith. Indeed, the formal qualities of Henderson's photographs have striking consonances with Spender's. These photographs, often taken in the company of Eduardo Paolozzi, as the two roamed the streets of Bethnal Green and its adjacent boroughs, are grounded in an anthropological approach to culture. It is this approach that informs Paolozzi's early work, particularly the collages he produced during the years of his close association with Henderson. Their socio-anthropological approach to culture, motivated as it was by a passionate concern with all forms of contemporary culture has, at its roots, a sense of continuing and extending the work undertaken by Mass Observation.

28Britain in the Thirties: Photographs by Humphrey Spender with an introduction and commentary by Tom Harrisson, Lion and Unicorn Press, Royal College of Art, London, 1975, p. 3.
CHAPTER ONE
ANTHROPOLOGY AT HOME

Throughout the nineteen thirties, a number of issues and ideas served to define the various ways in which working class people were investigated. Many accounts of working class areas were based on the premise that these communities constituted a separate unknown nation that was worthy of exploration. J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934), Bill Brandt's *The English at Home* (1936), George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), John Grierson's documentary films and the documentary movement Mass Observation, were all concerned, to varying degrees, with demystifying and demythologising working class life. But the thirties was not exceptional for its concern with penetrating working class communities. Nor was the thirties unusual for its preoccupation with documenting the lives of working class people, for throughout the late nineteenth century, working class people, particularly those inhabiting the East End of London, were repeatedly scrutinised. For many late nineteenth century novelists and social investigators, working class regions, such as the East End, were sites of discovery, alien and foreign, yet knowable through statistics and factual descriptions and through first-hand accounts of journeys into working class territories. In constructing accounts of working class people, late nineteenth century writers employed a number of rhetorical devices that emerge in the documentary endeavours of the thirties. Consider, for example, a passage from *The Condition of England* (1909), a book in which Charles Masterman argued for the need to incorporate the voiceless masses into the state. Masterman reminds his readers:

> Again, we know little or nothing to-day of the great multitude of the people who inhabit these islands. They produce no authors. They edit no newspapers. They find no vocal expression for their sentiments and desires.¹

To turn from Masterman, to the 1937 pamphlet *Mass Observation*, written by Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, two founders of the newly established documentary group Mass Observation, is to recognise a similar approach. In both, there is an emphasis on the unknown people. Madge and Harrisson write:

> How little we know of our next door neighbours and his habits; how little we know of ourselves. Of conditions of life and thought in another class or another district, our ignorance is complete.²

This chapter deals with a number of approaches to unknown people that emerged in the thirties. Particular attention is given to what is now the best known account of exploration into working class life undertaken during the 1930s, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Orwell’s book was written at the height of the documentary movement in Britain and appeared at a time when there was considerable discussion about the need to develop documentary forms of literature. At the centre of these discussions was the question of how the literature of fact could be brought to bear on the literature of fiction. Although the status of *The Road to Wigan Pier* as a work of documentary is arguable, it is, for instance, dismissed by Samuel Hynes on the grounds of being too subjective, it is possible to conceive of Orwell’s book as an account in which the author displays a self-conscious concern for the very methods and structures by which documentary forms of literature are constructed.³ It will be argued that Orwell’s concerns with method and structure intersect with Mass Observation’s attempts to forge an inextricable link between the methods of presenting knowledge and the substance of that knowledge.

Mass Observation’s approach to documenting working class lives was informed by the anthropological methodology of Bronislaw Malinowski. Like Mass Observation and Orwell, Malinowski was concerned with the methods by

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which accounts of unknown people were constructed. But, whereas Mass Observation developed an approach that enabled ordinary people to speak for themselves, and whereas Orwell was aware of the impact that his class based position had on his perception of working class people, Malinowski's approach is one in which he sees himself not only as the creator of knowledge, but as the creator of the subjects under study. These three approaches to investigating unknown people form the basis of this chapter. It will be argued that, although on the surface, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and Mass Observation appear to have little in common, in fact, the reverse is the case. In contrast, it will be argued that, while Mass Observation and the anthropological work of Malinowski appear to have much in common, here too, the reverse is the case, for the two diverge on an issue that is fundamental to each.

Of course, neither Mass Observation, Orwell nor Malinowski, were unique in their desire to document unknown people. The idea of penetrating alien territories within Britain had held considerable appeal since at least the mid nineteenth century. Although Mass Observation and *The Road to Wigan Pier* represent a unique moment in the documentary endeavours of the thirties, they also look back to the late nineteenth century and this, as will be argued, is evident in the rhetorical devices that pervade *The Road to Wigan Pier* and, to a lesser extent, the approach of some members of Mass Observation.

In the late nineteenth century, the well-known journalist and social investigator, George Sims, began his description of the East End of London in this way:

> In these pages I propose to record the result of a journey into a region which lies at our own doors - into a dark continent that is within easy walking distance of the General Post Office. This continent will, I hope, be found as interesting as any of those newly-explored lands which engage the attention of the Royal Geographic Society - the wild races who inhabit it will, I trust, gain public sympathy as easily as those
savage tribes for whose benefit the Missionary societies never cease to appeal for funds. 4

A decade or so later, Jack London expressed a similar sentiment, with a somewhat sharper ironic edge, in *The People of the Abyss* (1903). "O Cook, O Thomas Cook & Son," he apostrophized,

path finders and trail-clearers, living sign-posts to all the world, and bestowers of first aid to bewildered travellers - unhesitatingly and instantly, with ease and celerity, could you send me to Darkest Africa or Innermost Thibet, but to the East End of London, barely a stone's throw distant from Ludgate Circus, you know not the way!5

The spatial metaphors that Sims and London employed were part of a limited stock of rhetorical devices that were produced and reproduced in late nineteenth century writings aimed at documenting and knowing the East End of London. The East End, and, by extension, all working class London, was repeatedly characterised as foreign and alien, as an unexplored underworld, as a dark abyss that nurtured disease and contamination. One of the most common rhetorical devices was an insistence on strangeness, and, as John Tagg notes in *The Burden of Representation*, strangeness was something more than geographic and physical separation.6 There are numerous examples in late nineteenth century writings that employ such devices.

In Arthur Morrison's *A Child of Jago* (1896), the Jago is "the blackest pit in London" where a sub-human population "swarmed in thousands".7 The people are like "great rats",8 and class and racial myths combine with Social Darwinism

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8 Ibid., p. 45.
to alarm the reader: "the Jago rats bred and bred their kind unhindered, multiplying apace and infecting the world."9

A similar rhetoric is employed by Charles Booth in his comprehensive study of East London, *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1889). He writes:

East London lay hidden from view behind a curtain on which were painted terrible pictures: Starving children, suffering women, overworked men; horrors of drunkenness and vice; monsters and demons of inhumanity; giants of disease and despair. Did these pictures truly represent what lay behind?...This curtain we have tried to lift.10

Masterman, too, insists on the alien, unknown nature of East London.

But below this large kingdom, which for more than half a century has stood for 'England', stretches a huge and unexplored region which seems destined in the next half-century to progress towards articulate voice, and to demand an increasing power...To most observers from the classes above, this is the Deluge...They see our civilisation as a little patch of redeemed land in the wilderness; preserved as by a miracle from one decade to another.11

In 1961, Tom Harrisson recalled how working class people were regarded in the 1930s.

It is difficult to remember (now) how in those far-off days, nearly everybody who was not born into the working-class regarded them as almost a race apart. Even good books like George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, which really tried to get under the surface, started out (1937) from this underlying and sociologically miserable premise.12

Harrisson acknowledges that *The Road to Wigan Pier* was grounded in the widely held belief that working class people constituted a separate race, an unknown entity worthy of exploration. Nevertheless, Harrisson recognises that

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9 Ibid., p. 88.
Orwell's documentation of working class life was notably different from other similar ventures.

It is not surprising that *The Road to Wigan Pier* is singled out for praise since this book is informed by an approach to investigating working class life that parallels Harrisson's methods. In early January 1936, the publisher and founder of the Left Book Club, Victor Gollancz, commissioned Orwell to write a book about the conditions of the unemployed in the depressed areas of the industrial North. Between 31 January and 30 March 1936, Orwell travelled to Wigan, Barnsley and Sheffield where he lived with working class people in lodging houses, in cheap hotels, in a doss-house and with a miner's family.13 These first-hand experiences provided Orwell with much of the primary material for *The Road to Wigan Pier* that was based, in part, on participation and direct observation. This method of acquiring knowledge was entirely in keeping with Harrisson's approach to social investigation. He had employed the methodology of participant observation while working as an amateur anthropologist in the New Hebrides between July 1933 and November 1935. Harrisson's willingness to participate in the day-to-day lives of the islanders is exemplified by his eating of human flesh which he describes in *Savage Civilisation*, written upon his return to England in early 1936 and published by Gollancz in January 1937.14 In writing about his years in the New Hebrides, Harrisson declared that his most valuable lesson was the realisation that he could "live native"15 and it was precisely this approach that he adopted in early 1937 when he undertook to "study the cannibals of Lancashire"16 and lead Mass Observation's investigation into working class life in the northern town of Bolton.

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15 Ibid., p. 376.
Harrisson's admiration for *The Road to Wigan Pier* rests on the fact that Orwell sought to "get under the surface"\(^\text{17}\), to seek out and record the minutiae of working class life by living within working class communities. The key metaphor here, is, 'under the surface', for with this phrase Harrisson suggests, as do Booth and Masterman, with their references to underworlds and abysses, that below the surface there exists a separate and unknown territory, a region that both Harrisson and Orwell aimed to render familiar and knowable.

Although Harrisson and Orwell sought to demythologise working class life, the emphasis that each accords to the class of the observer is very different. In the following extract from *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell acknowledges that the class of the observer *is* centrally important to the exposition of working class life:

> ...you can only mingle with the working class by staying in their houses as a lodger, which always has a dangerous resemblance to 'slumming'. For some months I lived entirely in coal-miners' houses. I ate my meals with the family, I washed at the kitchen sink, I shared bedrooms with miners, drank beer with them, played darts with them, talked to them by the hour together.\(^\text{18}\)

He continues with a warning to those who believe they can ignore class differences:

> I liked them and hoped they liked me; but I went among them as a foreigner, and both of us were aware of it. Whichever way you turn this curse of class-difference confronts you like a wall of stone. Or rather it is not so much like a stone wall as the plate-glass pane of an aquarium; it is so easy to pretend that it isn't there, and so impossible to get through it.

> Unfortunately it is nowadays the fashion to pretend that the glass is penetrable.\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^\text{17}\) Tom Harrisson, *Britain Revisited*, p. 26.


\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., p. 145.
For Orwell, class differences played a critical role in the production of documentary accounts. They prevented the establishment of intimate relations between the observer and the observed, thus, the 'you', serves as a index of distance, not a point of identification. On this point, Orwell stands in complete contrast to Harrisson who refused to acknowledge that class differences functioned as barriers. Harrisson insisted that he could successfully penetrate working class communities where, in spite of his 'BBC accent', he would be accepted as a working class man.

The biggest thrill which this lately initiated "cannibal" experienced was finding it no more difficult to be accepted as an equal in a cotton mill, as a lorry driver or ice-cream man. The fact that one had an accent very acceptable on the BBC of those days in no way led to suspicion that one was "slumming" or "spying". It was only necessary to claim to have come from another dialect area a few miles away. (For one thing, no workers in their right senses ever supposed that anyone came to work in Worktown for any other reason than dire necessity!)\(^{20}\)

For Harrisson, Orwell's pane of glass was completely penetrable. Indeed, for Harrisson, the glass did not exist. In 1938, while taking part in a radio discussion on class, Harrisson refused to acknowledge the complex reality of class that so clearly troubled Orwell.

I can find no support for the view that there is a simple clear-cut thing called 'Class' at all...There has been a lot of talk about class cleavage and class conflict, but it seems to me today that there is very little of that cleavage visible in England.\(^{21}\)

In spite of their different attitudes towards the role of class in social investigation, Orwell and Harrisson sought to insinuate themselves, with varying degrees of proximity, into the lives of working class people. But, whereas Harrisson sought to identify with working class people, to regard himself as a 'cannibal', Orwell refused to believe that it was "ever possible to be

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\(^{21}\) 'What Do We Mean by 'Class'? Discussion between Captain Anthony Ludovici, G.A. Isaacs, and Tom Harrisson', *The Listener*, Vol. XX, No. 509, 13 October, 1938, pp. 765-766.
really intimate with the working class." There is, he wrote, "no short cut into their midst...you can't become a navvy or a coal-miner." Orwell was acutely aware that he could "only mingle with the working class" and assume the role of a witness whose observations were recorded against the backdrop of his own privileged position. In _The Road to Wigan Pier_, Orwell's constant reminders of his upper-middle class origins and his foregrounding of his own class based opinions serve to reinforce divisions between the observer and the observed. Harrisson's immersion in working class life was of a very different kind. His refusal to acknowledge class barriers was a means of eradicating this distance. While Harrisson sought to become a fully participating member of the working class community in Bolton, Orwell remained aware of his position as a temporary visitor.

Observation through participation is based on the work of Bronislaw Malinowski. His ethnographic work in the Trobriand Islands, from 1914-1918, established fundamental methodologies in modern anthropological fieldwork. The emerging discipline of field-based, sociologically grounded anthropology in the late nineteenth century can be said to have crystallised in Malinowski. He produced the first widely disseminated account of the new anthropologist as a participant observer - squatting beside the camp fire looking, listening and questioning in the indigenous language, recording and translating Trobriand life. The advent of this new ethnographic approach was marked by the publication, in 1922, of the first of Malinowski's three Trobriand monographs, _Argonauts of the Western Pacific._

Building on developing trends, Malinowski extended both the method and conceptual base of participant observation in anthropological fieldwork. This

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22 George Orwell, _The Road to Wigan Pier_, p. 106.
23 Ibid., p. 144.
24 Ibid., p. 144.
methodology sought to erase the distance between the observer and the observed. In his introduction to *Argonauts*, Malinowski writes, "it is good for the ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on." This statement reflects a reactionary stance to earlier ethnographic method in which armchair anthropologists relied on information and data being relayed to them from missionary ethnographers. Malinowski advocated a programme of intensive fieldwork which involved living within a community for extended periods of time, and study through direct and participant observation of every custom and feature of life.

In *Argonauts*, Malinowski demonstrated how participant observation enabled continuous scrutiny of minute and seemingly insignificant details. These details, which he referred to as "the inponderabilia of actual life," were vital to an understanding of culture since, cumulatively, they revealed culture as a syncretic form of ritual, ceremony and pattern. Examples of these details included:

...such things as the routine of a man's working day, the details of his care of the body, of the manner of taking food and preparing it; the tone of conversational and social life around the village fires, the existence of strong friendships or hostilities, and of passing sympathies and dislikes between people; the subtle yet unmistakable manner in which personal vanities and ambitions are reflected in the behaviour of the individual and in the emotional reactions of those who surround him.

Indeed, if we remember that these imponderable yet all important facts of actual life are part of the real substance of the social fabric, that in them are spun the innumerable threads which keep together the family, the clan, the village community, the tribe - their significance becomes clear.

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26 Ibid., p. 18.
27 Ibid., pp. 18-19.
The key figures in Mass Observation were certainly familiar with Malinowski's approach. Several Mass Observation personnel had the opportunity to exchange ideas with Malinowski on a first-hand basis since he, along with Roderick Garrett, John Madge, Tom Harrisson, Stuart Legg and Charles Madge, was a member of Mass Observation's expenditure committee.28

Malinowski's support for Mass Observation is evident in a lengthy essay he contributed to First Year's Work 1937-38 by Mass-Observation. In this essay, titled 'A Nation-Wide Intelligence Service', Malinowski argued that Mass Observation was pioneering a new type of social research. He rigorously defended Mass Observation's claim to being a science and this, at a time of harsh criticism of Mass Observation, was an important endorsement for a movement that had only existed for a year. Evelyn Waugh, for example, had dismissed Mass Observation as "pseudo-scientific showmanship",29 and, in the Spectator, it was claimed that "scientifically they are about as valuable as the chimpanzees' tea party at the Zoo".30 Malinowski responded to these specific comments unreservedly.

The recognition that the present movement is an important branch of science, and that its devices are a first-rate scientific tool, provides Mass Observation with its legitimate scientific charter.31

Malinowski and Mass Observation were clearly in agreement with the initiatives that each were contributing to the study of human behaviour. Both believed that alien cultures, or in the words of Harrisson, the 'race apart', had to

29 Evelyn Waugh, quoted in Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson (eds), First Year's Work 1937-38 by Mass-Observation, p. 60.
30 Spectator, 19 November 1937.
31 Bronislaw Malinowski, 'A Nation-Wide Intelligence Service,' in Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson (eds), First Year's Work 1937-38 by Mass-Observation, p. 89.
be studied 'from the inside' to make most sense. And, both engaged in a form of study yielded by participant observation and lengthy immersion in the field.

Malinowski's support of Mass Observation was probably due, in part, to a perception that they were extensively applying to "the British Islanders" an ethnographic methodology that he had pioneered in the Trobriand Islands some years earlier. Malinowski claims as much when he states:

...I feel that in a way I have been responsible to a large extent for the inevitable consequences in the development of the functional method of anthropology: I mean, for its definite move towards *Anthropology Begins at Home*. From the start of my own field-work, it has been my deepest and strongest conviction that we must finish by studying ourselves through the same methods and with the same mental attitude with which we approach exotic tribes.33

Thus, Malinowski's appraisal of Mass Observation subtly establishes points of contact between his own methodology and beliefs, and those of the movement. His following comment about Mass Observation, for example, could equally apply to his own work, with its insistence on the integrality of institutions.

Mass-Observation may become the "Open Sesame" laying bare to us the personal motives, private interests and activities of innumerable individuals, as well as the conditions of their life and work. The way in which all these infinitely small, infinitely many details of social reality work, act and integrate into big, collective movements, the manner in which they are related to legislation, politics, declarations of policy and acts of State - all this is not irrelevant work, subject to bias, to futile eavesdropping tendencies, to prying. It is the main task of social science.34

A significant point of difference between Mass Observation and Malinowski was over the interplay between subjective and objective reportage. Malinowski

33 Bronislaw Malinowski, 'A Nation-Wide Intelligence Service,' p. 103.
34 Ibid., p. 89.
suggested that Mass Observation had not yet clarified a means of extracting objective fact from subjective data. He writes:

The relevant and difficult question is this: how can Mass-Observation hope to reach an objective, that is, scientific, result from subjective data? The ordinary Observer is primarily a "subjective camera" and thus presents a picture with "individual distortions." Is it possible to hope that "completely objective fact" will emerge out of this?

At the outset the Authors seem not to have clarified this point completely. It is almost as if they believed that the objective fact would emerge as it were through "spontaneous generation."

It is clear now that some essential difficulty stands here in the way of Mass Observation.35

Malinowski appears to agree with Mass Observation when he writes "In human affairs the more subjective the behaviour, the more objective are the scientific data which it furnishes."36 But, in a subtle twist of argument, Malinowski immediately qualifies this by stipulating that information provided by observers requires scientific analysis. He writes, "Their [observers] statements are the subject matter on which further scientific analysis is indispensable. The objective treatment of subjectively determined data must start at the very outset."37 In other words, subjective data, for example, accounts which consist of an observer's impressions, beliefs and opinions, remains deficient unless it is channelled and framed, and, ultimately, translated by scientific analysis. In the broadest sense, Malinowski appears to be at odds with Mass Observation's fundamental goal of providing the masses with a voice, of creating a form of science in which the people speak for themselves, and, with collecting, rather than interpreting, data. In publications such as May 12th (1937), for example, Mass Observation sought a co-existence of objective and subjective knowledge. Facts exist alongside numerous subjective responses to the Coronation. These

35 Ibid., p. 95.
36 Ibid., p. 96.
37 Ibid., p. 96.
responses are free of scientific decoding so that the reader can see for himself or herself the different points of view. Whereas Mass Observation's primary concern was to collect rather than interpret data, for Malinowski it was the business of the observer "to translate subjective processes into objective evidence."38

The issue of the observer's subjectivity was one that Malinowski had faced in observing and recording the details of Trobriand life. He believed that the observer's subjectivity could be neutralized by keeping an ethnographic diary in which the normal and typical, and deviations from the normal, were systematically recorded over a prolonged period of field work. Malinowski was of the opinion that the ethnographer, or scientifically trained observer, was singularly positioned for such an undertaking. In Argonauts, he wrote that only those who had undergone appropriate training were in a position to "...judge whether an event is ordinary or an exciting and singular one...He will be able to "set" the act into its proper place in tribal life...And he will be able to bring all this home to his readers in a clear, convincing manner."39 Although Malinowski was prepared to grant a voice to his subjects, it was a voice which was always objectified and mediated by his own voice. As George Stocking points out, the heroes of Argonauts are not the Trobriand voyagers Malinowski described, but rather, the ethnographer cast as Jason "who brings back the Golden Fleece of ethnographic knowledge."40

When Malinowski declared early in his essay that "despite all its [Mass Observation's] promise and the value of its results, it needs a thorough

38 Ibid., p. 98.
39 Bronislaw Malinowski, Argonauts of the Western Pacific, p. 18, p. 21.
overhaul of principle and method",\textsuperscript{41} it is apparent that the foundation of his concern rested upon Mass Observation's explicit attempts to let the people speak for themselves. Mass Observation's belief in a democratic form of social science challenged and questioned the authority and role of the intelligentsia and was manifestly at odds with the singularity of perspective expressed by Malinowski in September 1917, when, as he sailed towards the Trobriands, he audaciously proclaimed "Joy: I Hear the word 'Kiriwina'. I get ready; little grey, pinkish huts. Photos. Feeling of ownership: It is I who will describe them or create them.\textsuperscript{42}

In spite of Malinowski's apparent support of Mass Observation, this statement, more than any other, reveals a fundamental and irreconcilable difference of approach. Mass Observation sought to provide ordinary people with a voice so that they could describe themselves and, in turn, create sufficient self-knowledge which would lead the masses to liberation from "intellectual serfdom".\textsuperscript{43} It is clear that Mass Observation's ultimate goal was in complete contrast to Malinowski's ambitions. For, not only does Malinowski describe and speak for the Trobriand Islanders, more significantly, he sees himself as their creator. Without him, without the authority of an ethnographic voice, the Trobriand Islanders do not exist.

Whilst participant observation was a relatively recent development in ethnographic fieldwork, the practice of immersing oneself into a culture other than one's own was part of a long standing tradition in Britain. This tradition had become firmly established by the late nineteenth century, particularly amongst social reformers. Throughout the latter decades of the nineteenth

\textsuperscript{41} Bronislaw Malinowski, 'A Nation-Wide Intelligence Service,' p. 87.
\textsuperscript{43} Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge, \textit{Britain by Mass Observation}, Penguin, Middlesex, 1939, p. 11.
century, when outspoken social critics were alerting the public to the increasingly complex social problems generated by advanced capitalism, Oxford and Cambridge graduates frequently settled in working class areas, particularly the slums of East London, where they undertook programs of social regeneration. In an age described by the editor of *The Christian World* as one which "made slumming fashionable",44 it was customary for such graduates to reside in one of the many University Settlements - Mansfield House, Oxford House, Toynbee Hall, Cambridge House and Trinity College Settlement - established in the East End of London throughout the eighties and nineties.

A variety of motives lay beneath the founding of Settlements. For the Conservative Member of Parliament, Sir John Gorst, who lived for a time at Toynbee Hall in Whitechapel, settlers played an important role in maintaining the status quo. In his Glasgow Rectorial Address to the University of Glasgow in November 1894, Gorst argued that since the destitute classes existed in great numbers and were concentrated in specific areas of London, they constituted a potential threat to the existent social and political system.

> The instinct of self-preservation should, therefore, make society grateful to anybody who will spend his life in gaining the confidence of the masses and guiding their ideas into the channels in which the common good of all is the prevailing influence.45

Reform-minded clergymen such as James Adderley, the founding head of the High Anglican University Settlement, Oxford House, were committed to establishing Settlements in which strong associations between the Church and the local community could be forged. In such cases, the Settlement movement provided an opportunity for men and women "of refinement and culture...to

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renounce the accidental advantages of birth and fortune," and achieve personal salvation by living and working with the poor. In the following extract from Gorst's address, he is clearly appealing to the popular Victorian conviction that a reforming spirit could assuage the guilt associated with a socially privileged position and atone for the collective sins of class irresponsibility.

They long to come into personal contact with human suffering, to bind up the wounds with their own hands, to pour in oil and wine from their own stores, to give up their own beast and go on foot themselves, and to welcome the afflicted to their own society and their own abode. Gifts of money cannot cure the misery of the poor,...the life of devotion to the good of the human race at large, which is the religion of Jesus Christ, demands personal service.

Other reformers saw the movement as having more specifically political intentions:

Lord Selborne said that from a political point of view there could be no greater service to the State than that a colony of gentlemen should live down in the East End, should live among the working men, and let working men see what kind of men they, the gentry were, and learn by experience that, after all, they were God’s creatures first, as they the working men themselves were.

The key to effecting social, moral, political or religious transformation rested largely on the successful cultivation of close friendships across class divisions. Settlers were urged to establish individual, one-to-one associations with members of the working class community as a means to acquiring their trust and confidences which, in turn, implied the position of settlers as leaders.

46 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
47 Ibid., p. 9. See also Beatrice Webb’s autobiography My Apprenticeship (1926) where she writes that “consciousness of sin was a collective or class consciousness” and notes that the desire to rid oneself of the guilt associated with a socially privileged position had inspired her and many other late nineteenth century people to take up reform work. Beatrice Webb, My Apprenticeship, Penguin, London, 1971, pp. 192-193 and p. 195, where she refers to a speech made by Alfred Toynbee in 1883, in which he expresses a similar sentiment.
All settlements...seem to be begun upon one uniform principle. The first object, to which every other is subsidiary, is to make friends with the neighbourhood - to become part of its common life; to associate with the people on equal terms, without either patronage on the one side or subserviency on the other; to share in the joys and sorrows, the occupations and amusements of the people; to bring them to regard the members of the settlement as their friends...This object, if attained, fills up, or at least bridges over, the gulf between the classes which modern civilisation has created, and restores the solidarity of the race.49

If young university graduates were to make effective connections with the inhabitants of East London, it was vital that they familiarise themselves with 'Darkest England'. To this end, settlers were strongly encouraged to descend into, penetrate and explore working class neighbourhoods for themselves. The sense that working class people were subjected to the observations and scrutiny of settlers is highlighted by Richard Whiteing in his 'slum novel' No. 5 John Street (1902). Here, Whiteing comments on his refusal to join a University Settlement:

It proved to be a mere peep-hole into the life I wanted to see, with the Peeping Tom still a little too much on the safe side. The inmate did not live the life. He observed it merely from the standpoint of all the comforts of home. And if he sometimes plunged into the waters of tribulation, it was only in corks.

I therefore found a situation in a factory as a copyist and minor clerk. The place was less than a mile from my customary haunts, as the crow flies; yet in the reckoning of life and habits and ways of thought, it was as remote from them as Africa.50

Like so many writers throughout the late nineteenth century, Whiteing relies on the metaphoric figure of the foreign country as a means of invoking the sense of an unbridgeable chasm between the "two nations".51 In presenting the East End

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51 The phrase "two nations" had been popularised by Benjamin Disraeli in his political novel *Sybil or the Two Nations* (1845) where he warned that England was divided into two nations,
of London as a separate 'nation' as a 'foreign' or 'unknown' country, it was repeatedly reified as a *terra incognito*.

Although since the 1850s there had been sporadic exposés of working class living conditions, prior to the 1880s such information was either intended for, or appealed to, a limited audience.52 Certainly, works such as Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), Thomas Beames's *The Rookeries of London* (1852), James Ewing Ritchie's *Night Side of London* (1857), and, James Greenwood's *Seven Curses of London* (1869), contributed to an awareness of working class life. But, in spite of the incredible portraits of destitution, squalor and vice that these accounts delivered, it took until 1883, when a missionary group, the London Congregational Union, published *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, for the plight of the working class and slum dwellers to become widely known. This sensational best-seller was quickly followed by a series of journalistic exposés: in 1883 George Sims was commissioned to produce a series of articles titled 'Horrible London' for the *Daily News*, and, in the same year, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, W.T. Stead, focussed widespread attention upon urban slum conditions by giving *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* extensive and dramatic press coverage and used the pamphlet as the basis for a campaign demanding immediate reform.53 Then, in 1885, the *Pall Mall Gazette* serialized the results of a survey of working class districts in London. In the following year, 1886,

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52 Until the 1880s the most detailed writings on slum conditions came from medical practitioners and appealed to a very restricted audience. For a discussion of their writings see Anthony Wohl, 'The Bitter Cry of Outcast London', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 13, 1968, pp. 189-245.

Charles Booth began work on the first of his seventeen volume empirical study of East London, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, which was published three years later in 1889. Thus, in the course of the 1880s, East London became the subject of intense scrutiny and a new epoch in the discovery of working class areas took shape. Knowledge about the conditions and attitudes of the working class was no longer restricted to radical tracts, Parliamentary enquiries and government blue books, nor to the pamphlets of clergymen, but became readily available in the daily and periodical press. Such scrutiny occurred at a time of economic depression and in a climate of fear of disorder and insurrection. As Gareth Stedman Jones notes, the years between 1883 and 1888 was a period of intense insecurity when middle class concern over low profits and high unemployment was coupled with fears about Jewish immigration, the threat of a cholera epidemic, overcrowding, police inefficiency and municipal corruption. Added to these anxieties was an increasing suspicion that the poor and unemployed were seeking solutions to their misery in the form of revolution. Sims expressed this fear of upheaval when he cautioned:

>This mighty mob of famished, diseased, and filthy helots is getting dangerous, physically, morally, politically dangerous. The barriers that have kept it back are rotten and giving way, and it may do the State a mischief if it be not looked to in time. Its fevers and its filth may spread to the homes of the wealthy; its lawless armies may sally forth and give us a taste of the lesson the mob has tried to teach now and again in Paris, when long years of neglect have done their work.

Attempts to re-establish inter-class harmony ranged from the 'civilizing' activities of the settlement houses of the 1880s to the Salvation Army's Darkest England scheme which was pioneered by the Army's founder, General William Booth, and publicised in his book, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890). As with *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* was an

55 George Sims, *How The Poor Live and Horrible London*, p. 44.
immediate best-seller: in the first year of publication approximately 200,000 copies were sold and another 100,000 in the following year. The success of *In Darkest England* may be attributed to the direct analogy that Booth establishes between his own travels in ‘darkest England’ and those undertaken in ‘darkest Africa’ by Henry Stanley, whose account of his journey across the ‘Lost Continent’, *In Darkest Africa*, had been published a few months earlier.

Drawing on the imperial progress narrative and the image of the journey into the interior, Booth figured the East End slums in the language of empire and degeneration - as swamps and wilderness, as shadows in which the ‘Light of Civilisation’ did not shine. Booth begins *In Darkest England* with an account of Stanley’s heroic entry into the almost impenetrable tropical forests of the Congo and his discovery of its predatory and godless population, and then interrupts his narrative to ask the inevitable question:

...while brooding over the awful presentation of life as it exists in the vast African forest, it seemed to me only too vivid a picture of many parts of our own land. As there is a darkest Africa is there not also a darkest England?...May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone’s throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest?56

The density, size and sprawl of the tangled slums were equated with jungles, and the language of imperial missionary enterprise was evoked to justify their penetration and their subjection to progress. Working class people, Booth declared, needed salvation just as much as the savages of ‘darkest Africa’, and, with the almost obligatory reference to the Biblical metaphor of Light, Booth is seen as bringing the ‘Light of Truth’ and the ‘Light of Civilisation’ into benighted darkness.

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The Equatorial Forest traversed by Stanley resembles that Darkest England of which I have to speak, alike in its vast extent - both stretch, in Stanley's phrase, "as far as from Plymouth to Peterhead;" its monotonous darkness, its malaria and its gloom, its dwarfish de-humanised inhabitants, the slavery to which they are subjected, their privations and their misery. That which sickens the stoutest heart, and causes many of our bravest and best to fold their hands in despair, is the apparent impossibility of doing more than merely to peck at the outside of the endless tangle of monotonous undergrowth; to let light into it, to make a road clear through it, that shall not be immediately choked up by the ooze of the morass and the luxuriant parasitical growth of the forest - who dare hope for that?

Darkest England, like Darkest Africa, reeks with malaria. The foul and fetid breath of our slums is almost as poisonous as that of the African swamp. Fever is almost as chronic there as on the Equator.

Drunkenness and all manner of uncleanness, moral and physical, abound...What a satire it is upon our Christianity and our civilisation, that the existence of these colonies of heathens and savages in the heart of our capital should attract so little attention!57

Booth enlists an image popular during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, namely that of the social explorer venturing into the terra incognita of Britain's working class areas, striking the pose of an explorer embarking on voyages into unknown lands. As George Godwin put it in 1854, these men set out to "brave the risks of fever and other injuries to health, and the contact of men and women often as lawless as the Arab or Kaffir."58 Echoing popular images of imperial travel, these urban explorers returned from their forays with sensational reports, 'facts' and 'statistics' about the 'races' living within their midst.

Booth's metaphors are well-known: East London was a massive, putrid wilderness swarming with every kind of physical and moral pestilence, of misery and vice; a city so crowded that its very atmosphere was lethally fetid.

57 Ibid., pp. 12-16.
Its ‘colonies of heathens and savages’ were spiritually and morally impoverished, anonymous, isolated, alienated; its feculent inhabitants physically and morally degenerate, feral, subhuman. In short, East London was depicted as an anachronistic world of deprivation that was inhabited not only by a separate class, but by a distinct ‘race’.

In the 1930s, the working classes of Britain were ‘rediscovered’ with a renewed sense of vigour and another epoch of social exploration took shape. But, whereas in the 1880s and 1890s the East End of London had been the focus of investigation, in the 1930s, working class communities across the country as a whole became sites of exploration. And, just as the urban explorers of the late nineteenth century had sought to render the working classes knowable at a time of political and economic disturbance, so too in the 1930s, which was characterised by widespread economic depression and by waves of domestic and international social and political unrest.

In the rediscovery of the working classes, social observers of the thirties produced accounts that drew upon the well understood literary conventions of the late nineteenth century. Thus, when Tom Harrisson recalls that in the thirties "...nearly everybody who was not born into the working-class regarded them as almost a race apart", 59 he is echoing a view firmly lodged within tradition. So too with the documentary film-maker, John Grierson, who spoke of the need "to travel dangerously into the jungles of Middlesborough and the Clyde." 60 Similarly, the Mass Observation photographer Humphrey Spender recalls thinking about the inhabitants of Bolton as "total foreigners". 61 He states:

59 Tom Harrisson, Britain Revisited, p. 26.
I certainly came from a privileged background of nannies and governesses. There were always servants in the house, and we were really protected from it, we were actually protected from physical contact. One of Stephen's [Spender] best poems is to do with the fact that he wasn’t allowed to speak to what my parents would have called gutter snipes, and so immediately that sets up a peculiar attraction toward forbidden fruit, toward the common people.  

In July 1937, the editorial in the journal *Fact*, made an explicit return to the familiar England/Africa analogy.

Suppose, instead of going to work one day without reflecting on what was before you, you were to watch and listen, to observe the buildings, the dress, the habits, the conversation, the food and the taboos of your fellows as conscientiously as if you were walking for the first time into an African village. What would you see? and what would you, a new Dr. Livingstone, think could be made of this tribe?

In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell writes of the filth and grime and, almost obsessively, of a suffusive putrid stench that he encounters on his two month journey through the industrial North of England in the autumn of 1936. In one of the most celebrated passages of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell describes the Brookers lodging house with a range of metaphors that are as familiar and as brutally revealing as those of Sims, London and Booth: dark labyrinths inhabited by hordes of subterranean people whose dirt-blackened bodies are twice likened to animals; excrement and urine that menacingly threatens to infect.

On the day when there was a full chamber-pot under the breakfast table I decided to leave. The place was beginning to depress me. It was not only the dirt, the smells and the vile food, but the feeling of stagnant meaningless decay, of having got down into some subterranean place where people go creeping round and round, just like black beetles, in an endless muddle of slovened jobs and mean grievances...But it is no use saying that people like the Brookers are just disgusting and trying to put them out of mind. For they exist in tens and hundreds of thousands; they are one of the characteristic by-products of the modern world. You

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62 Ibid., np.
63 *Fact*, No. 4, July 1937, pp. 5-6.
cannot disregard them if you accept the civilisation that produced them...and this is where it all led - to labyrinthine slums and dark back kitchens with sickly, ageing people creeping round and round them like black beetles. It is a kind of duty to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist; though perhaps it is better not to stay there too long.64

For Orwell, as for many late nineteenth century and early twentieth century writers - William Tirebuck's *Miss Grace of All Souls*’ (1895), Arthur Morrison's *A Child of Jago* (1896), Ellen Willkinson's *Clash* (1929), Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1933) - the foreign matter of dirt is equated with the 'foreignness' of working class people. By the late nineteenth century, when the benefits of cleanliness had become inscribed by the upper classes with moral values and were seen as synonymous with virtue and respectability, cleanliness served not only as a mark of the upper classes but distinguished them as being socially and morally superior from those on whom the dirt was displaced. As Mary Douglas notes in her study *Purity and Danger*, dirt represents that which is marginal or outcast and is typically equated with disorder and chaos.65 For Orwell, dirt functioned as one of the prime signs by which representations of working class people were constructed. As he reveals in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), Orwell prepared himself for life as a tramp by soiling his clothes. In this way he was able to conceal his class identity so that he could insinuate himself into the lives of the impoverished.66

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64 George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 14. See also *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) where there are numerous visions of the stupefied multitudes, the superfluous and the living dead. The two elderly book-sellers for example, are described as being "...just by-products. The throw-outs of the money-god. All over London, by tens of thousands, draggled old beasts of that description; creeping like unclean beetles to the grave." George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Penguin, London, 1989, p. 16.


Whereas in Paris and London, Orwell had masked himself with dirty clothing in order to muddy the lines that divide classes, for his journey to the industrial north in 1936, he abandoned his disguise of dirt. Despite the self-abasing escapades of his down-and-out-days, *The Road to Wigan Pier* makes it abundantly clear that Orwell is literally repulsed by dirt. The autobiographical and confessional Part Two, where Orwell interweaves his northern experiences with recollections of his own upbringing - his birth into the 'lower-upper-middle class', his education at Eton and his service in Burma - displays a pathological concern with smell and dirt. The most revealing passages are those in which Orwell attempts to investigate his own attitudes to the working class.

Here you come to the real secret of class distinctions in the West - the real reason why a European of bourgeois upbringing, even when he calls himself a Communist, cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal. It is summed up in four frightful words which people nowadays are chary of uttering, but which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. The words were: *The lower classes smell.*

That was what we were taught - *the lower classes smell.* And here, obviously, you are at an impassable barrier. For no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a physical feeling...You can have an affection for a murderer or a sodomite, but you cannot have affection for a man whose breath stinks - habitually stinks, I mean. However well you may wish him, however much you admire his mind and character, if his breath stinks he is horrible and in your heart of hearts you will hate him. It may not greatly matter if the average middle-class person is brought up to believe that the working classes are ignorant, lazy, drunken, boorish and dishonest; it is when he is brought up to believe that they are dirty that the harm is done. And in my childhood we *were* brought up to believe that they were dirty. Very early in life you acquired the idea that there was something subtly repulsive about a working class body; you would not get nearer to it than you could help.

But the essential thing is that middle-class people believe that the working class are dirty...and, what is worse, that they are somehow inherently dirty...Nowadays, thank God, I have no feelings of that kind. A working-man's body, as such, is no more repulsive to me than a millionaire's.67

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67 George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, pp. 119-122.
It is, principally, around dirt and other sensory disturbances that a sense of strangeness is constructed. Although in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell employs the well understood rhetorical devices and metaphoric figures of late nineteenth century writers, unlike Mayhew, Preston, Sims or Booth, Orwell places himself under scrutiny. Here, the observer is positioned side by side with the observed as a subject of investigation.

In spite of the slightly comical intensity of the above passage, Orwell betrays his own deep internal revulsions and his phobic horror of filth. For others, however, 'dirtiness' was an eminently desirable state, a visible mark not only of working class difference as Orwell understood it, but, more importantly, of working class power. Rather than being a mark of disgrace which creates feelings of revulsion and disgust, dirt was sometimes perceived as a distinctly masculine stain; as a sign of respectability achieved through a certain kind of physical labour. Harry Hardcastle, a central character in Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1933), yearns to be dirty, "...to have oil and dirt smeared on his face as evidence of the nature of his work."68 Having being denied access to the machinery that will begrime him, Harry achieves his marks of distinction artificially and applies the facial grease himself. For Harry, dirt is a status symbol rather than a stigma.

The spectacularly memorable descriptions of Orwell's squalid lodgings above the tripe shop, and, in particular, of the chamber-pot episode, hold a central place in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Orwell gives more prominence and a more detailed description to this establishment than to any other single place he inhabited during his two month journey: the bread which is marked by the black print of the landlord's dirt-stained thumb which, moments earlier, had been detected tipping over the rim of a full chamber-pot, the dead bluebottle

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flies in the shop window, the unspeakably filthy, dust-encrusted jar of marmalade, the black beetles that are suspected of contaminating the tripe, the slimy and soggy bits of tissue which surround the sofa bound landlady, Mrs. Brooker. These particularities, coupled with Orwell's assertion that "...this place must be fairly normal as lodging-houses in the industrial area go,..." bestow an emblematic significance upon the Brookers and their domestic environment.

Such grim portrayals, whilst intended to provide an objective account of working class life, are equally revealing for the insights they afford into Orwell's middle class viewpoint. Although Orwell describes the lodging house in such a way as to re-create the feelings of repulsion experienced by himself, in a sense, the horror belongs entirely to Orwell. Not only does he repeatedly focus on and select details which cast his subjects and their environments in a less than favourable light, he omits details which may provide a contrary view. Thus, the piggishness of Mrs. Brooker - she is, after all, the mother of a "large pig-like son" - is subtly created by Orwell's distortion of the facts. In his *Diary* he had recorded that her illness was the result of a heart condition. Yet, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell implies that her illness is self-imposed by re-

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69 The description of the Brookers' lodging-house closely parallels that of the bug-infested Hotel des Trois Moineaux in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, but there the description creates an eccentrically farcical and burlesque effect, rather than the grotesque and nauseating sense that is produced by the description of the Brookers'. George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, pp. 1-5.

70 George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 13. In fact Orwell was fully aware that this was not the case. According to Joe "Jerry" Kennan, an electrician who worked in a Wigan mine and who helped Orwell find lodgings in the home of an unemployed miner, Orwell moved from the miner's home to the Brookers' a few days later because, "he wanted to see things...at their worst." Joe Kennan, BBC interview for Melvyn Bragg's "The Road to the Left," 1970. Bernard Crick has recounted how Orwell deliberately sought out these lodgings: "We found him...perfectly clean and decent lodgings. Most people had more time to clean when out of work and had prided themselves on it. He left them after a while for no good reason and went to that hole. Did he think it made better propaganda? Did he have a taste for that sort of thing: I don't know." Bernard Crick, 'Return to Wigan', *New Society*, Vol. 39, 27 January 1977, p. 195.

71 George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 9.

attributing its cause to gluttony, thereby creating an entirely different set of images to those normally associated with a heart complaint. In effect, these distortions parallel Malinowski's wish to 'create' the Trobriand Islanders.

It is notable too, that although Orwell resided with the Brookers for two weeks, with two other commercial travellers and seven permanent residents, there is surprisingly little indication of activity, vitality, laughter or conversation, either in the lodging house or in the shop below. To include signs of animation would conflict with the sense of inertia, impotence, decay and stagnation that dominates Orwell's representation of the Brooker household.

Similarly, there is minimal reference to the ideas and beliefs of politically active workers even though Orwell's Diary records that he spent much of his time in the company of working class socialists and members of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. They had arranged many of Orwell's visits to mines, factories and members' homes and provided contacts in each town: Joe Kennan, electrician, Paddy Grady, a miner, the Searles couple, the unnamed 'B' in Sheffield, the union official Frank Meade, who ran both Labour's Northern Voice and the northern office of the Adelphi and with whom Orwell stayed. All are working class, all are political activists and all, as the Diary makes clear, impress Orwell. Yet, they are excised from his discussions of working class socialism in The Road to Wigan Pier. Their silence stands in marked contrast to the elaborate attention that Orwell pays to the working class landscape and to the loquacity with which he endows the tramps and lumpenproletarians in Down and Out in Paris and London. As Raymond Williams notes in his perceptive study Orwell, these omissions are significant because they highlight the literary process of selection and organisation, and because they demonstrate how Orwell simply excluded those characters and experiences which do not

73 George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, pp. 5, 9, 13.
constitute part of his understanding or "definition of what the working-class is like."  

The *Road to Wigan Pier* can, on the one hand, be considered a conventional work of social exploration which displays Orwell's inheritance of the rhetorical devices characteristic of late nineteenth century explorers of urban and industrial working class life. On the other hand, it can be seen as a work which intersects with several key issues that dominated discussions in the documentary movement. The nature of the relationship between the observer and the observed and the need to develop artistic and literary forms which enabled an alliance with scientific method were central to these discussions.

The glaring structural divisions of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, between an 'objective' Part One and a 'subjective' Part Two, permits Orwell to partake of the authority of fact and the licence of fiction. But, a more subtle and complex fissure runs throughout *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which operates as a critical strategy and bears testimony to Orwell's problematising of the relationship between an observed reality and the mediator or mediating account of reality. In *Argonauts*, Malinowski had dealt with this polemic by publicly arguing for the elimination of the observer's subjectivity and for the subjugation of subjective material to objective treatment. In contrast, Orwell does not negate his own authorial presence nor refuse his position as mediator between observed and reader. To the contrary, Orwell frequently and explicitly appeals to subjective experience in order to inform the objective validity of his work.

Instead of operating as a detached observer, who erases all textual traces of his existence, as Malinowski would have it, Orwell repeatedly foregrounds himself and his own cognitive processes. He is ubiquitous to the point that the

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observations of Part One are submerged, not by the overtly subjective nature of his descriptions, but, rather, by the creation of Orwell himself, and, further, by his problematising of the very processes by which that creation occurs. Thus, Orwell publicly acknowledges what Malinowski had only been prepared to admit in the privacy of his diary. Indeed, Orwell goes one step further than Malinowski by recognising that the process of creating "them" necessitates the creation of himself. In this sense, Orwell's methods come close to Mass Observation's in that the tensions which exist in the division between artist and reporter become the source of a creative dynamic. Herein lies the significance of *The Road to Wigan Pier* to an examination of those endeavours in the thirties which were committed to popular social investigation.

Considered as a straightforward piece of social reportage, *The Road to Wigan Pier* is not entirely successful. Although Part One more-or-less satisfied the expectations of Victor Gollancz when he commissioned Orwell to report on conditions in the North of England in January 1936, the insistently personal and sometimes nostalgic nature of Orwell's account detracts from, and in some instances, annuls its facticity. Part Two, with its lengthy political and ideological harangues, is largely tangential to Part One. Certainly, the latter half of the book diverges from Gollancz's intentions. This is apparent in Gollancz's apologetic and conciliatory Foreword to the Left Book Club's edition of March 1937 and in the fact that the Club issued Part One as a separate edition in May 1937 for 'propaganda distribution.'

Samuel Hynes argues that *The Road to Wigan Pier* fails as a document because it is "too subjective, too literary,...to achieve that cold, objective rendering of facts that was the documentary goal."75 However, the value and success of a documentary report in the thirties was not necessarily constrained by

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qualitative judgements which measured the degree of disengagement and fidelity to cold, hard facts. Indeed, when *The Road to Wigan Pier* is situated within the immediate context of the documentary movement of the thirties, it becomes apparent that its appeal resides precisely in Orwell's insinuation of himself into the account, his acknowledgment of his authorial position, and in the attention he pays to the processes of fact production. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell displays a willingness to experiment with forms of expression that transcend conventional divisions between the literature of fact and the literature of fiction. The ultimate success or failure of Orwell's attempt is arguable but, at the time of its writing, there were no conventions for literary forms of documentation and, in this sense, it has a certain freshness.

*The Road to Wigan Pier* was published by the Left Book Club in March 1937, only three months after the establishment of Mass Observation. In July 1937, the newly founded left-wing magazine *Fact* devoted a special issue to the documentary. In an article, titled 'Documents', the novelist and co-editor, Storm Jameson, urged writers to establish a documentary mode of literature. On the surface, Jameson appears to agree with Mass Observation's aims and methods. She clearly echoes Mass Observation in phrases such as "the number of documents to be got is infinite," she supports the approach whereby writers immerse themselves within a community and suggests that "if a writer does not know, if his sense and imagination have not told him, what poverty smells like, he had better find out." However, she argues that writers' interest in their own sensations and responses are self-indulgent and narcissistic and, accordingly, should be excised from the documentary account. Jameson advises:

> The first thing a socialist writer has to realise is that there is no value in the emotion, the spiritual writhings, started in him by the sight, smell,
and touch of poverty. The emotions are no doubt unavoidable. There is no need to record them. Let them go and pour them down the drain.78

Jameson chooses her words carefully. By referring to the drainpipe she is drawing attention to Orwell's poignant description of a scene he witnessed through a train window when he left the Brookers.

At the back of one of the houses a young woman was kneeling on the stones, poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe which ran from the sink inside and which I suppose was blocked. I had time to see everything about her - her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arms reddened by the cold. She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye. She has a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery; and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen. It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that 'It isn't the same for them as it would be for us', and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her - understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe.79

Orwell's response to this scene is one of the most touching and memorable in The Road to Wigan Pier but it is precisely the kind of writing which Jameson believes unnecessary.

For Jameson, the problem faced by the novelist who wished to directly engage with 'facts' was one of structure and form. How, asked Jameson, are the documents to be presented? In his essay, 'Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature' (1937), Edward Upward expressed the problem clearly:

...speculation about future literary forms is idle unless it is accompanied by the realisation that already now the old forms can no longer adequately reflect the fundamental forces of the modern world. The

78 Ibid., p. 11.
79 George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 15.
writer's job is to create new forms now, to arrive by hard work at the emotional truth about present-day reality.\(^{80}\)

For Mass Observation, as for Orwell, the solution lay in constructing documentary accounts in a way that incorporated a series of shifting perspectives between the observer and the observed, the objective and subjective account, between individual and collective behaviour, the private and the public, and between the visible world and the invisible world. These various perspectives are not held in opposition to each other, but rather are positioned so that they illuminate and inform each other so that the interplay leads to a heightened understanding and a more comprehensive representation of the everyday world. For instance, in Mass Observation's coronation survey, \textit{May 12th}, the following two accounts relating to the coronation are presented together.

150,000 Half-pint cartons of milk,  
2,500 lbs, of fruit essences to produce 250,000 glasses of orangeade and lemonade,  
And £3,000 worth of cigarettes.

'Say, your gelatines of pork pressed into coronet shapes and cased in crimson jelly, just gives me the creeps!'\(^{81}\)

This interplay of perspectives between objective, public information, and private, subjective opinion, forms the basic structure of the book. Mass Observation's first major collective publication \textit{May 12th}, was edited by Madge and Jennings, with assistance from Kathleen Raine, William Empson, Stuart Legg and Ruthven Todd. The influence of Jennings, who was then working with Grierson at the GPO Film Unit, is particularly apparent in the presentation of the material. The mass of material in \textit{May 12th} is organised as a vast

assemblage of snapshots of information that cut, like a film, from one perspective to another, in an attempt to build up a kaleidoscopic montage of knowledge. Moreover, *May 12th* is consciously organised to achieve a cinematic effect, cutting, as it does, from newspaper reports to subjective accounts from people's diaries, and, from responses to questionnaires to objective observations supplied by trained observers. In this way, "Close-up and long shot, detail and ensemble, were all provided." Mass Observation and Orwell realised that the methods and procedures of telling played a vital role in the production and reception of documentary accounts. For them, the structures of telling, the very methods by which the accounts were constructed and organised, could not be divorced from the facts. Indeed, the methods by which information was conveyed, shaped and structured knowledge.

The significance that Mass Observation granted to shifting perspectives was apparent from the very beginning. The letters that announced the formation of Mass Observation in *The New Statesman and Nation*, on 2 January and 30 January 1937, appeared under the title 'Anthropology at Home'. This term soon became a catch-phrase of Mass Observation since it encapsulated their central concerns and ambitions.

In the popular imagination, anthropology was a science that occurred elsewhere, beyond the geographical boundaries of Britain, in the swamps of Africa or the jungles of South America. Embedded within the term 'Anthropology at Home' is a spatial trajectory which suggests that that which had hitherto taken place beyond British shores is to be propelled back toward the British interior. This movement from the exterior to the interior, from the outward-bound to the inward-bound, effects a homecoming of anthropology. But, this movement contrasts with the complex web of associations

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82 Ibid., p. 90.
surrounding the term 'home'. On one level, 'home' relates to the domestic realm, conveying a sense of the private and individual sphere. On another level, 'home' functioned as a symbol of the nation, as Humphrey Jennings made clear in his 1950 documentary film *Family Portrait*, which begins with the narrator Michael Goodliffe reassuringly describing Britain as a family and the Festival of Britain as a family reunion. Jennings' portrayal recalls a passage from Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1940):

> It has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes its ranks. A family with the wrong members in control - that, perhaps, is as near as one can come to describing England in a phrase.

It is precisely in the spaces between these two spheres, between the nation and the individual, the public and the personal, and between individual perception and the collective imagination, that Mass Observation sought to position their anthropological endeavour. As Madge and Harrisson wrote in their 1939 publication *Britain by Mass Observation*:

> There are two kinds of focus on society. One is the ordinary focus of the ordinary man or woman which centres round home and family, work and wages. The other is the political focus, which centres round government policy and diplomacy. What happens in this political sphere obviously affects the sphere of home and work; equally obviously, political developments are affected by the reactions of ordinary people. But between the two there is a gulf - of understanding, of information and of interest. This gulf is the biggest problem of our highly organised civilisation.

The gulf between public opinion and personal opinion was a significant generating factor of Mass Observation. By the end of 1936, the three founders of Mass Observation, Madge, Jennings and Harrisson, had become acutely

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aware of this gap which, in their opinion, had become dangerously wide. In 
establishing Mass Observation, they sought to develop a mode of investigation 
that enabled working class people to construct accounts of their own lives. The 
development of Mass Observation and their approach to documenting working 
class people is the subject of the following chapter.

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85 Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, *Britain by Mass Observation*, p. 25.
CHAPTER TWO

‘DISCOVERING’ WORKTOWN

Mass Observation was conceived towards the end of 1936, a year during which the symbolic order of Britain appeared to be on the verge of collapse. 1936 began with the death of George V and continued with the removal through abdication of another monarch, Edward VIII, and the substitution of a third, George VI. 1936 was also the year in which a great national monument, the Crystal Palace, was destroyed by fire. By coincidence, the burning of Crystal Palace occurred on the very same night that the mass media were preparing to reveal, on the following day, the affair between Edward VIII and Mrs Simpson. The Crystal Palace fire took place prior to the official announcement of the establishment of Mass Observation, when the movement was still being discussed. For at least one participant of the discussions, the poet David Gascoyne, the burning of Crystal Palace on 30 November was symbolic of a wider collapse. In the introduction to his Journal 1936-37, Gascoyne recalls leaving the home of Charles Madge in Blackheath, where they and a number of other people had been discussing the possibility of founding Mass Observation.

...in the train after the ‘meeting’,...I saw a great glow in the sky, which the next morning I found to have been the great fire of the old Crystal Palace, a ‘happening’ which greatly struck the popular imagination at the time (the King and the P.M. went out to see the blaze, if I remember rightly), and sensational photographs of it duly appeared on the centre pages of the Mirror the following days. For most of us, - we Mass Observationists that is to say, - it represented in a sort of symbolic way an image of the world-conflagration which we were already beginning to think of as about to break out, and we felt that it meant this, unconsciously, to the general public, hence the unusual fascination it seemed to have for everyone at the time.¹

In Europe, 1936 was the year of the Popular Front in France. It was also the year of Franco's assault, backed by Germany and Italy, against the Spanish Republic. But Mass Observation was strictly concerned with national issues when Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings joined with Tom Harrisson in January 1937 to announce the formation of the endeavour. For them, the abdication crisis was symptomatic of a wider national disorder because it clearly exposed that knowledge was in the hands of a few and that the masses had been placed in a position of ignorance.

This chapter focuses on the emergence and foundation of Mass Observation. It discusses the immediate circumstances that impelled Madge, Harrisson and Jennings to establish Mass Observation, and outlines the methods they developed to investigate working class life. The scope of the chapter is restricted to the years before World War II, since by the outbreak of war the pioneering features of Mass Observation had been fully established. After September 1939, when Harrisson became entirely responsible for running the organisation, the original intentions of Mass Observation became "more and more distorted by the pressures of war". Mass Observation was placed at the disposal of government agencies such as the Ministry of Information, and, although Harrisson continued to employ the same methods of investigation, the range of subjects for study became restricted to those directly connected to the war, such as public reaction to the blitz, civilian morale and rationing.

In this chapter, attention is given to the work of Mass Observation's official photographer, Humphrey Spender. His photo-documentation of everyday life in Bolton constitutes a significant contribution to the cumulative network of Mass Observation documents and, ultimately, to the social transformation that Mass Observation sought. In his essay 'God's Sanitary Law: Slum Clearance

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and Photography in Late Nineteenth-Century Leeds’, John Tagg poses the following questions about the deployment of photography in the Quarry Hill slum clearance schemes.

Why were photographs of working-class subjects, working-class trades, working-class housing, and working-class recreations made in the nineteenth century? By whom? Under what conditions? For what purposes? Who pictures? Who is pictured? And how were the pictures used? What did they do? To whom were they meaningful? And what were the consequences of accepting them as meaningful, truthful or real? These are not questions about the ‘externals’ of photography,...but questions about the very conditions which furnish the materials, codes and strategies of photographic images, the terms of their legibility, and the range and limits of their effectivities. Such determinations are scored across the images, in what they do and do not do, in what they encompass and exclude, in the ways they open on to or resist a repertoire of uses in which they can be meaningful and productive.3

Tagg’s questions are essentially concerned with relations of power in late nineteenth century photographic representation. To ask the same questions of the photographs that Spender produced in the 1930s is not to ignore the important changes that occurred in photographic documentation between the end of the nineteenth century and the emergence of the documentary mode of the 1930s. Rather, Tagg’s questioning of the relationship between viewer and image, reader and representation, and of the institutional frameworks within which photographs are produced and consumed, opens the way for an examination of Spender’s photographs, for these are the very issues that Spender and Mass Observation confronted in their attempts to democratise knowledge about working class experience.

The photographs discussed in this chapter are those that Spender produced in the 1930s. These photographs can be roughly divided into two groups, his Mass Observation work, and, a second body of work that includes his 1934

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photographs of the working class district of Stepney in East London, and those he produced for newspapers and magazines such as *The Listener* and *The Left Review*. In each group Spender is fundamentally concerned with representing working class life, but, a comparison of the two groups reveals crucial differences of approach and intention. Although all of the photographs examined here provide a vital record of working class life in the thirties, it will be argued that Spender's Mass Observation photographs are distinguished by the emphasis he places on the cultural environment that informs the everyday lives and experiences of the inhabitants of Bolton. This emphasis, which engenders an animation of working class life, rather than a mere description of working class life, is the binding quality of Spender's Mass Observation photographs. Indeed, Spender's concern for doing 'something more than simply showing us how they lived',\(^4\) coupled with his desire to capture patterns of thought and behaviour, mark out the difference of his Mass Observation photographs from his other photographic work of the 1930s and from the documentary strategies of his contemporaries.

Spender's non-Mass Observation work, his photographs of Stepney, Newcastle and Jarrow, is focussed on providing evidence of the material conditions of working class life; evidence that, in the case of the Stepney photographs, was specifically produced for use in courts of law where they were deployed to argue for social reform. In serving as visual testimony, as documents of proof through which, it was hoped, attention would be drawn to the material needs of the working classes, Spender's non-Mass Observation photographs conform to the documentary mode of Edith Tudor Hart, Harold Tomlin and Kurt Hutton. Such work, which has its genesis in the photographs of nineteenth century photographers such as Thomas Annan, John Thomson and Willie Swift, stands in contrast to Spender's Mass Observation photographs of Bolton

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and Blackpool. Indeed, by comparing Spender’s Mass Observation photographs with his non-Mass Observation work, it becomes apparent that his photographs cut across the shifts that occurred in photographic representation of working class people between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s. This shift, it will be argued, is one that Spender’s photographic work of the thirties embodies as he moves between two regimes of representation: one which sees him deploy the camera to construct a visual testimony, and, one in which he is fundamentally concerned with constructing a visual anthropology. It is this latter position that will have, in the 1940s, significant consequences for the work of one of the founding members of the Independent Group, Nigel Henderson.

Throughout 1936, until December 1, the British press had maintained a complete silence on the affair between Edward VIII and Mrs Wallis Simpson, an American double divorcee whose two husbands were still living. A ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ had been negotiated between the King and the two press barons, Lord Beaverbrook, who owned the Daily Express, the Evening Standard and the Sunday Express, and Lord Rothermere, who owned the Daily Mail, the Evening News and Sunday Dispatch. This agreement guaranteed that there would be no press coverage of the friendship between the King and Mrs Simpson and ensured that "the public at large knew nothing."5 In contrast to the self-imposed censorship of the British press, the American and European mass media frequently reported on the relationship between the King and Mrs Simpson. But, even this information frequently did not reach British shores since articles and photographs relating to the couple were removed by the English distributors.6 Such censorship prompted Ellen Wilkinson, the Labour

6 For a discussion of the failure of the press to report on the relationship between Edward VIII and Mrs. Simpson, see, Malcolm Muggeridge, The Thirties: 1930-1940 in Great Britain, Collins,
MP for Jarrow, to ask in Parliament why the magazines she had received from overseas had large holes cut in them.7

The crisis of Edward VIII's abdication highlighted the gulf between reported knowledge and public opinion, and threw into question the relationship between the mass media and the general public. Geoffrey Pyke, a Cambridge schoolmaster, asked in his letter to *The New Statesman and Nation*, "How far the press reflected, and how far it evoked and moulded, public opinion during the last ten days it is impossible to say."8 Charles Madge was better positioned than most to answer Pyke's question. In 1936, Madge was working at the *Daily Mirror* reporting on the events leading up to the abdication of Edward VIII and was able to judge for himself the extent to which the press formed, manipulated, invented or conveyed public opinion. In 1976 Madge recalled:

Deployed now here, now there by my news editor, I stood little chance of an overall view of what was going on, but at least what I did know was at first hand, and of potentially more historical interest than the largely fabricated and contradictory accounts that appeared in the newspapers, including my own. This experience was for me one major precipitant of the idea that history and social self-knowledge could be served by organised collective observation.9

The turmoil surrounding the abdication of Edward VIII highlighted two factors that propelled Mass Observation into existence. First, the realisation that the British public had been seriously misled and misinformed with regard to the events leading up to the abdication, had exposed the need for a social investigation that would generate sufficient factual material to enable a more comprehensive and democratic knowledge of society. Secondly, it quickly became apparent that the general public were rendered voiceless by the

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absence of channels through which they could articulate and communicate their thoughts, opinions and attitudes.

In his introduction to *Britain in the 30s*, Tom Harrisson recalled his sense of alarm over the discrepancy between public opinion and published opinion.

There were many people in the thirties who were uneasily aware of the inadequacy of communication between the 'two societies' and who felt an urgent need to overcome it. A dramatic opportunity to confirm one's suspicions and test theories came with the abdication of King Edward VIII in 1936.

The abdication hit me in this initial phase. Both before it was made public and during the crisis itself I found a striking discrepancy between the published word in newspapers and over the radio and what one actually felt and heard working and moving amongst the people of industrial Lancashire at all levels below the middle class. It was as if there were two worlds, the public and the personal. Those famous 'ordinary people' were hardly ever thinking or saying things attributed to them by Fleet Street or by Westminster.10

Harrisson’s reference to 'two societies' recalls Disraeli’s two nations. But, whereas Disraeli had written of England as two nations, one constituted by the rich and the other by the poor, Harrisson acknowledged another two worlds, one formed by the public, the other by the personal. The media’s handling of the relationship between Edward VIII and Mrs Simpson and the abdication crisis had clearly demonstrated that communication channels between the individual and the collective were seriously fractured. To counter this situation, Mass Observation sought to develop a research movement that documented the everyday lives of ordinary people. In so doing, people could be apprised of the facts relating to their own lives and this, it was hoped, would give rise to alternative versions of reality that had the potential to challenge and contest so-

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called official versions of reality, such as those perpetrated by the press throughout 1936.

From the outset, Mass Observation was primarily concerned with the social landscape of Britain. It emerged in response to a specifically British crisis and, in developing an anthropology at home, it aimed to "add to the social consciousness of the time". Moreover, as Tom Harrisson revealed, Mass Observation believed that at the time of its inception, British democracy was being seriously undermined.

Private opinion remained totally private and obscure. The gap between leader and led, between published opinion and public opinion, between Westminster chatter and Lancashire talk built an invisible barrier, dangerous in our democracy. If this gap had widened it could well have led - as it had done in Germany not long before - to total breakdown and revolution in social structure.

Democracy was linked with knowledge and facts. Recent events had demonstrated that ordinary people were not being provided with either. Mass Observation saw itself as capable of repairing this situation by establishing the facts about what people did and said and by providing ordinary people with the means of communicating their beliefs and opinions. At this level, the quasi-political ambitions of Mass Observation become apparent, for in opening up and democratizing channels of communication they sought to realign the relationship between democratic processes and the silenced majority.

The clearest statement of the relationship between democracy and knowledge appeared in Madge and Harrisson's 1939 publication *Britain by Mass Observation*. The material in *Britain by Mass Observation* is largely concerned with exploring and establishing public reaction to the political events of 1938,

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12 Tom Harrisson, *Britain in the 30s*, np.
particularly to the Munich Agreement of October that saw large parts of Czechoslovakia transferred to Hitler, who had annexed Austria in March. Many of the press reports dealing with Chamberlain’s meeting with Hitler in September took a congratulatory approach to the occasion, emphasising that Chamberlain was sixty-nine and that he had never flown before. While Beaverbrook’s *Daily Express* praised Chamberlain, and suggested that the issues at stake in Europe were not Britain’s concern, Rothermere’s *Daily Mail* promoted the view that Chamberlain had the trust of the nation. In keeping with Mass Observation’s intentions, newspaper reports dealing with the Czech crisis were included in *Britain by Mass Observation* and were offset by accounts of the opinions and beliefs of ‘the man in the street’. Mass Observation discovered that only 14% of the three hundred and fifty people who were asked “What do you think about Czechoslovakia?”, supported Chamberlain. With such methods, Mass Observation was able to demonstrate that published opinion was at odds with private opinion, and that newspaper accounts of public attitudes were inaccurate. By establishing a more accurate account of people’s beliefs and opinions, Mass Observation saw themselves as a movement that empowered people, as a mechanism for providing people with sufficient information so that they could play a more effective role in the democratic process.

Throughout *Britain by Mass Observation*, Madge and Harrisson repeatedly remind their readers of the relationship between knowledge, democracy and power.

This is a democratic country, so we are supposed to have some idea of what is going on. For this we depend on wireless and newspaper presentation of news. But can we believe what we read and hear?

One thing that we can be fairly sure of, namely that most readers of this book want to know these facts, and all other relevant facts which will help them to play their full part in the world...Fact is urgent - we are cogs in a vast and complicated machine which may turn out to be an
infernal machine that is going to blow us all to smithereens...if we are at all interested in this world...we had better hurry up and learn where we stand. We must have knowledge, at least sufficient for us to come to personal decisions.

It is the function of...our democratic Parliament to voice the wishes, feelings, wants, needs, hopes, opinions, grouses, aspirations and criticisms of 45,000,000 people. But this democratic system has broken down in other countries, and may break down in our own, because the 45,000,000 do not feel sufficiently strongly that they are able to speak through Parliament. So they give it up as a bad job and resign themselves to being voiceless...

It is because of this situation - the urgency of fact, the voicelessness of everyman and the smallness of the group which controls fact-getting and fact-distributing - that this book came to be written.13

But, Mass Observation was not only concerned with overcoming the voicelessness of the masses and democratising knowledge. There are indications that Mass Observation sought to accumulate knowledge in order to generate societal transformation. In January 1937, Madge, Harrisson and Jennings, wrote:

It does not set out in quest of truth or facts for their own sake, or for the sake of an intellectual minority, but aims at exposing them in simple terms to all observers, so that their environment may be understood, and thus constantly transformed. Whatever the political methods called upon to effect the transformation, the knowledge of what has to be transformed is indispensable. The foisting on the mass of ideals or ideas developed by men apart from it, irrespective of its capacities, causes mass misery, intellectual despair and an international shambles.14

From the very beginning, Mass Observation was envisaged as a movement that could lead to the transformation of society on the basis of a more comprehensive knowledge about itself.

The above extract is taken from the letter that announced the official formation of Mass Observation in *The New Statesman and Nation* on 30 January 1937. This was one of three letters published in *The New Statesman and Nation* that stressed the urgent need for widespread social investigation. On 12 December 1936, Geoffrey Pyke suggested that the thousands of letters responding to the monarchic crisis be preserved and used as the basis of an "anthropological study of our own civilisation of which we stand in such desperate need." Nearly three weeks later, on 2 January 1937, a letter in response by Charles Madge appeared in *The New Statesman and Nation*. Madge revealed that a group had been formed with the aim of developing an anthropology of ourselves. Madge wrote:

English anthropology...has to deal with elements so repressed that only what is admitted to be a first-class upheaval brings them to the surface. Such was the threatened marriage of the new "Father-of-the-people" to Mrs. Ernest Simpson. Fieldwork, i.e., the collection of evidence of mass wish-situations, has otherwise to proceed in a far more roundabout way than the anthropologist has been accustomed to in Africa or Australia. Clues to these situations may turn up in the popular phenomenon of the "coincidence." In fact it is probable that in the ultra-repressed condition of our society they can only materialise in this form, so mysterious in appearance.

Coincidentally, this letter appeared on the same page as a poem by Tom Harrisson, who was then residing in Bolton, Lancashire. Of course, Harrisson read Madge's letter and some time over the next two weeks he travelled to Blackheath, London, where he met with Madge and Jennings. At this meeting the establishment of Mass Observation was sealed and on 30 January 1937 another letter was sent to *The New Statesman and Nation*. It was this letter, signed by Harrisson, Jennings and Madge, that announced the official formation of Mass Observation.

Of the three founders of Mass Observation, only Harrisson had any previous experience of anthropology. Humphrey Jennings had been employed at the GPO Film Unit between 1934 and 1935, and, throughout the first six months of 1936 he had been deeply involved with the organisation of The International Surrealist Exhibition, serving alongside David Gascoyne and others, as a member of the exhibition’s organising committee. Charles Madge had been working at the Daily Mirror since 1935 and resigned towards the end of 1936. In contrast to Madge and Jennings, Harrisson had been involved with various anthropological endeavours since 1930. Although Harrisson had received no formal anthropological training while a student at Pembroke College, Cambridge, he had gained considerable experience in a variety of scientific methodologies through his involvement with several Cambridge and Oxford University Expeditions. At the time of Mass Observation’s formation, Harrisson had only recently returned to England after spending three years living in the New Hebrides islands of Espiritu Santo and Malekula.

In 1930, at the age of nineteen, Harrisson had travelled to the Arctic with an Oxford University Expedition. There he had shared a tent with Charles Elton, who promoted animal ecology as a science in Britain, and from whom Harrisson was able to learn a great deal about scientific methodology. In the summer of 1931, he took part in a joint Cambridge and Oxford expedition to the island of St. Kilda in the Outer Hebrides. Shortly after completing this expedition, Harrisson abandoned his studies in Natural Science at Cambridge and embarked on another Oxford University Expedition, this time to the British colony of Sarawak on the north coast of Borneo, where he arrived in July 1932. Harrisson’s final Oxford University Expedition began in July 1933, when he

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17 The International Surrealist Exhibition, New Burlington Galleries, London, 11 June - 4 July 1936. Other members of the English committee were Hugh Sykes Davies, McKnight Kauffer, Rupert Lee (Chairman), Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Roland Penrose (Hon. Treasurer), and Herbert Read.
arrived in the New Hebrides. Finally, after remaining in the New Hebrides for three years, Harrisson returned to England in early 1936 and settled in Bolton. It was in Bolton that Harrisson came across Madge’s letter of 2 January 1937 in *The New Statesman and Nation*.

Although the letter of 2 January revealed that Mass Observation would require the participation of volunteers, the ambitions of the movement’s founders were more clearly stated in the letter of 30 January. Here it became apparent that Mass Observation would be a vast anthropological project, both in terms of its scale and scope, a nation wide investigation involving thousands of untrained observers who would inquire into every aspect of daily life. The letter revealed:

> It [Mass Observation] does not presuppose that there are any inexplicable things...it must be allowed to doubt and re-examine the completeness of every existing idea about "humanity," while it cannot afford to neglect any of them.19

In pursuing an exhaustive knowledge bank, Mass Observation sought to inquire into the visible world and into the invisible world, to "get written down the unwritten laws and to make the invisible forces visible."20 They aimed to document not only the observable but also "...mental phenomena which are unconscious or repressed,...".21 The letter to *The New Statesman and Nation* of 30 January, contained a surreal and eclectic list of possible topics for study. It is worth presenting this list in its entirety, for although it was written in 1937, at the height of the Depression, what is strikingly absent are topics relating to labour and economic conditions. Such concerns are secondary to Mass Observation’s interest in the subjective lives, behaviours and environments of people.

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Behaviour of people at war memorials.
Shouts and gestures of motorists.
The aspidistra cult.
Anthropology of football pools.
Bathroom behaviour.
Beards, armpits, eyebrows.
Anti-semitism.
Distribution, diffusion and significance of dirty jokes.
Funerals and undertakers.
Female taboos about eating.
The private lives of midwives.\(^{22}\)

Mass Observation sought to create a museum of knowledge, a museum that contained comprehensive information about all aspects of human behaviour, including people’s dreams, desires, opinions, thoughts and beliefs. In order to document the objective and subjective worlds of ordinary people, Mass Observation developed a dual approach to the collection and documentation of knowledge. Harrisson and a team of untrained volunteer observers, sometimes numbering as many as sixty, lived and worked in the mill town of Bolton where they produced detailed objective accounts of everyday life based on observation. In 1960, Harrisson recalled the strategies employed in Bolton, otherwise known as Worktown:

...penetrate, observe, be quiet yourself. For our first two years in Worktown we did not make a direct interview with anybody. At least three-quarters of the work was concentrated in describing what observers could see and hear without doing anything to alter the situation (or conversation). In this way we were able to penetrate into most of the corners of Worktown life, including all the forty-odd religious sects...every political party...and scores of organisations, businesses and family situations ranging from the Royal Ancient Order of Buffaloes...through to the Budgerigar Club...\(^{23}\)

While Harrisson worked in Bolton, Jennings and Madge remained in London where they initiated a number of strategies. A national panel of diarists was

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 155.

recruited to produce subjective accounts of their activities and thoughts on the twelfth day of each month between February 1937 and January 1938. Madge and Harrisson explained that the intention of these day surveys "was to collect a mass of data without any selective principle, as a preliminary to detailed studies of carefully chosen subjects." These subjective accounts were complemented by objective reports provided by Mass Observation investigators who were required to document people's behaviour. For example, on 12 May 1937, the day of George VI's coronation, a team of twelve investigators were sent out onto the streets to record their observations of what they saw and heard and to distribute questionnaires to the public. People were asked to reply, in writing, to questions such as "Did you yourself see, or did you want to see, the Coronation procession?", and, "What did you do on May 12? Give a short hour by hour description of your day." Thus the team of investigators provided objective reports and the diarists and questionnaire respondents provided subjective accounts. These reports formed the basis of May 12th, that was discussed in the previous chapter.

Mass Observation distinguished itself from traditional social investigation by recruiting untrained people to observe and report on their own everyday lives. As Madge and Harrisson wrote in 1937:

Mass Observation intends to make use not only of the trained scientific observer, but of the untrained observer, the man in the street. Ideally it is the observation by everyone of everyone including themselves.

The "mass science" that Mass Observation spoke of, was a mass science precisely because the subjects of inquiry were the creators of the knowledge.

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25 Ibid., p. 90.
27 Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, *Mass Observation*, p. 11.
28 Charles Madge, 'Anthropology at Home', p. 12.
relating to their own lives. It was a project that relied on the mass to generate knowledge of the mass. Ordinary people were no longer merely the subject of detached observation because in documenting their own individual lives, the observer and the observed were one and the same.

Although Madge, Harrisson and Jennings were united in their belief that Mass Observation was a means of collecting facts that would provide a more accurate understanding of society, it seems that in the early stages, there were differences between Harrisson on the one hand, and Jennings and Madge on the other, about the ways in which the material could be employed. Jennings, who left the movement shortly after the publication of *May 12th* in September 1937, and Madge, brought a literary approach to Mass Observation that was born out of their interest in Surrealism. In *Defending Ancient Springs*, Madge's wife, Kathleen Raine, wrote that Madge:

> originally envisaged Mass-Observation as a technique for recording subliminal stirrings of the collective mind of the nation; through the images thrown up in such things as advertisements, popular songs, themes in the press, the objects with which people surround themselves (have on their mantelpiece, for example).29

Some years later, in *The Land Unknown*, Raine returned to the relationship that Madge envisaged between Mass Observation and Surrealism.

> To Charles, who seemed a man inspired almost as a medium is inspired or possessed, the idea of Mass Observation was less sociology than a kind of poetry, akin to Surrealism. He saw the expression of the unconscious life of England, literally, in writings on the walls, telling of the hidden thoughts and dreams of inarticulate masses.30

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For Madge, Surrealism was a means of reconciling the apparent differences between art and science. Indeed, as early as 1934, Madge had written of Surrealism as a science.

Surrealism is a science by virtue of its capacity for development and discovery and by virtue of the anonymity of its researches. Like science, it is an apparatus which, in human hands, remains fallible - it has its own margin of error, and its own type of superstition.31

David Gascoyne's translation of Breton's introductory essay to the catalogue of *The International Surrealist Exhibition* contains a passage that could well serve as a model for Madge's attitude to Mass Observation. Breton states:

We say that the art of imitation (of places, scenes, exterior objects) has had its day, and that the artistic problem consists to-day in bringing a more and more objective precision to bear upon mental representation, by means of the voluntary exercise of the imagination and the memory...The greatest benefit that surrealism has derived from this kind of operation up till now has been that of having succeeded in reconciling *dialectically* these two terms which are so violently contradictory for adult man: perception, representation; and in bridging the gap that separates them.32

Madge and Jennings believed that Mass Observation offered the opportunity to bring a scientific rigour to the imaginary world. In their opinion, the invisible world, the world of dreams, fantasies and fears, could be investigated and subjected to objective scrutiny and analysis. In an essay of February 1937, titled 'Magic and Materialism', Madge explained how empiricism and the imaginary could be brought together.

'The observer is to ask himself at the end of each day what image has been dominant in it. This image should, if possible, be one which has forced itself on him and which has confirmed its importance by recurrence of some kind. The image may occur in a series of varying forms or may take the form of a coincidence. For example, the same name or object may forcibly strike the observer's notice, from within or

without, several times on the same day.' Such a test is going to throw light on such questions as: Is there an image typical of a certain day, of a certain area, of a certain class, etc.? The reactions of individuals when plotted on a map may turn out to form a mass-picture, just as many separate barometer-readings go to make a weather map.\textsuperscript{33}

Madge wrote 'Magic and Materialism' only two or three weeks after Mass Observation's inception, when its aspirations and methods were still being determined. It is clear that in the early stages, Madge believed that Mass Observation would be capable of plotting individual fantasies and dreams on a chart or grid and that, in their totality, and at their points of intersection, these could reveal patterns of group fantasies.

In 1976, Madge claimed that the initial idea of developing a scientific view of the collective unconscious, what he refers to as the "poetic side" of Mass Observation, was never realised.\textsuperscript{34} If one conceives of Mass Observation purely in terms of their written publications, then Madge's assertion has some validity since publications such as \textit{Britain by Mass Observation} were largely concerned with assessing the relationship between published opinion and private opinion. But, the achievements of Mass Observation will be misunderstood if they are assessed purely in terms of the written word. Mass Observation sought to provide an exhaustive and multifaceted understanding of working class life and, to ensure that the complexities of everyday life were fully documented, painting and photography were deployed as tools of reportage. By turning to another essay that Madge wrote in 1937, \textit{Press, Radio and Social Consciousness}, and then to the photographs by Mass Observation's official photographer, Humphrey Spender, it becomes apparent that Madge may have underestimated the 'poetic' achievements of Mass Observation, for Spender's photographs clearly articulate the poetic aspirations of Mass Observation.

\textsuperscript{33} Charles Madge, 'Magic and Materialism', \textit{Left Review}, Vol. 3, No. 1, February 1937, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{34} Charles Madge, 'The Birth of Mass Observation', p. 1395.
In 'Press, Radio and Social Consciousness', Madge was concerned with exploring the relationship between mass journalism, particularly newspapers, and social consciousness. He argues that in contemporary society, newspapers have generated a new sense of connectedness, since on any given day, newspaper and radio reports provide each person with the same information. He writes, "Social homogeneity in our day is a function of the Press and the radio...". Madge approvingly quotes from A.J. Cummings' *The Press and a Changing Civilisation*:

> The introduction of the popular Press,...brought a remarkable change in the intellectual life of the people by giving them some common basis of opinion, some data on which to form collective opinions, however false or incomplete such opinions might be.36

Later in the essay, Madge advocates that newspapers are not only concerned with the conscious world, but also with the unconscious world.

Fourteen months as a reporter taught me to understand the queer poetry of the newspaper and the advertisement hoarding, and not to dismiss it simply because it is sensational and vulgar...there is a second element in them besides the sordid interest of newspaper-owner or advertiser: the element of the mass-wish. The best sub-editors and layout men are dominated by the mass-wish not only consciously, but unconsciously as well. For one thing, they have not the time very often to think out exactly what it is they are doing when they make up a page for the press. All they know is that their livelihood depends on their turning out a good page, which is to say the page that the public wants. The newspaper and the hoarding serve as vehicles for the expression of unconscious fears and wishes of the mass.37

Madge's view of the newspaper and advertising hoarding is strikingly similar to Spender's. In speaking about his Mass Observation work, and particularly about a series of photographs depicting graffiti, (Figs. 3, 4, 5) Spender has said:

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36 Ibid., p. 152.
37 Ibid., p. 160.
I was mainly interested in taking pictures of people going about their daily lives, but I soon realised that I didn't have to photograph people in order to understand people's behaviour. That's why I was interested in posters and graffiti and scratches on walls and bits of exotic architecture, because to me, these seemed to be valuable supplies of information. These photographs tell us about what people thought and about what they might want and this is what I mean when I say that they tell us about how people lived. They were a way of documenting another aspect of people's lives. Tom wasn't terribly keen on these photographs but I got around that, whenever I possibly could, by taking photographs of people against a background of walls with posters, or of children playing in front of a wall with graffiti on it.38

For Madge and Spender, the newspaper and other forms of mass media imagery, were sociologically significant because they contained information about the hidden thoughts, desires, fears and fantasies of the masses.

38 Author's interview with Humphrey Spender, 4/11/97.
Tom Harrisson was equally interested in non-verbal manifestations of human behaviour and thought but his interest was primarily driven by a belief that the written word was incapable of conveying the complexities of everyday life. Harrisson mistrusted "the value of mere words."39 In Britain Revisited, Harrisson wrote:

...despite the complexity of verbal statements at different levels, the whole of verbal statement is only a fraction of the total subject matter of a

39 Tom Harrisson, Britain in the 30s, np.
living, realistic social science. Much of life has little or no speech pattern - the basic act of sex, for instance. And again much of speech may have effects different from those inferred in the uttered context. This vast area of human activity, to be studied by looking and listening, only secondarily by ASKING, remains excitingly - and rather terrifyingly - unexplored in our own society.40

Given Harrisson’s interest in non-verbal manifestations and the emphasis he accords to looking, it is not surprising that he urged Spender to join him in Bolton in the spring of 1937. Throughout 1937 and 1938 Spender made several trips to Bolton, usually staying for no more than two or three weeks at a time, before returning to London where, between 1934 and 1937, he worked as ‘Lensman’ for the Daily Mirror.

Spender’s trips to Bolton were motivated by a genuine belief that in providing photographic knowledge about working class life he could contribute to the transformation of society. He has recalled that he was “concerned with photographic fact-gathering which had a direct social purpose, to be used as an instrument of change.”41 Yet, Spender’s Mass Observation photographs are strikingly distinct from his earlier work and, more importantly, from more conventional photo-documentary accounts of working class life produced in the thirties.

Many photo-documentarists of the thirties, such as Harold Tomlin, Kurt Hutton and Edith Tudor Hart, deployed the camera to bring the effects of dire poverty and social deprivations to the public’s attention and this, it was hoped, would generate social and political reform (Figs. 6, 7). Photographic representations of working class people invariably, and often with great effect,

40 Tom Harrisson, Britain Revisited, p. 19
focused on economic and social conditions, picturing the effects of unemployment, bad housing, poor nutrition and industrial decline. Wal Hannington’s *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, published by the Left Book Club in 1937, placed great emphasis on a series of powerful documentary photographs to illustrate points in the text.42 (Figs. 8, 9) Several photographs

42 There is no acknowledgment of the photographer in *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, however at least one photograph is by Edith Tudor Hart. This untitled photograph of 1936
depict queues of unemployed people at the Labour Exchange and others depict the appalling living conditions of slum dwellers. These photographs were often accompanied by dramatic and emotive titles. A photograph of three small children playing with a skipping rope is entitled ‘These Kiddies Have Nowhere but the Street to Play In’, while another scene of a couple with a child in a pram is given the title ‘They Walked from Carlisle to London Searching For Work’. Such photographs were incorporated into written accounts to validate and prove experience, to provide evidence of the direct manifestations of poverty and unemployment, and of the need for social reform.

![Photograph of slum dwellings](image)

Fig. 8. Photographer unknown. One of the photographs included in Wal Hannington’s *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* (1937). Title reads ‘Slum Dwellings in Camberwell’, c.1937.

depicts a family group in the back yard of their home. (See Fig. 6.) In Hannington’s book the photograph is accompanied by the title “Living” conditions in 1937. Wal Hannington was the leader of the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement. According to Bernard Crick, Orwell heard Hannington speak at a political meeting during his journey through the industrial North and criticised him as a poor speaker. Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, Penguin, London, 1982, pp. 282-283.
Throughout the thirties, documentary photographs frequently relied on generating a sense of shame and compassion as a means to invoking reform. This is the approach of Edith Tudor Hart in photographs such as No Home, No Dole (c.1935), London Family (c.1936), Stepney Mother (c.1936) and the particularly poignant Cake Shop (c.1937, Fig. 10), in which a young impoverished girl, looks wistfully into the window of a bakery shop that is laden with pastries. Bill Brandt adopted a similar approach for his series of photographs in The English at Home, but, in this instance, the sense of shame and despair emerges from the comparisons that Brandt establishes between images of poverty and those of wealth. In writing about Brandt's photographs in the introduction to The English at Home, Raymond Mortimer asks, appropriately, "Is there any English man or woman who can look at these without a profound feeling of shame?"  

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43 Raymond Mortimer, 'Introduction', The English at Home, Batsford, London, 1936, p. 7. Interestingly, the artist Graham Bell responded to the paintings of Robert Medley in a similar vein. In a review of Medley's paintings, Bell wrote: "The artist is very much aware of the gulf that separates fortunate from unfortunate...These pictures echo the forlorn cry from the distressed areas - 'something must be done.' They might inspire a well-meaning rentier to reach for his cheque book, or an undergraduate to take up social service." Graham Bell, 'Escape
Spender's Mass Observation photographs are entirely different. Although there is no doubt that Spender employed the camera as an educative tool and as an instrument of social reform, for Spender, social transformation was not necessarily consequent on the photographic illumination of social problems. In contrast to the impulse that lay beneath the inclusion of photographs in *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Spender was not seeking to produce documentary evidence of the material conditions of working class life. Indeed, Mass Observation in general, did not seek to expose the material circumstances of working class life. Unlike other documentary endeavours of the thirties, such as *The Road to Wigan Pier*, or James Hanley's *Grey Children: A Study in Humbug and Misery* (1935), Mass Observation did not provide statistics on housing problems, education or unemployment, nor did they report on death rates, and in Bolton in 1937, the unemployment and mortality rates were higher than the national average.

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Spender's fundamental concern in Bolton was with photographing human behaviour and activity and with providing an account of the social landscape of Bolton. In his Mass Observation photographs there are no images of unemployment queues and there are no photographs of back alleys in slum areas, such as those included in *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* (Fig. 11).

Most striking, perhaps, is that there are no photographs of the intolerable domestic conditions that were all too familiar in photographic accounts of working class life in the thirties. Indeed, there is only one domestic interior shot amongst the approximately nine hundred photographs that Spender produced for Mass Observation. This photograph, *Baby Getting a Bath, Bolton* (1937, Fig. 12), is exceptional because the mother specifically requested Spender to take the photograph, a task which he found especially unnerving precisely because he regarded the act of photographing people inside their homes as intrusive and voyeuristic and, more importantly, because the subjects knew they were being
photographed, the ability to produce an objective and candid photograph was diminished.44

Fig. 12. Humphrey Spender, Baby Getting a Bath, Bolton, 1937.

This is not to suggest that Spender ignored scenes of urban decay or poverty, for photographs such as Catapult Kids, Bolton (Fig. 13), Street Scene, Children and Wasteland, Bolton, all of 1937, testify to the existence of poverty. Rather, it is to highlight the fact that in Bolton, Spender did not seek out to document scenes of social deprivation. The economic and material conditions that existed in Bolton formed the context, not the focus of his photographs.

Fig. 13. Humphrey Spender, Catapult Kids, Bolton, 1937.

This shift in emphasis, this move away from being primarily concerned with documenting the material conditions of working class life towards a concern with producing a "photographic archive of human behaviour"45, was one that Spender was conscious of making. Indeed, he has since revealed that he felt compelled to make this decision.

I was becoming increasingly disturbed by the sense that people were being photographed in a way that didn't allow them to speak for themselves. I became most aware of this problem while working in Stepney. Part of the reason that I was so attracted to Harrisson's work was because I believed that knowing more about human behaviour could improve everyday life but I wasn't especially interested in simply illustrating things that were already known. I wanted to photograph people in a way that allowed them to speak, so that the people and the things in the photographs could speak for themselves. In Stepney I was always suspicious that the photograph spoke for the people. I really couldn't see the point of continuing in that way. Harrisson provided me with a marvellous opportunity to do something different.46

Spender's comments are worth pursuing in detail because they point to a number of concerns that underpinned his photographic strategies throughout the thirties. These concerns are best illuminated by turning to his photographs of Stepney, for when these are set against the photographs of Bolton it becomes apparent that in his Mass Observation photographs Spender is seeking to extend the documentary character of the photograph. It is in the Mass Observation work, in photographs such as Open Market Shoe Stall, Bolton, (1937, Fig. 14) and The Professor (1937, Fig. 15), that Spender is able 'to do something different' while simultaneously retaining the essential importance of the photograph's documentary character. Thus, while on the one hand, the photographs of working class Bolton reveal Spender's concern with providing knowledge about working class life, they are equally important for generating knowledge that exists beyond the confines of working class experience.

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
Fig. 14. Humphrey Spender, *Open Market Shoe Stall, Bolton*, 1937.

Fig. 15. Humphrey Spender, *The Professor*, 1937.
In 1934, two years before joining Mass Observation, Spender produced a series of photographs of the East End area of Stepney. These photographs were made in response to a request by a social worker, Clemence Paine, who asked Spender to supply her with photographic proof of the living conditions in the Stepney slums. Spender visited Stepney sporadically throughout 1934, spending several days at a time in the community, recording the environment, the living conditions and the daily routine of individuals. The photographs were subsequently used by Paine in the courtrooms of Henriques and Hall to provide evidence of the material impoverishment of Stepney's inhabitants and to argue a causal connection between living conditions and juvenile crime.47

Thus, photographs such as *Washerwomen, Stepney* (Fig. 16) and *Mother and Daughter, Stepney* (Fig. 17), were produced with the knowledge that they would be presented within a legal structure and exhibited to people who are to be informed or persuaded by them. Here, the photographs speak to legal experts and social welfare agents, they speak to people in a position of relative power about those positioned as lacking, and they speak to those experts who, it was hoped, would attend to the material and economic conditions that are the focus of the Stepney documents. This strategy, which has its genesis in the work of the Victorian street life photographers Annan, Thomson and Swift, typifies the approach of 1930s photo-documentarists in that the working classes, the poor and the ill-housed are positioned as objects of knowledge.48 Moreover, the

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47 Ibid.
48 Thomas Annan was commissioned by the Glasgow City Improvement Trust in 1866 to record the slum dwellings of Glasgow before their demolition. His book *Old Closes and Streets of Glasgow* (1868) was the first commissioned work of its kind in Britain. John Thomson's photographs of the street life of London served as illustrations for the book *Street Life in London* (1877-1878) which he co-authored with Adolphe Smith. Each photograph appeared with an explanatory text which included eye-witness accounts on the individuals photographed. In their preface, Thomson and Smith wrote of photography's ability to provide accurate testimony and of its value in preventing the author's from being accused of exaggeration. Preface quoted in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1982, p. 103. Willie Swift's photographs of the conditions of Leeds slum life were
knowledge these photographs bear is not transmitted back to the subjects of representation, it is not made available for their own negotiation, but rather, is circulated within domains of expertise where those who are not represented can create meaning for those who are represented. These are the concerns that lie at the heart of the suspicions that Spender refers to in the above comments, and it is these issues that Spender attempts to address in his Mass Observation photographs.

Fig. 16. Humphrey Spender, Washerwomen, Stepney, 1934.

The difference between Spender’s photographs of Stepney and those taken for Mass Observation is substantially one of direction and intention. Spender’s Mass Observation photographs were not intended to inform middle and upper class social reformers who, on behalf of working class people, could use them to advocate transformation. Rather, they were intended to address a wider audience, an audience that included, not excluded, the subjects of representation. At the same time, and in keeping with Mass Observation’s efforts to democratise knowledge, Spender assumed different expectations from the viewer of his Bolton photographs. While it is true that the photographs were produced with the intention of providing knowledge and information about working class people and that this knowledge would contribute to widespread reform and a more open society, the very nature and structure of his Mass Observation photographs is such that they generate an imaginary identification of viewer and image, reader and representation. Spender is no longer singularly concerned with producing photographs that allow a detailed inspection of the material conditions of working class people,
as he had been in Stepney. And, because he is no longer primarily concerned with rendering social problems and misery visible and legible, the photographs become sources of information, not just about working class life, but more importantly, about human behaviour. It is in this sense that Spender's documentation of working class life in Bolton transcends the boundaries of class. Photographs such as Not True (1937, Fig. 18) and Street Scene, Bolton (1937, Fig. 19), certainly provide information about the working class environment, but it is the interplay between the images of graffiti, advertising hoardings and environment, that elevates the photographs beyond mere description of physical conditions.

His Mass Observation photographs do not seal or reinforce differences between the classes, rather they generate points of contact between viewer and image. This crucial, but subtle, shift is important because it marks a moment of transition in documentary photography whereby working class areas are no longer confined to being represented as sites of discovery, as spaces to be
penetrated, investigated and photographically exhibited. In Spender's Mass Observation photographs, working class sites are figured as spaces in which, and out of which, meaning is animated. Spender transforms documentary photography from the confining rhetoric of evidence into an ethnographic theatre in which the interrelationships of gesture, behaviour and location generate knowledge about human experience.

Fig. 19. Humphrey Spender, *Street Scene*, 1937.
CHAPTER THREE

I AM A CAMERA

This chapter is concerned with establishing the cultural context that surrounded Nigel Henderson in the thirties. This was a particularly important decade for Henderson since it was during these years that he came into contact with a number of people who were absolutely central to the development of new literary, artistic and theatrical forms; Duchamp, Ernst, Auden, Brecht, Doone, Cocteau, Virginia Woolf, Dylan Thomas, Jennings, Coldstream, Stokes and Trevelyan, to name but a few. Henderson’s work was first exhibited in 1938 when, at the age of twenty-one, two of his collages were exhibited in Peggy Guggenheim’s London gallery, Guggenheim Jeune, which was managed by Henderson’s mother Wyn. Henderson’s collages, now lost, were exhibited alongside collages by Picasso, Braque, Ernst, Tanguy, Arp, Masson and Gris. Despite this auspicious start to his career, by the time of his death in 1985, Henderson had received little recognition and is now best known as a member of the Independent Group. Unlike Henderson’s good friend and colleague Eduardo Paolozzi, Henderson’s career has been understood largely within the narrow framework of his contributions to two significant Independent Group exhibitions, Parallel of Life and Art of 1953 and This is Tomorrow of 1956. This approach has given rise to a limited understanding of Henderson’s career. Indeed, Henderson’s contributions to the Independent Group have been severed from the work that he did before and after his involvement with the Independent Group and this too stands in marked contrast to art historical writings of other Independent Group members such as Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton, William Turnbull, or Alison and Peter Smithson.

1 Guggenheim Jeune was one of the four main galleries in London committed to exhibiting contemporary French art, particularly the work of French Surrealists, during the thirties. The other three galleries were the Mayor Gallery, the London Gallery and the Zwemmer Gallery which was also the sole outlet for publications such as Minotaure.

2 Although the Independent Group had officially ceased to exist at the time of This is Tomorrow, it is still regarded as a significant event in the history of the Independent Group.
Henderson was involved in only twelve exhibitions during his life-time. He contributed work to six group exhibitions, several being Independent Group shows, and held six solo exhibitions that received little, if any, critical attention. His work has not been fully catalogued nor has it been the subject of any extensive scholarly investigation. Yet, Henderson and the photographs that he produced, in the late forties and early fifties, constitute a vital link between Mass Observation and the investigations of the Independent Group, particularly the early work of Paolozzi. His photographs of people in their immediate urban environment, surrounded as they are by signs of mass and popular culture, synthesise and develop several diverse currents that dominated British art in the mid to late thirties. In this sense, Henderson can be seen as a figure who functions as a conduit between pre-war and post-war British art and culture.

This chapter does not set out to chart the life or career of Nigel Henderson. To do so would be to embark on a study of a rather different kind. Instead, this chapter seeks to identify the constellation of artists that Henderson became associated with in the thirties and to examine what it was that he witnessed. Within these limits the discussion is selective, for it is not the intention to be inclusive, but rather to isolate, from the immensely crowded decade of the thirties, those points of contact which impinge on Henderson’s photographs of the late forties and early fifties.

In 1935, at the age of eighteen, Henderson moved from his mother’s flat in Gordon Square, where he had been living since leaving Stowe school in 1933, to reside with Adrian and Karin Stephen and their two daughters Ann and Judith, who Henderson later married. According to Vanessa Bell’s biographer Francis Spalding, Adrian and Karin, who were both practising

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psychiatrists, informally adopted Henderson.  

4 Adrian was the brother of Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf. Karin was the daughter of Frank Costelloe and Mary Pearsall Smith, who left her family in 1891, two years after Karin's birth, to work with Bernard Berenson who she married in December 1900.  

Henderson's 'adoption' by the Stephen family provided him with access to the central figures within Bloomsbury. He became a regular visitor to Charleston, the Sussex home of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, and, in January 1935 he attended a private performance of Virginia Woolf's play *Freshwater*, a dramatisation of the life of Woolf's great-aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron.  

In 1935, while still living with the Stephen family, Henderson met Rupert Doone, an ex-Diaghilev dancer and choreographer, who was the director of the London based Group Theatre.  

The Group Theatre had been established in February 1932 by Doone and the painter Robert Medley, with the intention of changing the naturalistic face of English drama by producing deliberately stylised, often avant-garde plays.  

Much of the work produced by the Group was inspired by the experimental theatre and the political and satirical

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5 Barbara Strachey, *Remarkable Relations*, p. 196.


7 Anne Seymour, *Nigel Henderson, Paintings Collages and Photographs*, np.

cabarets that emerged in Berlin in the late twenties - the Berlin theatre of Piscator and Brecht. Auden and Isherwood, both recently returned from Berlin, worked collaboratively on a number of experimental verse plays for the Group. Their plays, *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1936), *The Ascent of F6* (1937) and *On the Frontier* (1938), for which Benjamin Britten wrote the music, are satirical fantasies in which the influence of Brecht and of Berlin left wing political cabaret is especially apparent.

At the Group Theatre, Henderson found himself surrounded by Benjamin Britten and W.H. Auden, and, John Piper and Henry Moore, who sometimes assisted in the making of costumes and masks. Although there is little information about the nature of Henderson's involvement with the Group Theatre, in a conversation with Anne Seymour, Henderson mentioned that he assisted Robert Medley in the making of the scenery for the production of Louis MacNeice's translation of *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, that was performed on 1 and 8 November, 1936. In his comprehensive study of the Group Theatre, Michael Sidnell records that, in *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, Henderson played the role of a soldier and was a member of the chorus of dancers. In his conversation with Seymour, Henderson also states that he dined with Auden and Brecht and that, for about six months in 1936, he lived with Doone and Medley, who was then heavily involved in the Artists International Association.

There are two likely dates for Henderson's meeting with Brecht. In 1981, Robert Medley recalled that Brecht attended the Group Theatre's production of Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* and Auden's *Dance of Death* in October 1935.  

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9 Anne Seymour, *Nigel Henderson, Paintings Collages and Photographs*, np, and see Michael Sidnell, *Dances of Death*, p. 293.

10 Michael Sidnell, *Dances of Death*, p. 293.

11 Anne Seymour, *Nigel Henderson, Paintings Collages and Photographs*, np.

However, Michael Sidnell insists that Medley is mistaken. He argues that Brecht only attended the December 1934 production of *Sweeney Agonistes.*\(^{13}\) Whichever of the two dates is correct, either December 1934 or October 1935, what is clear, is that by the time of Henderson’s performance in the *Agamemnon* in November 1936, his involvement with the Group Theatre appears to have been more intense and long-lasting than that which is implied by his rather casual recollection. There is also one further piece of information that would seem to confirm this. In an exhibition catalogue essay, Christopher Mullen states that while at the Group Theatre, Henderson was offered employment at the GPO Film Unit by Basil Wright, who was working there as a director.\(^{14}\) But, as with much of Mullen’s commentary, there is no supporting evidence for this claim. However, in mid 1936, Wright was persuaded by Auden to establish the Group Theatre’s Film Group. So it is possible that Wright’s involvement with the Group Theatre led to an offer of employment, an offer that Henderson appears to have refused.\(^{15}\)

It is important that Henderson’s association with Auden occurred while Auden was working at the Film Unit making documentary films under John Grierson. Auden had sought employment with the Film Unit in June 1935 through his friend Wright. At the time, Auden was teaching at Downs School, Colwall, and was unable to take up the offer of employment until he arrived in London in September.\(^{16}\) In June and July 1935, Auden was still teaching, but despite this he was asked by Grierson to begin work immediately on providing verse for two films, *Coal Face* (1935) and *Night Mail* (1936).\(^{17}\)

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13 Michael Sidnell, *Dances of Death,* p. 103.
effect, Auden wrote the commentaries on the basis of what he was told about the films from Wright, who travelled to Downs School in June and again in July, bringing the composer Benjamin Britten with him so that the two could collaborate. In spite of the difficult circumstances under which Auden and Britten worked, *Coal Face* and *Night Mail* are significant for their highly experimental use of sound. *Night Mail* remains noteworthy for the absolute synchronicity between the movement of the train and Stuart Legg’s recitation of Auden’s verse, ‘This is the night mail’, which was composed after the film had been edited, in a metre that suggested the rhythmic beat of train wheels.

For *Coal Face*, a new sound technique of orchestrated voice-over was used. Unfortunately, the voice-over obscured a more significant aspect of the film. Beneath the voice-over, miners voices recite various mining disaster statistics but their voices are barely audible. However, the intention of having the miners ‘speak for themselves’ is a crucial feature of *Coal Face*. Apart from the value of the information revealed, and this was rendered negligible by the lack of audibility, the act of allowing the subjects of observation to contribute to an account of their working lives established a positive role for working people hitherto habituated to being observed and denied the opportunity to construct accounts of, and for, themselves. The democratisation of communication channels apparent in *Coal Face* anticipates, by almost two years, the emergence of Mass Observation but here Humphrey Jennings forms a vital link, for he had been employed at the Film Unit since mid 1934 and shot several sequences of the film.18

Auden left the Film Unit in March 1936 but while there he became good friends with William Coldstream, the editor of *Coal Face* and a friend of Henderson’s. Auden lived with Coldstream throughout most of 1936, having

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left Wright's after a row over Auden's overspending of the budget for the film Calendar of the Year (1936), in which Auden made a brief appearance as Father Christmas.\(^\text{19}\) Coldstream had begun working at the Film Unit at around the same time as Jennings, in April 1934, and worked with Jennings in the making of Locomotives (1934) and The Story of the Wheel (1934-5).\(^\text{20}\) Auden was to have a profound influence on Coldstream. He urged Coldstream to resume the art practice that he had relinquished before joining the Film Unit. Coldstream finally left the Film Unit on 16 April 1937 and returned to painting.\(^\text{21}\)

Five months after leaving the Film Unit, Coldstream’s article, ‘How I Paint’, was published in The Listener. Here, Coldstream explains his motives for abandoning painting in terms of his sense of the exclusiveness of modern art.

We read Clive Bell and Roger Fry and spent a great deal of time discussing aesthetics. All the more intelligent books on art which we read taught us to regard subject-matter merely as an excuse for good painting.

The 1930 slump affected us all very considerably...it caused an immense change in our general outlook...Everyone began to be interested in economics and then in politics.

After 1930 I worked only from nature, but always in the direction of abstractions. That is to say I did not alter or invent shapes, but selected very consciously from the objects I was painting, used a rather formalised colour and tone scheme and usually left out the features, if I was painting a head. Putting in any facial expression was absolutely taboo as being vulgar particularisation. My output became extremely small, as all my work was produced under the strain of the conflict between my natural curiosity about particular visual facts and the obligation to abstract and generalise which was imposed by current aesthetic theories.


\(^{20}\) Coldstream also worked on John Aitken Saves Up (1934) and directed The King's Stamp (1935), Fairy of the Phone (1936) and Roadways (1937), his last film. See Rachel Low, Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s, pp. 211-227.

The slump had made me aware of social problems, and I became convinced that art ought to be directed to a wider public; whereas all ideas which I had learned to regard as artistically revolutionary ran in the opposite direction. It seemed to me important that the broken communications between the artist and the public should be built up again and that this most probably implied a movement towards realism. But such a direction was difficult for me to take wholeheartedly...A direct realistic approach was considered to be something which had been finished with at the end of the nineteenth century.

Before I went to work in films, it often occurred to me that it was possible that photography had forced painting into a position of permanent preciousness.22

Coldstream’s decision to return to painting in April 1937 was due, in part, to Auden’s inducement. In the autumn of 1936, Auden had commissioned Coldstream to paint a portrait of his mother, Mrs Auden (1936-37). Another form of encouragement came by way of a poem, Letter to William Coldstream, Esq., which Auden had written during his trip to Iceland with MacNeice, between early June and September 1936. The poem is too long to quote in its entirety but the following lines are especially pertinent.

Upstairs in the Corner House, in the hall with the phallic pillars
And before the band had finished a pot pourri from Wagner
We’d scrapped Significant Form, and voted for the Subject,
Hence really this letter.

An artist you said, if I remember you rightly,
An artist you said, in the waiting room at Euston
Looking towards that dictator’s dream of a staircase
An artist you said, is both perceiver and teller, the spy and the gossip

Very well then, let’s start with perceiving.
Let me pretend that I’m the impersonal eye of the camera
Sent out by God to shoot on location

But here is my poem, nevertheless, the fruit of that fortnight
and one too of Louis’s, for comparative reading.
The novelist has one way of stating experience,
The film director another

These are our versions - each man to his medium.23

Coldstream’s article in *The Listener*, when read in conjunction with Auden’s poem, reveals a fundamental tension that emerged in the mid thirties about the function of art in relation to public events and politics. Both reject Fry and Bell’s ‘significant form’, the catchword by which Bloomsbury operated, and gesture towards subject and the statement of experience. Both are convinced that the concerns of art must shift from the cultivated sensibility, exemplified by Bloomsbury, to an art that engaged with aspects of the social and political world. For Henderson, this approach provided a striking alternative to those older Bloomsbury figures who disapproved of direct social or political commitment by the artist.

While Coldstream, with a hint of apology, seeks to explain and justify the genesis of his realist ambitions in terms of the social function of art, Auden moves beyond the specifics of art. He speaks in terms which correspond to the broader documentary impulses of the thirties. Indeed, Auden’s description of the artist as a ‘perceiver and teller, as a spy and a gossip’, is one that absolutely conforms to the role Tom Harrisson would later ascribe to the Mass Observer. Similarly, Auden’s use of the camera as a metaphor for the artist accords with Madge and Harrisson’s description of observers as “the cameras with which we are trying to photograph contemporary life.”24 Yet, at the time of writing *Letter to William Coldstream Esq*, Mass Observation did not exist. This is not to suggest, however, that *Letter to William Coldstream, Esq*, reveals Auden’s prescience. Nor can Auden’s reference to the ‘impersonal eye

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23 W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland*, Random House, New York, 1937, pp. 220-229. Interestingly, at this time Auden was also offering similar advice to Lawrence Gowing, another friend of Henderson’s. Gowing had written to Auden in Iceland seeking his opinion on a career in film. Auden replied “You want to get into film because you think it is the art of the future; it isn’t. Art is the art of the future. I should like you to meet my friend William Coldstream whose opinions are passing through the same stages”. See Lawrence Gowing, ‘Remembering Coldstream,’ *The Paintings of William Coldstream 1908-1987*, p. 9.

of the camera' be explained by the fact that he had recently finished working at the Film Unit. Rather, Auden is alluding to the fascination the camera held for artists and literary figures of the thirties, a fascination which saw the camera being deployed not only as a recording tool, but more interestingly, as a metaphorical device.

Heightened interest in the camera as a tool of reportage is evident in its increased use as a journalistic device. The pages of *Picture Post* and *Life Magazine*, *Weekly Illustrated* and *The Daily Mirror*, and even *The Geographical Magazine*, which contained twenty-six photographs by Spender in the April 1938 issue, swelled with picture stories, and Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* and *Letters from Iceland* were both accompanied by photographs. Indeed, in this work, Auden declared photography 'the democratic art'. Later, in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), Isherwood merged authorship and democracy in professing himself to be a camera. Echoing Dziga-Vertov's words "I am a Kino-Eye, I am a mechanical eye", Isherwood claimed, "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking". Interestingly, many years later, Auden countered Isherwood's stance, emphatically stating "I am Not a Camera".

Beneath the widespread interest in the camera lay the belief that, as a mechanical device, it was capable of erasing subjectivity and this was a crucial consideration in a decade intent on documentation. Above all, the camera was perceived as a tool for recording reality, and, with the increasingly widespread use of Leica miniature cameras, it had the advantage of being unobtrusive. In effect, the camera, as Auden made clear, was seen as

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vital to the process of democratising communication. Hence, perhaps, the analogies between writers and cameras. While the camera served as a metaphorical device which enabled a certain distance between writers and their subjects, and here one is reminded of Orwell's use of the aquarium glass in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, it also served to align writers with democracy. Of course, in reality, such analogies remained in the realm of metaphor and the degree of distance afforded by the camera remained problematic. A comparison of Bill Brandt's photographs with Humphrey Spender's Mass Observation photographs illuminates the nature of this problem.

In the summer of 1935, Bill Brandt undertook a photo-journey to the North of England and, in the following year, the results of his excursion were published in the photo book, *The English at Home*. In the introduction, Raymond Mortimer, the literary editor of *The New Statesman and Nation* and also one of the newspaper's art critics, described Brandt as an anthropologist viewing society objectively. Mortimer writes:

[Brandt] shows himself to be not only an artist but an anthropologist. He seems to have wandered about England with the detached curiosity of a man investigating the customs of some remote and unfamiliar tribe.28

But, in a sense, *The English at Home*, with its images of wealth and comfort juxtaposed against images of poverty and isolation, was anything but objective, for the strength of these photographs comes about through the contrasts between different classes which Brandt laid out when he composed the book. The cover itself announced this form of juxtaposition - on the front, an upper class group of spectators in dress suits watch the Derby, and, on the back, working class children in well worn clothes cluster around their mother (Fig. 20). Brandt's photographs certainly do not accord with Tom Harrisson's expectations of objective reportage, for these photographs are, in the main,

highly composed images in which the subjects are invariably posed and look directly at the photographer. For Harrisson, as for Humphrey Spender, awareness of being photographed markedly diminished objectivity and reduced the degree of reportorial truth. For them, it was crucial that the observer remain unobserved. Herein lies a fundamental difference between the photographs of Spender and Brandt, for Spender was always aware that "in functioning as a spy, remaining undetected was vital."29

Fig. 20. Bill Brandt, *The English at Home*, 1936.

Fig. 21. Bill Brandt, *East End Morning*, September 1937, 1937.

Even when Brandt's subjects appear to be unaware of his presence, as in *East End Morning, September 1937* (Fig. 21), a photograph which ostensibly provides a glimpse into everyday East End life, Brandt structures the image in such a way that the photographer's existence is foregrounded. By contrast, in Spender's photographs, such as *Woman Cleaning Pavement, Lambeth* (1938, Fig. 22), Spender is very much in the background.

Yet, paradoxically, Brandt is as physically close to his subject as Spender is to his. Indeed, Spender appears to be running the risk of tripping over the woman's extended arm. Thus, we have two photographs, one of 1937, the other of 1938. Both photographs deal with identical subject matter, that of a woman scrubbing the front door step, a task which also involved the washing of the pavement slabs immediately in front of the step. In each photograph, the subject is the same physical distance from the photographer.

Although these two photographs have much in common, they are, in fact, vastly different. Brandt's is a highly organised photograph, an image of pathos which is intended to elicit an emotional response as opposed to revealing the actualities of everyday life. The gentle curve of the young
woman's kneeling body, her slightly tilting head and downcast eyes, and the listless grip of her hands on the cleaning rags, which she holds over the bucket next to her, invokes the romantic tradition. She is a melancholic figure, a figure of resignation who is trapped in the shallow, enclosed space of the doorway. Here, Brandt uses the camera to interpret working class life, to provoke from the viewer a mental construction of East End life. Spender, on the other hand, uses the camera to produce a dispassionate snapshot of everyday behaviour, to record a chance encounter. Whereas in *Woman Cleaning Pavement, Lambeth*, Spender is concerned, as the photograph's title suggests, with providing an evidentiary image that focuses on the task at hand, in *East End Morning, September 1937*, Brandt directs attention away from the actual scrubbing and the rituals of everyday life. While the woman in Brandt's photograph appears both mentally and physically disengaged from the scrubbing, the woman in Spender's photograph displays extraordinary vigour and determination. For her, this is clearly a task of some importance.

Spender produced numerous photographs of this daily custom, and this suggests that he recognised the significance of a freshly scrubbed door step for working class women. The sheer number of photographs, *Woman Scrubbing Doorstep, Bolton* (1937), *Marking up the Canvass, Worktown* (1937), along with several other untitled photographs that depict the same task, reveal the ritualistic frequency and endless repetition of this task. In their totality, these photographs suggest that working class women took great pride in a clean door step and herein lies the anthropological quality of Spender's work. Indeed, clean doorsteps were significant to working class women, as the following Mass Observation report makes clear, but the point is that Spender's photographs convey this significance independently of the written reports and in a way that Brandt's photograph does not.
Despite the grime of the atmosphere, curtains are always spotlessly clean and the doorsteps, rubbed to a pure white or brilliant yellow with "donkey stone", are a joy to the eye. Woe betide the negligent housewife whose doorstep disgraces the street by falling below the general standard of cleanliness, and a really energetic women (sic) will go beyond her doorstep and holystone a strip of the paving flags in front.30

Ultimately, Brandt's *East End Morning, September 1937* exists as a portrait photograph and, in this sense, it has more in common with the paintings Coldstream produced, after he left the Film Unit, than it does with Spender's *Woman Cleaning Pavement, Lambeth*. Portraiture dominated Coldstream's oeuvre in the years between his departure from the Film Unit in April 1937 and his enlistment in the army in July 1940. Paintings such as *Stephen Spender, W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood*, all of 1937, and *E.A. Smith-Rewse and Mrs Inez Spender* of 1937-38, represent a marked shift from the paintings he was producing prior to joining the Film Unit.

The Matisse inspired painting *The Studio* (1932-1933, Fig. 23), epitomises Coldstream's earlier approach.31 Here, Coldstream depicts himself in the act of painting. He has momentarily stepped back from the canvas and turns towards a plaster bust perched on a stand. The painting is dominated by vertical lines and this, along with the dull, low-keyed colours, distances *The Studio* from Matisse's *The Studio, Quai St Michel* (1916). The most obvious point of difference between the two paintings, and what distinguishes *The Studio* from Coldstream's later portraits, is that the figure is completely devoid of facial features. Here, Coldstream demonstrates his adherence to the belief he later outlined in *The Listener*, namely that "facial expression was absolutely taboo...vulgar particularisation."32

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31 In the Tate Gallery catalogue Coldstream reveals that *The Studio* was influenced by Matisse's *The Studio, Quai St Michel*, (1916) which he saw at the Gargoyle Club. *The Paintings of William Coldstream* 1908-1987, p. 75.

Coldstream’s drive towards realism was not a matter of engaging with radical subject matter. Nor was it simply a matter of transferring information from the real world onto the canvas. Rather, as his portraits of 1936-1940 reveal, his concerns lay with his belief that space itself could be objectively recorded and that actuality could emerge from accurate rendering of spatial data. Thus, the exactitude and restraint which mark his portraits of these years is achieved, not so much out of a desire to achieve a faithful likeness, but from his belief that, in mapping the human body, objective reality would emerge. Given Coldstream’s belief that points of space could be established and fixed, it is not surprising that one of the few non-portrait paintings of 1936-1940, *On the Map* (1937), sometimes known as *Off the Map*, has as its subject the act of establishing relative positions and spatial relations and distributions, that is, mapping.
Coldstream's colleague, Graham Bell, who Coldstream depicts holding the map in *On the Map*, took a more militant approach to forging a stronger relation between art and society. Like Coldstream, Bell believed that art needed to be directed to a wider public, but whereas Coldstream was driven by the belief that artists ought to respond to the social realities of the day, Bell was additionally concerned that art engage with the moral and sociological needs of society, that artists should serve the masses as a means of transforming society. Throughout Bell's writings of the late thirties, in his reviews for *The New Statesman and Nation*, in his occasional articles to *The Listener* and *Left Review*, he returns, again and again, to the argument that artists had become severed from society, and that, in distancing themselves, artists were abrogating their responsibilities to society. Returning a social role to artists was seen as urgent.

Bell's most sustained piece of writing dealing with the social and political position of artists can be found in his pamphlet of 1939, *The Artist and his Public*. Bell's basic contention was that the poor relationship between the artist and the society was the inevitable consequence of a capitalist society. In the opening paragraph Bell writes:

I hope to show that the poor relationship that exists is responsible at least to some degree for the poverty of modern art; that this poor relationship is symptomatic and indeed the inevitable result of capitalism pushed as it is now, to its extreme...33

Quoting Baudelaire, Bell argues that the poverty of modern art is due to a failure of 'constructive imagination' and that the imagination cannot flourish in a capitalist society which "detests and fears art at its serious levels, which seeks only to escape from itself in its horrible diversions."34 This was not the first time that Bell had spoken of escape. In an earlier article titled 'Escape

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34 Ibid., p. 17.
from Escapism', Bell declared abstract art synonymous with escapism and urged artists to avoid escapism by attending to subject matter, by concentrating on the things depicted, rather than on the manner of depiction.35

At the end of The Artist and his Public, Bell makes a passionate plea in which the relationship between the imagination, the social realities of the day and societal transformation is made clear.

Let those who dare follow their imagination in the investigation of truths, and let them not disown their own nation's doom...One must not forget or allow it to be forgotten that the imagination is the true revolutionary spirit. Anyone who has travelled in working-class England knows the horrible, deathly sensation of towns, half-strangled by the downward spread of the terrible middle-class snobbism, half-stamped by the fear of starvation. We sometimes hear Englishmen boasting our lack of revolutions (just as they boast about their ignorance of art). If hunger and misery could make revolutions we would have had them long ago. No, the middle-class ulcer has spread its poison and the people are descending into apathy.36

Bell's preoccupations go beyond the notion of writing about art to an awareness of artistic production as a form of political practice in itself. By confronting social conditions, such as those of working class England, the artist and the imagination have a vital role to play in social revolution.

If The Artist and his Public is placed in its most immediate context, it becomes clear that Bell is urging artists to pursue the path that he had taken in 1938, the year before writing the pamphlet. In that year, Bell had accepted Tom Harrisson's invitation to take part in a Mass Observation experiment by going to paint in Bolton. Bell was one of four artists Harrisson invited; the others being Coldstream, Michael Wickham and Julian Trevelyan.

36 Graham Bell, The Artist and his Public, pp. 30-31.
Harrisson had a number of objectives in mind when he brought these artists to Bolton. First, he was concerned with establishing a role for Mass Observation in improving the public's powers of observation. In the pamphlet *Mass Observation*, Harrisson and Madge wrote:

> We intend to issue series of images, like packs of playing cards and to suggest various exercises which can be played with them. These exercises will be designed to sharpen the powers of observation of a particular type - the observation of images.37

Secondly, Harrisson wanted to establish the reactions of working class people to art, and, thirdly, he was keen to procure painterly documentation of working class life in Bolton.

Harrisson came to Mass Observation with some already formed ideas about art. In his 1937 book *Savage Civilisation*, Harrisson revealed that, like Bell and Coldstream, he was concerned with the relation of art to society:

> I doubt whether it is safe to judge a culture by its 'highest art', its minority passions. The integration of art and every individual in the community must be considered - art in its fullest sense.38

Given that Bell and Coldstream held similar beliefs to Harrisson, they were obvious choices.

Trevelyan, on the other hand, appears to have arrived in Bolton not with the intention of coming into contact with 'the nation's doom' that Bell sought, but, rather, out of a very real sympathy with Mass Observation's intentions. Trevelyan had known Jennings and Madge, along with other Mass Observation personnel, Kathleen Raine and William Empson, since their student days at Cambridge. Such contacts might account for Trevelyan's introduction to Mass Observation. However, his initial motivation for joining

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the movement was grounded in a set of mutual beliefs, as is evident in his short essay of 1937, 'Mythos', in which he writes about the city as a subject for artists. He writes "Mingling in its streets and among its labyrinthine galleries are the mass-desires and individual experiences of its innumerable inhabitants." This is the pure stuff of Surrealism and, as such, it constitutes the common ground between Trevelyan and Mass Observation. Trevelyan absolutely accorded with Jennings and Madge's belief that Mass Observation could function as a mechanism for collecting individual dreams, fantasies and desires, and, in their totality, these individual accounts could reveal the collective unconscious. Trevelyan, Jennings and Madge were each attracted by the emphasis the Surrealists placed upon a common vocabulary latent in everyday experience but worthy of extraction as a means to heightening understanding.

Mass Observation, concerned with man, was essentially urban. We hoped to discern on the surfaces of dingy walls, on advertisement hoardings, or written upon the worn stones of pavements, or in the play of light and shadow cast by some street-lamp upon puddles at the corner of a shabby street, traces of the beautiful, degraded, dishonoured, suffering, sorrowful, but still the deus absconditus.

Trevelyan's involvement with Surrealism led him to Mass Observation. Paradoxically, his association with Mass Observation was to lead him away from Surrealism. In his autobiography, Indigo Days (1957), Trevelyan recalled that it was through his experiences in Mass Observation that he developed the courage to abandon Surrealism and paint the things that he cared about. In the same book he wrote:

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I had been feeling for some time that my own work was moving away from Surrealism to something more personal; there were new currents coming into my life.\textsuperscript{42}

When Trevelyan and Wickham accepted Harrisson's invitation in 1938, they were, in fact, returning to Bolton, for they had already worked with Harrisson in 1937, when Harrisson had insisted that they work outside, under the watchful eye of the local inhabitants. In \textit{Bolton Mills} (1937), Trevelyan alludes to Harrisson's instructions by pasting several photographs of heads and a photograph of an eye onto the collaged scraps of newspaper. In so doing, Trevelyan creates a dynamic interplay between the audience captured in the collage and the audience of the collage.

Trevelyan and Wickham certainly became more involved with Mass Observation than Bell and Coldstream. Trevelyan took a series of photographs in Bolton and Blackpool and, in 1938, he was instrumental in developing the exhibition \textit{Unprofessional Painting}, which brought Mass Observation and the Ashington Group together.\textsuperscript{43} He and Wickham also worked as Mass Observers and in 1959 they both returned to Bolton with Harrisson and other Mass Observation personnel to document the changes that had occurred in Bolton in the intervening years.\textsuperscript{44}

In contrast, Bell and Coldstream's commitment was short-lived. They soon turned their backs on Bolton, staying for three weeks, from 19 April to 10 May, 1938. Both found Bolton to be a particularly distasteful environment. In April 1938, having only been in Bolton for two days, Bell wrote of "waking one morning from the minor unpleasantness of the dream world to a real

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 80.

\textsuperscript{43} The Ashington Group were a group of 'unprofessional painters' consisting of miners from Ashington, Durham, who had been brought together under a Workers' Educational Association programme in 1934.

\textsuperscript{44} Tom Harrisson, \textit{Britain Revisited}, Gollancz Ltd., London, 1961.
nightmare of life in Bolton."\(^{45}\) Thus, when Bell wrote *The Artist and his Public* between June and July 1939 and appealed for artists to distance themselves from the demands of patronage, to adopt the role of an adventurer and "go out into the unknown"\(^{46}\) so that they may familiarise themselves with their own 'nation's doom', he was, in fact, expecting from others, what he had been able to tolerate for only a very short time.

Harrisson brought the four artists to Bolton with the specific purpose of using the work they produced to solicit the reactions of the local inhabitants to images of their own town. Photographs of the works were taken and reactions to them were sought from people "in pubs and clubs, dance halls and at street corners".\(^{47}\) In an article in *The Listener*, Harrisson made it clear that he wanted the artists to "paint pictures of the town, the honest, unvarnished scenery of soot and factory, cobbled street and washing hung out at the back".\(^{48}\)

By the end of their three week stay, Bell and Coldstream had produced one painting each. They did not work under the watchful eye of the local inhabitants as Harrisson had wanted, choosing instead to distance themselves from the public gaze by working from the roof of the Bolton Art Gallery in Merehall Park. From here, sitting back to back, between mid April and early May in 1938, Coldstream painted *Bolton*, (Fig. 24) and Bell, *Thomasson Park, Bolton* (Fig. 25). Both paintings depict industrial landscapes consisting of rows of terraced houses, factory buildings and churches. Church


\(^{46}\) Graham Bell, *The Artist and his Public*, p. 10.


\(^{48}\) Ibid., p. 398.
spires and chimneys, from which black smoke bellows, punctuate the skyline.

Coldstream’s painting is particularly austere. The streets are depopulated, the buildings are uniformly rendered in red-brown and, in the upper two thirds of the painting, the buildings become increasingly vague as they fade beneath
a pall of grey smoke. The only sign of activity in Bolton is that which is implied by the smoke being released from the chimney stacks and the towers of the cotton mills. Contrary to art historical discussions of this painting, it appears that, at some stage, Coldstream had intended to include figures in his painting.\(^4\) In the area immediately in front of the terraced houses, there are the barest graphite outlines of two figures on either side of the fourth door from the right. The figure to the left of the door is moving towards the second figure who is standing to the right of the door. The fact that Coldstream painted over this social encounter suggests that he was keen to produce a scene in which nothing would detract from the industrial focus of the painting.

![Fig. 26. Humphrey Spender, William Coldstream Painting on the Roof of the Art Gallery, Bolton, 1938.](image)

The harshness of the scene is heightened by the fact that this is a carefully measured painting, as is evident from Spender’s photograph of Coldstream who is captured in the act of using his paintbrush to measure the scene before him. William Coldstream Painting on the Roof of the Art Gallery, Bolton (1938, Fig. 26), was taken on the first day of painting, 22 April, and shows Coldstream sitting in front of his easel that reveals the painting in an early stage of progress. His right arm is stretched out towards the chimney stacks, thumb

\(^4\) For a discussion of Coldstream’s Bolton, that does not acknowledge Coldstream’s initial incorporation of human figures, see The Paintings of William Coldstream, 1908-1987, p. 80.
pressed against the handle of the brush, as he measures the chimneys and seeks out an intrinsic order. The work in progress reveals several points of registration and, in the lower portion of the canvas, the first application of paint has been applied as blocks of tone. In the finished work these points of registration are still discernible, but more visible are the graphite lines which Coldstream has used to connect these points of registration. The windows and doors, the lamp posts and wall, the edges of the street and especially the buildings in the foreground are all carefully outlined, giving a certain order and rigidity to a scene which is otherwise marked by the haziness and transience of smog.

Bell’s painting *Thomasson Park, Bolton* depicts similar subject matter to Coldstream’s *Bolton*. However, the foreground of Bell’s painting incorporates aspects of the park, a hillside to the left and to the right, clumps of dark green trees and bushes which have been blackened by soot and grime. On the hillside is a tall flagpole which dominates the left foreground of the painting and serves to balance the two mill towers which punctuate the horizon in the upper right hand corner. It is significant that the flagpole bears no flag, for it implies that, in this austere and bleak environment, there is little to celebrate. Indeed, the absence of a flag suggests that the nation has forgotten Bolton. Facing the flagpole are two children, one standing and the other kneeling. The kneeling figure wears a bright red top which breaks the monotony of a uniformly grey painting. This is a particularly poignant scene, for the fact that this child is kneeling and facing the flagpole suggests that an act of allegiance is taking place and yet there is nothing to which allegiance can be sworn.

Although Bell and Coldstream only completed one painting each, Bell certainly intended to produce a series of paintings. In his Sketchbook, Bell provides lists of subject matter which reflect Harrisson’s interests: "houses of middle class with rubbish in foreground; houses of poor with mills, pubs,
chapels etc.; interiors of cotton mill, chapel, pub and market; Bolton wedding and funeral; dance hall and football match; the Council Chamber and high tea at Collinson's Cafe".50

Fig. 27. Julian Trevelyan, Bolton Mills, 1937.

Trevelyan’s views of Bolton are markedly different from those advanced by Bell and Coldstream. Trevelyan’s industrial landscapes, Coal Mine (1937), Bolton Mills (Fig. 27) and Worktown (1937, Fig. 28), are hectic, agitated collages which use a wealth of ephemeral materials to refuse the industrial rationality that dominates Bell and Coldstream’s depictions of Bolton. Whereas Bell and Coldstream responded to Harrisson’s request for painterly documentation, by concerning themselves with topographical reality and exposing urban ugliness, Trevelyan was primarily interested in the very means by which his experiences of Bolton could be constructed. His concerns lie with the processes and procedures of conveying knowledge rather than with literal description. This is most apparent in his collage Bolton Mills.

The foreground of Bolton Mills is dominated by fragments of newspapers and bits of photographs; five heads, a workers boot, an eye and the torso of a classical sculpture. Trevelyan employs the newspapers and photographs as

direct, concrete evidence of contemporary existence - one headline reads 'Fascists Wreck Offices' - but the fact that the newspapers are overlaid with photographs alludes to two very different methods of constructing, documenting and reporting knowledge. Furthermore, with the exception of the statue and the boot, the photographs are of individuals, and, located as they are on the newspapers, a shift in perspective occurs between the individual and individual knowledge, and collective, public knowledge. In the midst of an industrial landscape, Trevelyan has constructed a social landscape. In the background, behind the building on which is cast a mysterious shadow reminiscent of de Chirico’s cityscapes, there is a glimpse of rural England. It is significant that Trevelyan has chosen paint rather than collage materials to create this glimpse of pastoralism, for it allows traditional subject matter and forms of representation to exist simultaneously with fragments drawn from twentieth century life.

Trevelyan’s Bolton collages reveal a number of parallels with the concerns of Mass Observation. Given that Mass Observation were propelled into existence by their fascination with the mass media, it is entirely fitting that the mass media should form the basis of his collages at this time. In addition,
Trevelyan's employment of collage to document Bolton accords with the collage principles that informed Mass Observation's approach to the reporting of knowledge, whereby different forms of knowledge and multiple realities existed alongside each other in a kaleidoscopic arrangement.

In accordance with Harrisson's wishes, photographs of Trevelyan's Worktown, Coldstream's Bolton and Bell's Thomasson Park, Bolton were shown to the inhabitants of Bolton. Harrisson summarised their responses in an article in The Listener and, most importantly, they were recorded in a way that suggested that the respondents were speaking for themselves. Reactions to Trevelyan's Worktown varied from "'Great. That's great. One thing, it is us. You can tell that'", to, "'That's a remarkable picture. I will have to give it up as a bad job, though. I can't place it."[51] Responses to Coldstream's Bolton and Bell's Thomasson Park, Bolton, were not recorded separately but Coldstream's painting was consistently criticised for the absence of people. One person astutely commented on Coldstream's anti-modern view of Bolton, claiming "'We're more modern than this. There's nobody out. It's like on th' holidays" and another exclaimed "'There's something about it I don't like. We're dead, we are! Our people are dead!'"[52] In response to Bell's painting, one person asked, "'Is this here on holiday week? Or a flag-day? It would have been the two minutes' silence if there'd been a flag in the pole.'"[53] Soon after leaving Bolton, Coldstream painted St Pancras Station (1938) and it may well have been in response to such criticisms that he incorporated numerous figures, but, as with Bolton, St Pancras Station is a precisely measured painting in which the incidents of everyday life are subjugated to the rigours of Coldstream's working method.

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51 Tom Harrisson, 'What they think in "Worktown"', p. 399.
52 Ibid., p. 399.
53 Ibid., p. 399.
Although Harrisson's reasons for bringing the artists to work in Bolton are clear, the question remains as to why he chose these particular artists. The fact that only one month before the Bolton experience, Bell and Coldstream had opposed Trevelyan in a public debate, between the Realists and Surrealists, suggests that Harrisson's choice of artists was not entirely fortuitous. At the Group Theatre Rooms, on the 16 March 1938, the Realists and Surrealists debated the relative merits of Realism and Surrealism. The Surrealists were represented by Trevelyan, Jennings and Roland Penrose, and the Realists were represented by Bell, Coldstream and the sculptor Peter Peri. The debate was chaired by Robert Medley, the painter who Henderson had worked with at the Group Theatre and with whom Henderson had lived. Although the substance of the debate was not recorded, a few reviews referred to the event and, from these, it appears that Bell accused Surrealism of increasing the distance between the artist and society, while the Surrealists criticised the Realists for their narrow range of subjects. Herbert Read, whose book *Surrealism* (1936) had received a damning review from Bell, was present at the proceedings. Read swiftly dismissed the Realists in a particularly vitriolic outburst:

We have tried to remember anything contributed to the debate by Graham Bell and William Coldstream...but there is only the stammer and the sweat...our English Realists are not the tough guys they ought to be but the effete and bastard offspring of the Bloomsbury school of needlework.

Randall Swingler claimed in *Left Review* that the Realists "carried the day...by their humility and honesty." The Surrealists, he wrote:

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54 Graham Bell, 'The Unthinking Read', *The New Statesman and Nation*, 2 January, 1937, p. 19. Bell accused the Surrealists of being amateurish in their approach to psychoanalysis and he argued that Surrealist paintings foreclosed on the possibility of imaginative engagement by the viewer.


56 Randall Swingler, 'What is the Artist's Job?', *Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 15, April 1938, p. 931.
were betrayed by their very vociferation, the pretentious flourish of any pseudo-philosophical, pseudo-psychological, pseudo-literary pseudo-phraseology which has nothing to do with painting, as people with a complete despair and sterility as regards the practice of Art.57

Harrisson's article in *The Listener* makes it clear that he knew of this debate.

So, I think I've produced some reasonable and unprejudiced evidence to suggest that ordinary folk are ready to be interested even in the most abstruse painting. Painters are fools if they keep on moaning about their public...And why on earth can't the different 'schools' stop fighting among themselves? A waste of energy. Considering that in my town alone there must be some 170,000 people who've never heard of any of them, surely there's plenty of room for everyone - for the Realist to show us how we live and work, and why we do it, for the Surrealist to show us how we feel and fear, and why we laugh and cry.58

In selecting Bell, Coldstream and Trevelyan, Harrisson may have been attempting to recreate the Realist and Surrealist debate in an entirely different setting, hoping to assess the stylistic merits of each group by soliciting feedback from people-on-the-street.

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Nigel Henderson was aware of these events. Some time in 1938, he began living and working in a studio at 6 Fitzroy Street, where Adrian Stokes occupied the neighbouring room.59 Stokes vacated his room upon his marriage, in July 1938. So Henderson must have moved into his studio prior to July. Lawrence Gowing, who Henderson already knew, moved into Stokes' room shortly after it was vacated.60 A few doors away from Henderson, at 23 Fitzroy Street, William Coldstream and Henderson's good friend, Graham Bell, shared a studio, which they had taken

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57 Ibid., p. 931.
58 Tom Harrisson, 'What they think in "Worktown" ', p. 400.
59 Anne Seymour, *Nigel Henderson, Paintings Collages and Photographs*, np.
in October 1937.\textsuperscript{61} Thus, Henderson was well positioned to be informed of the activities of Bell, Coldstream and Gowing.

By 1938, Henderson had clearly determined to pursue a career in art. In response to a questionnaire by Christopher Mullen, Henderson recalled his painting activities at the Fitzroy Street studio.

I had a certain bohemianism for a while with my Fitzroy Street studio...(c1938) Hadn’t found my way. Painting a ridiculous picture...in my studio of a kind of Sphinx with ears like huge rhubarb leaves...\textsuperscript{62}

1938 was also the year in which two of Henderson’s collages were exhibited at the Guggenheim Jeune gallery.\textsuperscript{63} Although these collages are now lost, Henderson recalled that one of his collages included Player’s cigarette packets.\textsuperscript{64}

Henderson’s personal circumstances were conducive to his choice of career. His mother Wyn was managing Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery in London, which opened in January 1938 with an exhibition of drawings that Cocteau had produced for his play \textit{Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde} (1937).\textsuperscript{65} Marcel Duchamp and his companion, Mary Reynolds, flew to London for the opening of Guggenheim Jeune and Duchamp hung Cocteau’s work. For Henderson, then aged twenty-one, Duchamp’s hanging of the exhibition was a particularly memorable day, since Henderson spent the day assisting him. Henderson recalled:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Peter Rumley, ‘Chronology’, \textit{The Paintings of William Coldstream 1908-1987}, p. 110.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Christopher Mullen, \textit{Heads Eye Wyn}, p. 25.
\item \textsuperscript{63} In her autobiography Peggy Guggenheim suggests that this exhibition took place late in 1938. Peggy Guggenheim, \textit{Out of This Century, Confessions of an Art Addict}, Andre Deutsch, London, 1987, p. 193.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Peggy Guggenheim, \textit{Out of This Century}, pp. 165-166.
\end{itemize}
that long day I spent with Duchamp a couple of years before the war hanging an exhibition of Cocteau’s drawings... a day that both hung in the air forever and passed in a puff of smoke like a hashish dream... I was totally enchanted... the day... seemed to last for three weeks... I met him once more when I borrowed a tuxedo that he held in trust for a number of artist friends.⁶⁶

This was not the first time that Henderson met Duchamp. Guggenheim had introduced Henderson to Duchamp and Yves Tanguy during one of his earlier trips to Paris.⁶⁷ Between 1930 and 1934, Henderson regularly visited his mother in Paris, where she was managing Nancy Cunard’s Hours Press. The business, which had been established in 1928 by Cunard and her companion Louis Aragon, had moved to Paris in the winter of 1930 and was located a few doors away from the Galerie Surréaliste. Soon after moving to Paris, Hours Press became an informal exhibition space for artists associated with Galerie Surréaliste, and its windows and walls were used to display the work of Max Ernst, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, Francis Picabia and Joan Miró.⁶⁸

On one of Henderson’s trips to Paris, he accompanied his mother to the home of the painter Tristram Hillier in Gascony.⁶⁹ There, at the age of fifteen, while still a student at Stowe school, Henderson met Max Ernst.⁷⁰

Fifty years later, Henderson recalled the meeting:

The waitress was young and comely and as she passed I distinctly saw Max Ernst pinch her bum! Was that allowed from such serious artists? What an important lesson! I began from about that time to want to be an artist. They seemed the purveyors of the Life Force. Quick, lively, in touch with themselves, fun! What was the secret? everyone else seemed so somnambulistic.⁷¹

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⁶⁷ Frank Whitford, Nigel Henderson, Photographs, collages, paintings, np.


⁶⁹ Christopher Mullen, Heads Eye Wyn, p. 25.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 25.
Unfortunately, Henderson has recalled this occasion in a way that provides little insight into the substance of the meeting, but it certainly conveys the sense that Ernst's frivolity stood in stark contrast to the seriousness of the Bloomsbury artists surrounding Henderson in Gordon Square.

The fact that Henderson refers to his encounter with Ernst fifty years after the event suggests that this was, or in hindsight would become, a significant moment. It cannot be said, with any certainty, that Henderson's meeting with Ernst awakened Henderson's interest in collage, after all Henderson was only fifteen at the time of their meeting. However, it cannot be entirely fortuitous that some of Henderson's earliest works, those included in the Guggenheim Jeune exhibition of 1938, were collage works. Nor can it be fortuitous that on one of the extremely rare occasions that Henderson spoke about his interests in the late thirties, he refers to two artists who were working with collage. In 1982, Henderson recalled:

John Piper was doing work I admired...I liked some of Julian Trevelyan's work. He had a nice feeling for European art, notably Paul Klee and a nice free hand with collage.\(^\text{72}\)

Embedded within these few words is a wealth of important information. But, in typical Henderson fashion, the information is oblique. Nevertheless, buried beneath Henderson's recollection is an indication of his knowledge of, and involvement with, contemporary art.

Henderson's reference to Piper's work is illuminating because, at the time that Henderson is referring to, Piper was producing collages that bear a remarkable similarity to Trevelyan's. Indeed, in the summer of 1938, Piper held his first solo exhibition *Paintings and Collages*, at the London Gallery.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., p. 25.
which was located immediately next door to Guggenheim Jeune.73 The collages that Piper exhibited in 1938, amongst them Quarley Hill (1937, Fig. 29), Cardiganshire Beach (1938) and Gale (1938) were produced in the same manner as Trevelyan's Mass Observation collages, *en plein air*. In contrast to Ernst, Piper and Trevelyan used collage as a method of representing identifiable landscapes, their collages were firmly tied to the stimuli of a particular place; Bolton in the case of Trevelyan; and Dungeness or Newhaven in the case of Piper.

In speaking of Trevelyan's collages, Henderson may well have been referring to those that Trevelyan produced for Mass Observation. Furthermore, Henderson's mentioning of Paul Klee suggests that he was familiar with the work that Trevelyan exhibited at the International Surrealist Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries in 1936. On that occasion Trevelyan exhibited three

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oil paintings *Symbols of Growth, Underground, Two Versions of Babylon*, and two etchings, *The Tenements of Mind* and *Dream Scaffold*, all of 1936. In Trevelyan's entire body of work it is these that reveal a debt to Klee's paintings, and, more specifically, to paintings such as *Meeting in the Fields* (1930), *The Incredulous Smile* (1933), *Dynamics of a Head* (1934) and *Blue Man in a Scaffolding* (1935), all of which were then owned by the Mayor Gallery.

Any doubt that Henderson did not know about Mass Observation is put to rest by a comment he made in the seventies. When asked about Mass Observation, Henderson replied:

> I was a little too young for Mass Observation but not too young to pick up some of the tremor, some of the intent of it all. As I say I saw some of their work...Julian Trevelyan I knew a bit from before the war. Humphrey Jennings I always admired very greatly. He was quite a stimulus to me...I liked his diverse activity...I liked some of his stuff, it was all rather classical Surrealism: 'the rose', 'the locomotive' 'the hand'.

Humphrey Spender recalls that Henderson spoke with him about Mass Observation when they became good friends in the seventies. According to Spender, Henderson spoke enthusiastically about Jennings and of Harrisson's attempts to encourage Bell "to move closer to society."

Unfortunately, any opportunity that Henderson might have had to develop his acquaintance with Mass Observation was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II. Between 1939 and 1945, Henderson served in the R.A.F. and,


75 The Mayor Gallery also owned Klee's *Observations of Two Kinds* (1935) and *The Former Muse* (1930) and these, along with those paintings mentioned above, were some of the fifteen works by Klee exhibited at the International Surrealist Exhibition. *The International Surrealist Exhibition*, p. 20.

76 Nigel Henderson interview with Dave Hoffman and Shirley Read, *Camerawork*, No. 11, September 1978, pp. 12-13. This is the only known published interview with Nigel Henderson.

during these years, he produced no work at all.\textsuperscript{78} In 1942 he was given modified flying duties, and in early 1945 he was invalided out of service.\textsuperscript{79} Later in the year, he enrolled at the Slade School of Art in London and undertook psychoanalysis in an attempt "to stop the pavement shaking so alarmingly under my feet."\textsuperscript{80}

In speaking of his years at the Slade between 1945 and 1949, Henderson has said that he spent "most of his time...wandering about looking at things"\textsuperscript{81} in Bethnal Green, where he and his wife Judith lived. He apparently drew a lot, "but with no facility at all,"\textsuperscript{82} and there is now no trace of his student work. But, at some stage between 1945 and 1949, Henderson began taking photographs of Bethnal Green. These photographs, which will be considered in the following chapter reveal the influence of his associations and experiences in the thirties.

\textsuperscript{78} Anne Seymour, \textit{Nigel Henderson, Paintings Collages and Photographs}, np.
\textsuperscript{79} Nigel Henderson, 'Speculations about Self Rather than Self-Portraiture 1980-81-82', \textit{Heads Eye Wyn}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{81} Nigel Henderson, 'Introduction', \textit{Nigel Henderson, Photographs of Bethnal Green 1949-52}, Midland Group, Nottingham, 28 October-22 November 1978, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 3.
CHAPTER FOUR

‘DISCOVERING’ BETHNAL GREEN

This chapter is concerned with uncovering the significance of the working class area of Bethnal Green for Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson. Like Humphrey Spender, Henderson moved through the streets of Bethnal Green and, with camera in hand he produced an intense and meticulous archive of working class life. Henderson was not alone in his discovery of Bethnal Green. He was often accompanied by Paolozzi. From an art historical position these photographs of Bethnal Green are a valuable source of information. They reveal what Henderson deemed worthy of attention and, perhaps more importantly, they testify in some measure, to the nature of his and Paolozzi’s visual experiences in Bethnal Green. If one places these photographs alongside the collages that Paolozzi produced between 1945 and 1952, it becomes apparent that the collages are a seamless extension of the street life captured by Henderson.

In 1945, Paolozzi and Henderson met at the Slade School of Art where they began a life-long friendship. The Slade had recently returned to London, from the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford; it had been located there during the war. Henderson came to the Slade on an ex-serviceman’s grant after serving as a pilot in the Royal Air Force between 1939-1945. Paolozzi had already spent some time at art schools. In 1943, he had studied at the Edinburgh College of Art with the intention of becoming a commercial artist. In 1944, he briefly attended St Martin’s School of Art and later that year enrolled at the Slade while it was still housed in Oxford. In the following year, 1945, Paolozzi and Henderson met at the Slade in London. However, Paolozzi was not to remain at the Slade for long. He left for Paris in June 1947 without completing his
studies. Henderson remained at the Slade until 1949; but, he made frequent visits to Paolozzi in Paris.

Henderson and Paolozzi quickly became disenchanted with the Slade. Each regarded the school as anachronistic and neither took their formal study seriously. Paolozzi claims that he learnt nothing at the Slade.\(^1\) Henderson has described the Slade as "a joke...fearfully out of whack with the atom-smashing world".\(^2\) A controversy surrounding an exhibition of paintings by Picasso and Matisse at the Victoria and Albert Museum in December 1945 is symptomatic of the broader conservatism and hostility towards twentieth century French art that pervaded the Slade. Patrick Heron described this atmosphere eloquently when he said "to be influenced by French paintings as late as 1948 in England was to distinguish one unfavourably from the prevailing pictorial climate in London."\(^3\)

*Paintings by Picasso and Matisse* was a large exhibition containing thirty works by Matisse, painted between 1896 and 1944, including *View of Pont-St-Michel* (1902), *Nude* (1928) and *Odalisk* (1928). The remaining twenty-five works were painted by Picasso between 1939 and early 1945 and included *Woman with Fish Hat* (1943), *Portrait of a Lady* (1940) and *Child with Crawfish* (1941).\(^4\)

The exhibition generated an extraordinary and lengthy controversy. For the first two weeks of the exhibition, the letters to the editor of *The Times* were dominated by expressions of outrage. Most of the criticism was aimed at

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3 Patrick Heron, Barbican Art Gallery, 11 July-1 Sept 1985, pp. 6-7.
Picasso and his paintings. Roland Penrose has explained the hostility towards Picasso in the following way:

With the exception of the great painting of the Night Fishing at Antibes,...all of Picasso's work dated from the spring of 1940. This gave an atmosphere of violence and anxiety to his part of the exhibition which was overpowering in comparison with the 'Luxe, calme et volupté' of the Matisse paintings.

Many still in uniform who had so recently been trained to commit acts of violence saw an interpretation of the world that startled them. They had expected from the arts a soothing influence and were unwilling to admit that these pictures should be allowed to have such power over them.5

For many, art was clearly an endeavour that should not engage with modern life, but rather serve as a retreat from it.

A most hostile letter to the editor of The Times was penned by Evelyn Waugh who used the exhibition as an opportunity to attack modernism and to associate Picasso's paintings with Nazism.

Señor Picasso's painting cannot be intelligently discussed in the terms used of the civilised masters. Our confusion is due to the admirers constant use of an irrelevant aesthetic vocabulary. He can only be treated as crooners are treated by their devotees. In the United States the adolescents, speaking of music, do not ask; "What do you think of So-and-so?" They say; "Does so-and-so send you?" Modern art, whether it is Nazi oratory, band leadership, or painting, aims at a mesmeric trick and achieves either total success or total failure. The large number of otherwise cultured and intelligent people who fall victim to Señor Picasso are not posers. They are genuinely "sent." It may seem preposterous to those of us who are immune, but the process is apparently harmless. They emerge from their ecstasy as cultured and intelligent as ever. We may even envy them their experience. But do not let us confuse it with the sober and elevating happiness which we derive from the great masters.6

In a subsequent letter to Robin Campbell, Waugh continued his attack on Picasso, describing him as being "outside the world-order" and a glaring symptom of the rapid decay of Western culture.\(^7\)

For Waugh, modernism was inimical to the values and morals of a civilisation that had recently defeated Nazism. Although Waugh's view was extreme, the threat to civilisation that he saw in modernism was shared by many. There were several calls for the exhibition to be closed.\(^8\) Others urged that children be barred from entry.\(^9\) A group of students from the Slade protested against the exhibition on the steps of the Museum and many of the Slade staff warned that the exhibition represented the beginnings of the moral decline of the nation.\(^10\)

Given the conservative atmosphere of the Slade, it is not surprising that Henderson and Paolozzi ceased attending classes, preferring instead to spend their time visiting museums, attending lectures in other parts of the London University and wandering the streets of East London, particularly Bethnal Green, where Henderson and his wife Judith lived. For Henderson, the streets of East London offered "a greater reality than art maunderings at the Slade."\(^11\)

Paolozzi's association with Henderson proved significant. Roaming the streets of East London with Henderson, Paolozzi became more assured in his belief that the artefacts of everyday life, the uneventful and the ordinary, could serve as a potent realm of the imagination. In the early fifties, Alison and Peter

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\(^8\) Candidus, 'Picasso-and the itch for persecution,' *Daily Sketch*, Monday, December 31, 1945, p. 2.


Smithson also spent time with Henderson, observing the everyday events of street life. Their accounts of these occasions provide valuable insights into Henderson's approach to the everyday encountered on the street. Peter Smithson has commented that "a walk with Nigel is to see the inanimate as animate, the weird business of opening...other people's eyes to see, to have an affection between objects and people." 

Alison Smithson recalled:

He was the original image finder...He had the most fantastic eye...Nigel was finding stuff, in the gutter, in an area; bits of wire. He might say, 'Look at that door compared with that door.' The whole thing became something quite different, and he would play with the information, he could immediately say, 'Isn't that one like this or this one like that' - the whole thing was at this very clever Bloomsbury level.

Against the battered urban spectacle of post-war East London, Paolozzi was exposed to vignettes of working class everyday life that presented possibilities he recognised as consonant with his own interests. By considering Nigel Henderson's photographs of Bethnal Green, it is possible to arrive at an understanding of their visual experiences in East London and how these experiences served to strengthen Paolozzi's ideas about the relationship between art and everyday life.

Four black and white photographs, each of shop front windows in East London, are especially illuminating. Newsagent East London, Shop Front East London (Fig. 30), Rag Merchant, Blythe Street and W.F. Riley, Newsagent and Confectioner, present window displays that are densely packed with miscellaneous objects. These windows, strikingly similar to Peter Blake's

13 Ibid.
14 All of Nigel Henderson's photographs of Bethnal Green were taken between 1949-1952,
collage constructions of the sixties, contain an abundance of everyday objects; dolls, chess boards, fountain pens, small watering cans, paint boxes, handbags, toy yachts and A-Z guides of London. The windows are so packed with objects that the shop’s contents, literally, flow out onto the street that has been taken over for advertising, display and further storage.

Fig. 30. Nigel Henderson, Shop Front East London, 1949-1952.

In Shop Front East London, for instance, advertisements for biro pens, American comics, ice cream bricks and iced lollies, spill out of the shop onto the street. A placard advertising No Mean City informs that the book is restricted for sale to adults, yet the book is tantalisingly displayed in a rack that stands on the street.15 These hand-made advertisements, complete with spelling errors and a

unless otherwise indicated.

15 Alexander McArthur and H. Kingsley Long’s No Mean City (1935) is a gruesome account of street gangs in the Glasgow slums in the thirties, set against the background of cinemas and dance-halls. The title was a direct reference to Arthur Morrison’s collection of stories, Tales of Mean Streets (1894) in which Morrison claimed to contest the sensationalised accounts of the East End that were written in the latter years of the nineteenth century. In fact, Morrison presented working class people as silent victims of their own stupidity. The title, No Mean City is a parody of Morrison’s claims for the inhabitants of the Glasgow slums are presented as
hand drawn image of Mickey Mouse, have been made on panels of wood that lean against the shop front. In a sense, these advertising boards exist as vernacular billboards and, in effect, constitute the street as a collage.

Although Henderson's photographs reveal much about the kinds of subjects and objects he and Paolozzi saw while roaming through East London, the tableaus of working class life served to confirm something fundamental about ways of looking and modes of experience. Paolozzi had begun to realise this when he was in Oxford in 1944. While a student at the Slade in Oxford, Paolozzi spent considerable time at the Pitt-Rivers Museum of Ethnology where he became fascinated by the ethnographic displays. There, Paolozzi was attracted not so much by the objects on display but, rather, by the modes of display, for here objects were often displayed in a way that lacked any apparent order. Some objects were grouped together under categories such as 'hunting' or 'cooking' and were related to a particular region. Other cabinets contained objects under more abstract categories such as 'religion' and some displayed a range of objects that were haphazardly grouped according to their society of origin. In such instances, little written information was provided about the individual items and the viewer was left to make judgments and decisions about the objects, specifically about their use, value and meaning. Paolozzi has since recalled that he was often unable to identify an object, nor was he able to determine the precise purpose or meaning of an object through its association with other objects since the objects were dissimilar and indiscriminately exhibited. Thus, Paolozzi was in a position to exercise an imaginative interpretation with the displays and to determine meaning for himself. This, in turn, created areas of ambiguity where an object might participate in more than one area of meaning at once, where the thing entirely barbaric and horrifying. No Mean City was published twice during the fifties. Alexander McArthur and H. Kingsley Long, No Mean City, Neville Spearman Ltd., London, 1971. 

16 Eduardo Paolozzi, in interview with author, 5 February 1990.
discovered refuses to be confined to any single interpretation. And, because of the vastness and eclecticism of the displays, those meanings could be endlessly manipulated to his own satisfaction.

In East London, Paolozzi and Henderson were confronted with display cabinets of a very different kind, and yet, in terms of structuring experience, the window displays had much in common with the museum's cabinets. Both performed a dual purpose, functioning as storage cabinets and as display cabinets. Both contained an abundance of objects drawn from everyday life, a mass of heterogeneous materials that provided points of contact with their relevant society, and both presented objects arranged in such a way that they gave rise to abrupt and unexpected juxtapositions.

Henderson's photograph, *Rag Merchant, Blythe Street* (Fig. 31), depicts another shop window but this window is full of rags and scraps of fabric, piled high, waiting to be bought. Squeezed between the panes of glass and the clumps of cloth in the lower right hand corner are two hand-written signs, one bearing the name and address of a chimney sweep. Above this assortment of refuse, in the upper portion of the window, are four signs, three informing customers that rags can be bought here and the fourth declaring, 'We Want What You Don't, Old Clothes'.

![Fig. 31. Nigel Henderson, Rag Merchant, Blythe Street, 1949-1952.](image-url)
Henderson has framed this photograph very differently to his other photographs of shop windows. Unlike *Shop Front East London*, in *Rag Merchant, Blythe Street* the surrounding street is not visible. The frame of the shop window serves as the frame of the photograph. This suggests that Henderson intends the contents of the shop to be the absolute, almost telescopic focus of the photograph. This window can serve as a rich source of inquiry, for within the window is one object that strikes at the heart of Henderson's photograph. In the left hand corner of the window, to the back of the rag pile, bearing no apparent relationship to the other contents, with which it competes for attention, is a chamber pot. Here, on public display, is an object usually concealed within the privacy of one's home. Initially, this chamber pot seems out of place, at odds with the piles of rags that surround it, but its existence serves to highlight that this photograph is, in essence, a photograph of waste, a photograph that captures the refuse expelled by society; the discarded clothing, the soot that is implied by the reference to the chimney sweep; and the excrement implied by the chamber pot. The juxtaposition of the chamber pot and the scraps of cloth no longer appears bizarre, for it gives a new layer of meaning to the contents of this display cabinet. Henderson's photograph renders visible what is usually banished from sight. He has immortalised what is normally cast out from society and the visual realm, and in so doing, has rendered the ordinary, the banal and the everyday significant. Henderson has brought the expelled into the arena of representation.

It is not without irony that it was in post-war East London, in the working class boroughs of Bethnal Green, Hackney, Bow and Stepney, which still bore the scars of bombing raids, in communities far removed from the refinements and cultural niceties of the Slade, that the fundamentals of Paolozzi's art practice were established. Here, Paolozzi became liberated from the restricting atmosphere of the Slade where the teaching, based as it was on the imitation of
Dürer and Rembrandt, threatened to suffocate him. In East London, while still enrolled at the Slade, the clash between the hallowed domain of museum-worthy art and the plebeian facts of everyday life became most apparent.

Although Paolozzi had long been interested in popular culture, his use of popular imagery had been the subject of disapproval. In seeking application to the Edinburgh College of Art in 1943, Paolozzi presented a portfolio of collected material and collages containing popular imagery. His application for entry was successful but it was on the condition that he no longer pursue his interests in popular culture.\(^{17}\) In addition, his use of popular imagery at this time was tentative. For instance, in his *People in China Scrapbook* of 1943-44 (Figs. 32, 33), the range of popular imagery is restricted to the occasional pin-up girl.\(^{18}\) By 1947, works such as *A New Brand of Brilliance, Hi-Ho* (Fig. 34), and *I was a Rich Man’s Plaything* (Fig. 35), with their incorporation of covers from *Picture Post, Intimate Confessions* and *Hi-Ho,* indicate a more resolved and confident use of popular imagery. While it is likely that these collages were made in Paris, the framework and artistic foundations for these works had already been partly established by the time of Paolozzi’s departure in June 1947.

In East London Paolozzi developed an anthropological approach to culture: culture as the rituals, patterns and forms of a society, that when collated, provide information about its way of life. Of course, Nigel Henderson was well positioned to inform Paolozzi of the various endeavours that had been

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\(^{17}\) Eduardo Paolozzi, *The ad images that inspire today’s artists,* p. 6.

\(^{18}\) Interestingly, at this time Paolozzi sometimes used the Anglicized version of his Christian name when signing his work and this suggests that he saw himself as an outsider. (See Fig. 32.) Paolozzi’s early career is often approached as if he was a marginalised outsider, working in isolation from others who may have shared his interests. For this approach see Frank Whitford, *Eduardo Paolozzi,* and Thomas Lawson, ‘Bunk: Eduardo Paolozzi and the Legacy of the Independent Group’, in *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Pop,* The Clocktower Gallery, New York, 22 Oct 1987-12 June 1988.
Fig. 32. Eduardo Paolozzi, *People in China Scrapbook*, 1943-1944.

Fig. 33. Eduardo Paolozzi, *People in China Scrapbook*, 1943-1944.

Fig. 34. Eduardo Paolozzi, *Hi-Ho*, 1947.

Fig. 35. Eduardo Paolozzi, *I was a Rich Man’s Plaything*, 1947.
informed by anthropology in the thirties. But, Paolozzi’s exposure to anthropology also came from Judith Henderson who was undertaking an anthropological project of her own in Bethnal Green. Judith was a trained sociologist and had studied anthropology at Cambridge and Bryn Mawr College with the eminent anthropologists, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. Benedict’s book *Patterns of Culture*, and Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*, had created a climate of opinion in which a hierarchical ranking of cultures and peoples based on biologically determined ideas of race gave way to a more open account of the interaction between the individual and social systems. An important aspect of this new concept was in its appeal to diversity, flexibility and cultural relativism. Benedict and Mead argued that culture should be viewed in its entirety and that specific features of a culture could not be considered independently of its totality.19

In 1945, when Judith and Nigel settled in Bethnal Green, Judith began working for the sociologist J.L. Petersen. Of her own accord, she began to keep a diary in 1946 in which she recorded her observations of the Samuels family, who lived a few doors away. As with Mass Observation accounts, Judith’s diary provides detailed reports of everyday occurrences and offers insights into the feelings and thoughts of the members of the family. Tom Harrisson became interested in Judith’s reports and provided her with some financial assistance with the intention that her work be published.20 Between 1946 and 1952, when Judith ceased keeping a diary, Harrisson became a regular visitor to the Henderson household where, according to Nigel, the three would engage in enthusiastic discussions about Mass Observation.21 It is likely that Paolozzi was present for

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20 Judith Henderson’s diaries were not fully published but extracts from them were published in a catalogue of Henderson’s photographs of Bethnal Green. *Nigel Henderson, Photographs of Bethnal Green 1949-1952*, Midland Group, Nottingham, 28 Oct-22 Nov 1978.
21 Nigel Henderson interview with Dave Hoffman and Shirley Read, *Camerawork*, No. 11,
some of these discussions, particularly after his return from Paris in 1949, when he lived with the Hendersons' for a while. He certainly knew of Judith's work, since a diary entry for April 1947 reports that Paolozzi visited the Samuels' home with Nigel and describes his shocked reaction to their living conditions. In addition, a local resident recalls meeting Paolozzi at the Henderson's home.

We would drink tea, have a snack and chat sometimes Eduardo Pallizzi (sic) would be there. They talked of how they'd looked round London, looking for things to create unusual things which as Nigel always said was the simple things, like a rusty railing or dustbin.

It is clear that Nigel Henderson took more than a passing interest in Judith's work. There is evidence to suggest that he was deeply committed to it. First, there are numerous references in Judith's diary to Nigel's involvement with the Samuels family. Indeed, the two families became so entwined that, when the Hendersons' moved to Essex in 1952, they were followed by the Samuels family. Secondly, Nigel played a similar role to that undertaken by Humphrey Spender in his work for Mass Observation. While Judith observed and collated written reports, Nigel produced photographic documentation of Bethnal Green and its surrounding areas. These photographs intersect with the written accounts to provide a more comprehensive archive of working class life.

Henderson's photographs of Bethnal Green have much in common with Humphrey Spender's photographs of Bolton. Both deployed the camera as a

22 Nigel Henderson, Photographs of Bethnal Green 1949-1952, p. 44.
means for recording intimate observations of human activity within its familiar environment and both produced photographs that testify to the social and economic realities of the time. However, using the camera as a mere recording tool held no great interest for either Henderson or Spender. Rather, both were fascinated by the camera’s ability to penetrate the urban landscape, and by its potential to uncover the complexities of everyday life and, for both, these complexities were embedded in mass media images.

Both Henderson and Spender were fascinated by advertising hoardings, public notices and billboard displays. But in Spender’s photographs these signs always stand in a dynamic relationship to the human figure or figures being photographed. For instance, in “Christ is Risen,” Bolton (1937, Fig. 36), a sign on the corner of the church reads ’A thought for you! Christ is Risen! Heaven Above is Sweeter Blue. Earth Around is Sweeter Green.’ Yet, these words cannot be reconciled with the grey streetscape nor with the group of sullen women striding towards the church. Similarly, in the photograph The Procession (1937, Fig. 37), a sign reading ’Clog and Boot Repairs’ adds a
resonance to the image of a May Day procession and suggests that these people have had their shoes repaired in preparation for the march, or they will need to have them repaired when the procession is ended.

Henderson, on the other hand, frequently employs strategies that render the human subject secondary to mass media images and images of popular culture. This is not to suggest that Henderson ignores the human subject for, indeed, human beings figure prominently in his Bethnal Green photographs. Rather, it is to point out that Henderson often structures his photographs in a way that the advertising posters and billboards become the focus of attention, and, in foregrounding these man-made images, Henderson is stressing their potential as a source of information and as a channel of communication. In "Compote Capades", Roman Road, (Fig. 38) for example, the man on the bicycle is out of focus and this shifts attention away from him towards the decayed, shredded posters on the brick wall behind him and towards the large advertisement for Nescafé which dominates the upper portion of the wall. In
other photographs, such as Newsagent East London, Shop Front East London, and It’s Never Happened Before the human subject is not directly represented but is implied by the images of popular culture and mass media that function as signs of human activity. H.M.S. Invincible (Fig. 39) is a particularly
interesting photograph. In this work, as with those above, Henderson deploys the camera to record images of readymade images, which, in this instance, consists of a poster of a man's head that forms the centre of an advertisement for Player's cigarettes.

It is illuminating to compare Henderson's *H.M.S. Invincible* with Humphrey Jennings' photograph *Daily Worker* (1937-38, Fig. 40). In these photographs, Henderson and Jennings appear to be deploying the camera as a means of reconciling the diverse styles of Surrealism and Realism, and, of course this was precisely the approach of Mass Observation in the collection and organisation of their material. Both photographs depict images of objets trouvés. Henderson’s photograph is of a worn and aged Player's advertisement that has emerged after thick layers of more recent posters have
peeled away. Indeed, this poster of a bearded sailor, from the ship H.M.S. Invincible, is a most invincible and enduring image. Jennings' photograph is of a page from the Communist newspaper the Daily Worker that lies derelict on a wooden floor. The newspaper depicts a photograph of Lenin's head amidst various newspaper articles. One article carries the headline, 'His work lives and triumphs', but this triumphal announcement is belied by the fact that the newspaper, and the political optimism it pronounces, have been abandoned to the floor. In effect both of these photographs are re-representations of historical fragments.

Henderson's image in particular, testifies to the ways in which the urban environment can present opportunities for multiple ways of seeing. The street offers the potential for multiple meanings, it is a site of surprise and paradox, a site of speculation and conflict that creates areas of powerful ambiguity. And, it was precisely these qualities of the urban environment that Spender was seeking to overlay onto his images of working class people. Indeed, Spender has stated that he regards some of his Mass Observation photographs, such as
the photographs of a football crowd in Bolton (Fig. 41), as less than satisfactory because they function as straightforward documentation and in his opinion, restrict imaginative engagement.25

Fig. 41. Humphrey Spender, Football Crowd, 1937-1938.

In Spender’s opinion, the photograph *Three Smart Girls* (1937, Fig. 42) is more successful because the camera reveals more than a literal account of everyday life and is deployed to generate multiple meanings.26 *Three Smart Girls* is a low angle black and white photograph of a street in Bolton. The backdrop of the street consists of a wall that is covered with a line of posters advertising Guinness, Bass beer, Carnation milk and various entertainment events. The most prominent poster reads ‘Sabotage’ and underneath this is written ‘3 Smart Girls.’ In the foreground of the photograph are three small girls, one of whom is pushing a pram in which the other two girls sit. With a tremendous sense of irony, Spender has taken this photograph at the very moment when the trio are positioned in front of the poster reading ‘3 Smart Girls’, and yet these girls are the absolute antithesis of smart. They wear ragged clothes, they are dirty and dishevelled and the pram they use is dilapidated. They unwittingly sabotage the idea of ‘3 Smart Girls’. But, on the other hand, they enact what the poster

26 Ibid.
informs for, in this barren streetscape, where there is little to do, the girls have sabotaged the pram in order to provide themselves with entertainment. *Three Smart Girls* reveals how Spender deployed the camera to convey the richness and diversity of everyday phenomena; to record the marvellous embedded in the ordinary; and to expose new syntheses and new patterns of meaning that, in a straightforward documentary photograph, might be lost. For Spender and Henderson, the camera was a means of transcending objective fact.

In a brief introductory essay to an exhibition catalogue, Henderson wrote "I would like to think of the small box-like houses and shops etc. as a sort of stage set against which people were more or less unconsciously acting."27 Here, Henderson provides a subtle but crucial clue for an understanding of his photographic enterprise. In constituting the East End of London as a stage, as an arena of display and as a site of revelation, Henderson is alluding to the notions of theatricality and spectatorship that habitually informed his work.

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His photographs *Petticoat Lane Market* (Fig. 43), *Wig Stall* (Fig. 44), and *W.F. Riley, Newsagent and Confectioner* (Fig 45), are concerned with people engaged in the act of looking. Henderson structures these photographs in a way that the viewer becomes self-conscious of their position as a viewer. For instance, in *Petticoat Lane Market*, a screen of silk stockings hang from a stall-holder's barrow and create a curtain that stretches horizontally across the barrow. Behind the screen of stockings, on the far side of the barrow, is a crowd of women who are looking at the stockings. Although the screen prevents a clear view of the women and, as such, functions as a visual filter, it serves to highlight the fact that in addition to mimicking the women in looking at the stockings, we are looking at an act of looking. In this way, the viewer of the photograph is situated not as a passive consumer of quotidian data, but as an actively engaged spectator.
Fig. 44. Nigel Henderson, Wig Stall, 1949-1952.

Fig. 45. Nigel Henderson, W.F. Riley, Newsagent and Confectioner, 1949-1952.
Acts of seeing, watching, looking and viewing constitute an informing principle of Henderson’s work. In photographs such as *Newsagent East London* (Fig 46) and *Shop Front East London*, the viewer is positioned as a ‘window-shopper’, peering through the shop windows attempting to recognise and identify the goods on display. In other photographs, references to sight and looking are overt. For instance, in *Peter Samuels* (Fig. 47), a young boy leans against a wall on which a poster reads ‘Why Suffer From Eyestrain?’. Immediately beneath this is an image of a pair of large open eyes that stare straight ahead, and to the right is a boy who, by wearing glasses, no longer suffers from eyestrain. In *Newsagent East London*, a poster for *Radio Times* reads,
'Look Before You Listen', a statement reminiscent of Tom Harrisson’s privileging of sight over speech.28

Fig. 47. Nigel Henderson, Peter Samuels, 1949-1952.

In addition to these works, there is a small body of photographs containing images of glass. In these works, sight as subject matter, emerges through more subtle means that point to a fundamental aspect of Henderson’s endeavour. In Boy in Window, East London (Fig. 48) for example, the use of glass creates a screen that destabilises the viewer’s ability to establish the spatial relationships within the image. Is the figure standing on the far side of the glass, looking out towards the street, or, is his image a reflection, is he standing on the street looking in? Such ambiguities and uncertainties are remindful of the act of

seeing, but, more importantly, they generate an emphatically self-conscious spectatorship.

Moreover, the windows and panes of glass that recur throughout Henderson’s photographs separate the world of the observed from the world of the observer, and, because the objects or people that lie behind the screen are rarely fully legible, the presence of the glass as a barrier is further highlighted. Here, one is reminded of George Orwell’s comment about the aquarium glass; "it is so easy to pretend that it isn’t there, and so impossible to get through it." While Orwell was using glass as a metaphor for class barriers, which, in his opinion, could not be penetrated by the social explorers of the thirties, Henderson’s interest in glass and windows was entirely different. Although his photographs testify to his interest in vernacular culture and working class communities, the structure of photographs such as *Boy in Window, East London, Barber’s Shop Window* (Fig. 49) and *Cafe off Bethnal Green Road, East London* (Fig. 50), reveal

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that he was not singularly concerned with penetrating the glass and windows in order to expose merely what lies beyond. Henderson does not pretend the glass is absent, indeed, he insists on its presence. He uses the glass as a meeting point, as a site of exchange and interplay, as a surface on which the world behind the glass and the world in front of the glass merge and blend.

Fig. 49. Nigel Henderson, Barber's Shop Window, 1949-1952.

Fig. 50. Nigel Henderson, Cafe off Bethnal Green Road, 1949-1952.
In a sense, these photographs function as a metaphor for Henderson’s photographic enterprise, an enterprise that, as his following statement makes clear, he saw as a mid twentieth century counterpart to the social explorations of the nineteenth century: "The intimate box-like scale of the East London Streets. Like little theatres (see Mayhew)."\(^{30}\) Henderson’s reference to Henry Mayhew, a mid-nineteenth century social explorer who sought to expose working class living conditions in order to increase knowledge about the ‘unknown nation’ of East London, suggests that Henderson conceives of his photographic work as a continuation of Mayhew’s investigations.\(^{31}\) However, whereas Mayhew sought information as a means of exposing the appalling living conditions of working class people, Henderson was more closely aligned with Mass Observation in that he was concerned with rendering a dynamic interplay between the visible and the invisible, the conscious and the unconscious.

The gulf between the visual experiences of East London conveyed by Henderson’s photographs and the academic classicism upheld by the Slade was explicit, and must have given rise to the sense that Henderson and Paolozzi were inhabiting two very different worlds. Certainly, there is a sense of this in the work Paolozzi produced while a student at the Slade. On the one hand, Paolozzi was conforming to the demands of the Slade, producing drawings such as *Copies from Rembrandt* (1945). On the other, he was producing a range of works that show a distancing from the Slade’s emphasis on drawing from life and the antique. His 1946 Indian ink drawings *Three Men in a Boat* and *Fisherman and Wife*, reveal a debt to Picasso’s *People Sitting* (1938); and Paolozzi’s *Horse’s Head* (1946), with its rough surface, is closer to the horse’s


\(^{31}\) Henderson’s reference to theatres in the context of Mayhew recalls the rhetorical device of the curtain which was frequently used by late nineteenth century social commentators. Mayhew’s contemporary Charles Booth, wrote “East London lay hidden from view behind a curtain...this curtain we have tried to lift.” Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People of London*, Williams and Norgate, London, 1889-1891, Vol. 1, pp. 591-592.
head in *Guernica* than to the refined and smoothly polished surfaces of Moore's sculpture.

An insight into the Slade's approach to teaching, and the values they fostered, can be gleaned from a series of Paolozzi's student collages that were based on a prescribed text. Albert Toft's, *Modelling and Sculpture*, first published in 1921, is symptomatic of all that was parochial in British art in the mid 1940s. Toft advocated the canons of academic classicism and the naturalistic depiction of the human figure as the appropriate means for artistic expression. He completely rejected modernism after post-impressionism as the work of degenerate or incompetent artists. Toft's attitude, although comforting to those students who protested against the Picasso and Matisse exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1945, exemplifies what Henderson had in mind when he wrote that the Slade was "fearfully out of whack with the atom-smashing world."³²

In the opening chapter, Toft provides a brief discussion of the differences between a French and British sculptor. He asserts that:

...in some foreign schools, especially in the French, the system of education tends to produce a sameness in technique, a general likeness in selection of subject and arrangement, that suggest too great an influence of one or other professor or master, until individuality is lost, and the student becomes a copyist, even of the most marked faults of his master.

Fortunately, this is not the weakness of the British sculptor, whose dominating ideal is Truth...

The French sculptor is distinctly more facile in execution, but the Briton stands pre-eminent in conception and those qualities which go to make his labour of lasting value.³³

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Toft argues that it is a student’s duty to strive towards ‘truth’ and that this can only be achieved if a student learns "...how to copy well, with reverence and with the determination to do his best".\textsuperscript{34} The irony of these statements was not lost on Paolozzi. He took several illustrations from Toft's book but rather than copying them, as Toft advocated, Paolozzi used them as a basic source of imagery for a number of collages. The images that Paolozzi cut from Toft's book were not the reproductions of Ancient Egyptian nor Classical Greek works that Toft thought worthy of copying. Instead, he used technical photographs that demonstrate the various stages of making a sculpture.

The chapter 'Modelling in Relief' includes three photographs that Paolozzi used. One photograph depicts a completed bronze sculpture by Toft titled \textit{Maternity} and the other two depict this work in progress. Of these two photographs, one depicts a cage-work of wood onto which pieces of wood and lead piping have been attached to the required shape of a full standing figure with a child in each arm. The second photograph describes the next stage of development, with enough clay having being applied to clearly indicate the central figure and the two children, with a considerable portion of the underlying wooden frame and lead tubing still exposed (Fig. 51). Beneath each of Toft's photographs is a short instructive commentary. Paolozzi retains these commentaries at the bottom of his collages and from them, he extracts the titles, \textit{Cage Work of Wood} (1946) and \textit{When Putting on the Clay} (1947, Fig. 52).

With an ironic reference to the making of modern sculpture, in the collage \textit{When Putting on the Clay}, Paolozzi leaves the clay head exposed but superimposes images of the internal parts of machinery on to those other areas that, in Toft's work, are taken, or are intended to be taken, by the human body. Paolozzi adds a final twist by leaving exposed the underlying wooden laths

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 41.
and lead piping, that were intended by Toft, to be covered by the figure and the two children. Paolozzi literally reverses Toft's procedures and produces a collage in which the flesh is marred by objects while the objects masquerade as flesh.35

Another image in Toft's book is a reproduction of his sculpture *One of the Figures of the Welsh National War Memorial* (Fig. 53), that depicts his mannered academic rendition of a descending angel or winged victory that translates the grandeur and poise of classicism into strict formal symmetry. In Paolozzi's 1946 collage *Welsh War Memorial* (Fig. 54), Toft's figure has been almost totally replaced by an image of the interior of an engine. Of the original figure, only

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the feet and the turbulent folds of drapery remain. The outline of the wings and strict vertical axis of the figure have been preserved in the shape and central column of cogs and gears of the collaged image. Paolozzi has also placed two nude figures in the foreground, which, in the context of the title, suggests that these figures are part of the memorial. But, rather than an image of masculine heroism more characteristic of war memorials, these figures represent a man responding to a woman being shot or wounded, thereby creating a memorial to the suffering and heroism of the innocent victims of war. Presiding over this scene is the inscrutable mechanical face of the 'winged victory,' a symbol of the destructive aspect of modern technology.

Throughout 1945 and 1946, Paolozzi produced a number of collages in which he combined images of classical art with images drawn from the technological world of the twentieth century. In these works, Paolozzi brings together the
two worlds he is inhabiting, the classical, antique world of the Slade and the machine world of his immediate environment.

In *Nike des Paionios* (1946, Fig. 55), Paolozzi has grafted mechanical images onto the head and torso of the figure. Indeed, as the goddess of victory, *Nike des Paionios* is thematically related to *Welsh War Memorial*, the collage that is based on Toft's *Welsh National War Memorial*. But, whereas Paolozzi preserved the strict symmetry of Toft's figure in *Welsh War Memorial*, in *Nike des Paionios* he has preserved dynamic contrapposto and forward motion of the figure through the asymmetrical disposition of the collaged gears and cogs.

Paolozzi's scrapbook *Election* (1945ff) contains a collage titled *Athena, Heracles and Atlas* (Fig. 56). The basis of the collage is a reproduction of a metope of 460 B.C. from the temple of Zeus at Olympia, depicting one of the Labours of Heracles. In the original metope, Heracles is bearing the weight of the world for
Atlas who had been persuaded to bring from the garden of Hesperides, the apples of immortality that he holds in his outstretched hands. Athena stands behind and to the left of Heracles, ready to assist in returning the burden to Atlas. Part of the metope has been destroyed and the missing fragment forms a large triangle at the bottom right hand corner.

In Paolozzi's collage, the broken section of the original metope is left exposed and the two figures on the left, Athena and Heracles, are also left untouched. The half-figure of Atlas, who, in the original, is the only active figure of the three, is completely covered with a piece of machinery that replicates the action of offering the apples, so that the contrast between activity and passivity is continued through from the original metope to the collage. Not only does the machine replicate the activities of Atlas but its position in the collage performs the same compositional function as that of Atlas in the original metope. The predominant verticals of the design are maintained by Paolozzi while the contrasting strong horizontal of Atlas' extended forearms is replaced with the protruding piece of machinery. This serves to draw attention to the point of physical impact between man and machine, in much the same way as the original metope draws attention to the apples.

In a gesture that was to become characteristic of those collages of 1945 and 1946 in which Paolozzi brings the archaic and modern together, he creates temporal and spatial contrasts by having the machine make its encroachment into the archaic space from beyond the confines of the classical world represented by the metope. In Athena, Heracles and Atlas, for instance, the machine environment enters into the metope, not at its edges, but, rather, from the contemporary environment, from the modern space that lies beyond the confines of the metope. Thus, there is an engagement between the archaic and modern that extends beyond the limitations of the art work.
Through the marriage of human and mechanical forms, Paolozzi develops and explores similar concerns to those that were created at the Pitt-Rivers Museum, where the methods of classification and division of items gave rise to the wider problem of perception and evaluation. He sought to explore how collaged elements can be manipulated to construct meaning and how meaning can shift and blur, so that new patterns can unfold from items whose meaning appear to have been fixed. By cutting up and reassembling pre-existing archaic images and then placing them in juxtaposition with contemporary images, Paolozzi raises questions about how far an item's meaning is contained within itself and how far it changes by being placed in association with other items. In these early collages, meaning is created by the previous existence and original context of the images he uses, and by the union of those original meanings with the more contemporary context that Paolozzi establishes.

For Paolozzi, the possibilities inherent in the collage technique were made apparent in his everyday encounters. Henderson's photographs reveal that the environment itself constituted a series of constantly changing readymade collages. The surfaces and spaces of East London were structured as a series of dovetailing and interweaving images, a vast collaged environment in which experience is assimilated as a collage. Collage informs and structures experience and this is what Paolozzi meant when he said "All human experience is one big collage."

In addition, the incorporation of ephemeral artefacts from the real world was a way of constructing what he referred to as "the history of man can be written with objects." However, Paolozzi's vision of history was not an exclusive one; rather, it was one in which previous histories and the histories embedded in contemporary materials and cultures exist simultaneously. His 1946 collage *What is the Sun?* (Fig. 57) contains a cover...

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The Modern Marvels comic depicts futuristic modes of transport, with accompanying explanatory captions. The comic is partially hidden by the photograph of a male nude, whose right foot is located within the space occupied by the two classical sculptures. He appears to be springing out of the space and time of the past into that of the twentieth century. He peers inquisitively into the window of the speeding train, while simultaneously, appearing to push away the contemporary reality that surrounds him. The hair style of the figure and his position on the comic page clearly locates him within a contemporary context. But, this figure can be viewed as the living counterpart to the Greek statues that have been frozen and isolated within a particular
historical moment. Through his nudity, the use of chiaroscuro and his physical but tentative relationship to *The Capitoline Venus*, he appears to regenerate the classical values and traditions that surround this well known Aphrodite. However, *The Capitoline Venus* is a rather clumsy Roman copy of a Greek original. It is, in a sense, a fake. So, while the male figure appears to have an affinity with the sculpture, the relationship between the two is transformed by the knowledge that *The Capitoline Venus* participates in a traditional canon, without actually belonging to it. The values and judgments that surround *The Capitoline Venus* are forced into question and their validity and relevance to a contemporary iconography is placed in doubt. "Constancy", as Paolozzi later claimed, "is only skin deep understanding under specified conditions." The inclusion of *The Capitoline Venus* suggests that "perspective and history can be torn apart and reassembled" and that all cultures and all cultural levels are contingent.

Paolozzi combines *The Capitoline Venus* and a *Modern Marvels* cover page, not to suggest that one is of more value than the other, nor to suggest that one system of representation should replace the other. All of the images are presented with equal status and they operate and interact with each other to create questions about the categorical and exclusive use of source material. Paolozzi does not incorporate high art imagery in order to reject it but, rather, to question the exclusivity and insularity of those systems and hierarchies that refuse to acknowledge an entire range of cultural representations. In *What is the Sun?*, Paolozzi is firmly rejecting the notion that cultures are hermetically sealed entities that do not allow the passage of forms from each other.

Paolozzi's collages were informed by an anthropological approach that enabled all aspects of reality to be utilised, either directly or indirectly, as material for

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39 Eduardo Paolozzi, 'The ad images that inspire today's artists', p.11.
making art. Collages such as *Goering with Wings* (1941, Fig 58), *Has Jazz a Future?* (1944), *Fun Helped Them Fight* (1947, Fig. 59), *A New Brand of Brilliance* (1947, Fig. 60) and *What is the Sun?* reveal an openness towards all the manifestations of contemporary culture and the visual environment so that contrasting realities exist simultaneously. Just as Mass Observation and the photographs of Humphrey Spender had sought to provide an all encompassing account of life in Bolton, and just as Judith Henderson sought to document the Samuels family and Nigel the environment in which they lived, Paolozzi sought to record actual culture by using tangible signs extracted from that culture.

Whereas Mass Observation and Judith Henderson relied on written records, and Spender and Nigel Henderson the camera, Paolozzi sought to 'document' the everyday lives of ordinary people through an expansion of cultural references, that incorporated fragments and traces from those everyday lives.
He employs the ephemera of the world, allowing the material to speak for itself and in this sense his collages coincide with Mass Observation’s anthropology of ourselves. This is not to suggest that Paolozzi does not transform those fragments from the world of everyday life; for in re-positioning and recombining the images he produces new patterns of meaning. But, meaning in Paolozzi’s collages is cumulative. Each fragment contributes to the overall
synthesis of meaning, not through the exclusion of previous histories or meanings of individual fragments but, rather, by using the fragments in a way that they can exist independently of each other, while simultaneously engaging with each other. It is at this level that Paolozzi employs the fragments so that they retain the capacity to speak for themselves.

Between 1945 and June 1947, when Paolozzi left for Paris, his collages were dominated by images combining Classical Greek sculptures and technology. However, his interest in the relationship between man and technology extended beyond fashioning images of man as machine, or machine as man, to a broader concern with time and history. Paolozzi was certainly familiar with images of mechanistic man, for in *Minotaure* he had seen a reproduction of the *Young Writer* (c.1770, Fig. 61) constructed by Pierre Jacquet-Droz.40 This famous automaton, revered by the Surrealists for its ability to repeatedly write the word *merveilleux*, is depicted in *Minotaure*, not from the front as is customary.

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40 Benjamin Péret, 'Au Paradis des Fantomes,' *Minotaure*, Nos. 3-4, 14 December, 1933, p. 33.
but from the back, so that its mechanical devices are exposed. The collages in which Paolozzi combines images of Greek sculptures and technology initially appear to have much in common with Young Writer but the fact that Paolozzi consistently employs images of Greek sculptures, and invariably of Greek gods, suggests that his interests lie elsewhere.

All of the images of technology that Paolozzi selects for these collages depict pieces of machinery and technology that are connected to movement. Steam engines, internal combustion engines, large industrial fans and futuristic modes of transport are all concerned with propulsion, speed and motion and, most importantly, with moving through time and space. Similarly, a number of the images of Greek sculptures, that Paolozzi incorporates into his collages, are concerned with movement. For instance, Nike is thrusting forward in Nike des Paionios, Herakles is wrestling with Triton in Pedimental Groups in High Relief (1946). And Southern Siphian Frieze (1946) represents a battle scene. But, what is more important is that in the above works, and in works such as Head of Zeus (1946) and Head of Demeter (1946), Paolozzi selects images of Classical Greek gods while choosing to ignore images of ordinary Athenians.

By incorporating images of Greek gods, Paolozzi is alluding to the core of Ancient Greek life and the fundamental belief systems, around which Greek society and culture was structured and organised. Although the images of Greek gods appear to be widely separated by time and history from the contemporary images of technology, they are united by the fact that the images refer to the absolutely fundamental features that inform the structure and organisation of each epoch. Just as technology is vital to the fabric of twentieth century life and society, so, too, the Greek gods in Ancient Greece. Both the gods and technology constitute a driving force within their respective societies
and it is for this reason that Paolozzi selects images of technology that relate to propulsion and movement.

Fig. 62. Eduardo Paolozzi, *Automobile Head*, 1954.

In these early collages, Paolozzi was not primarily concerned with rendering man in the image of machine, or machine in the image of man. This did not become a key concern until the fifties in collage sculptures such as *Robot* (1956) and screenprints such as *Automobile Head* (1954, Fig. 62) in which automobile parts are arranged to form the shape of a head that bears an uncanny resemblance to the map of Scotland. Rather, between 1945 and 1947, he was chiefly concerned with isolating those aspects of experience that underpinned man's engagement with the environment. Thus, Paolozzi is employing images
of technology to suggest that technology plays as significant a role in twentieth century life as the Ancient Greek gods had centuries before. In so doing, he is advocating that images of technology be accorded a similar role in contemporary art to that accorded to images of Greek gods in Ancient Greece.

In June 1947, Paolozzi left London for Paris, where he remained for a little over two years. Upon his arrival, he abandoned the images of Classicism, choosing, instead, to concentrate on images drawn from the contemporary environment. In Paris, Paolozzi gained access to a wide variety of recent American magazines that provided him with a rich source of new collage materials: images of American film stars, glossy advertisements for packaged and fresh food, drinks, cigarettes and kitchen appliances, images from Beautiful Home and Ladies' Home Journal, American cars and aeroplanes, comic strips and pin-up girls. The best known collages of this period are the Bunk collages, a collection of forty-five works that he used as the basis of his Bunk lecture at the founding meeting of the Independent Group at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1952.

In art historical accounts of Paolozzi's work the Bunk collages are often treated in isolation from Paolozzi's previous collage work and are considered in terms of the subsequent impact they had on the newly established Independent Group. Frank Whitford's approach is typical. In a catalogue essay he writes:

The images on the following pages are some of those which Paolozzi projected on to a screen at the now famous first meeting of the Independent Group at the ICA in 1952. It was the first time pulp imagery had been talked about in a serious vein and in public, and in view of the later development of Independent Group ideas, their importance can scarcely be exaggerated.41

In other accounts, emphasis is placed on the fact that these collages, for instance, *Real Gold* (1949, Fig. 63), *Meet the People* (1948, Fig. 64) and *I was a Rich Man's Plaything* (1949), consist almost entirely of American mass media images and, as such, they "provided a direct window into the postwar United States - an unbelievably lush consumer world from the transatlantic view of one living in a Europe still on 'short rations.'"42 This approach is particularly common since it allows the Bunk collages to be positioned in terms of what Lawrence Alloway referred to as "the aesthetics of plenty". In Alloway's 1959 essay 'The Long Front of Culture', he urged that all forms of culture be regarded as equally valid and significant.

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The abundance of twentieth-century communications is an embarrassment to the traditionally educated custodian of culture. The aesthetics of plenty oppose a very strong tradition which dramatizes the arts as the possession of an elite. These 'keepers of the flame' master a central (not too large) body of cultural knowledge, mediate on it, and pass it on intact (possibly a little enlarged) to the children of the elite...Acceptance of the mass media entails a shift in our notion of what culture is. Instead of reserving the word for the highest artifacts and the noblest thoughts of history's top ten, it needs to be used more widely as the description of what a society does. Then, unique oil paintings and highly personal poems as well as mass-distributed films and group-magazines can be placed within a continuum rather than frozen in layers in pyramid.

Acceptance of the media on some such basis, as entries in a descriptive account of a society's communication system, is related to modern arrangements of knowledge in non-hierarchic forms. This is shown by the influence of anthropology and sociology on the humanities...Sociology, observant and 'cross-sectional' in method, extends the recognition of meaningful pattern beyond sonnet-from and Georgian-elevations to newspapers, crowd behaviour, personal
gestures. Techniques are now available...for recognising in 'low' places the patterns and interconnections of human acts which were once confined to the fine arts. The mass media are crucial in this general extension of interpretation outwards from the museum and library into the crowded world.43

Mass Observation had recognised this long before Alloway penned his article in 1959. Indeed, to turn from this passage to the 'collaged' material in Mass Observation's 1937 publication May 12, or to Humphrey Jennings' 1939 film Spare Time, with its comic books, pop songs and posters, set against the industrial landscape of South Lancashire, is to recognise a similar mode of approach to the relationship between culture, knowledge and society.

Alloway’s optimistic vision is one which embraced all forms of culture, and in regarding all manifestations of contemporary culture as being of equal status, hierarchical arrangements of knowledge become destabilised. Alloway's call for an expanded notion of culture is underpinned by the belief that shifting the very basis of what constitutes 'cultural knowledge' will lead to 'modern arrangements of knowledge in non-hierarchic forms.' In advocating 'the recognition of meaningful pattern beyond sonnet-form and Georgian-elevations to newspapers, crowd behaviour and personal gestures', Alloway is calling for a democratisation of knowledge. So too with Mass Observation when they sought to investigate the "Behaviour of people at war memorials", the "shouts and gestures of motorists", "the aspidistra cult" and "beards, armpits and eyebrows".44 And, in seeking to generate more democratic forms of knowledge, there is an implicit concern and regard for the reader who is able to appropriate and reshape meaning according to their individual and collective needs. Information, whether it be written, photographed or collaged, is

arranged to ensure the active and imaginative participation on the part of the reader. It is this attitude towards making art that is firmly established in Paolozzi's collages by the time he leaves for Paris in mid 1947.

The most striking difference between the collages Paolozzi produced in London and those produced in Paris is their subject matter. Images of Fred Astaire, Bing Crosby and Ava Gardner, advertisements for Coca Cola, Camel and Spam, for Studebakers and Lincoln Zephyrs, and images of lipsticks, refrigerators, toasters and electric irons are plentiful in the Bunk collages. But, to argue that the subject matter of the Bunk collages heralded a shift in Paolozzi's practice is to overlook the fundamental informing principle of his collages. This is that, in all of his collage work, Paolozzi is producing a visual experience in a way that parallels our everyday engagement is close to the manner in which a multitude of disparate images bombard us in everyday life. This is not to suggest that the Bunk collages are not significant but, rather, that in emphasising their Americanness and the idea that these collages reveal a very different existence to that experienced in post-war Britain, other relations tend to become obscured.

Paolozzi frequently alludes to these other relations when speaking about the Bunk collages. For example, in an interview with Jürgen Jacob in 1979 Paolozzi states:

...at that time I was in love with the "American way of life", we all were really. We were looking at it like an anthropologist looks at things but with different eyes to an American...These collages are made by someone who has never been there. We were all very poor and so I think that even an ice box was exotic. Nobody had been to America and we felt like people who were all living in a kind of ghetto, a cultural ghetto, outsiders.45

Comments of this kind have frequently been used by art historians to stress that collages such as Cory Coffee (1948, Fig. 65), Your Physique (1947, Fig. 66) and Alive with Innovations (1949) reveal an abundance that stood in stark contrast to the impoverishment of post-war Britain. While there is no doubt that in post-war Britain, America did appear exotic, in focussing on this issue the very processes that Paolozzi used to make art and the way that he employed his materials, tends to be overwhelmed by discussion of subject matter. What is important about these images, in addition to the fact that they reveal a ‘way of life’ that was very different to that being experienced in Britain, is that the images of food and cars, of pin-up girls and American film stars, retain their vitality and appeal precisely because Paolozzi looks and sees with the eyes of an anthropologist.

In speaking about his Bunk collages in 1973 Paolozzi stated:
Each image is a kind of metaphor for an experience...It's a ready-made process, as I say, and the dilemma that the artist has...is that very often these readymade metaphors seem to act much better than actually trying to draw the life experience, or convert it...There was a sort of idea...that there were other valid considerations about art besides the aesthetic ones; and that these were basically in kind sociological, almost anthropological, if you like.46

Paolozzi's strategies echo those of Mass Observation in that both allow experience to be conveyed in a way that has the vitality and autonomy of direct speech. Both Paolozzi and Mass Observation use extracts from the everyday world, stocks of reality that retain their integrity, and bring them together to engage with the immediate world and to challenge the active imagination and associative capacity of the reader. Paolozzi's collage, Evadne in Green Dimension (c.1952, Fig. 67), is illustrative of his approach.

Here, Paolozzi employs an image of a modern day Titan, the bodybuilder Charles Atlas. Atlas does not hold up the ancient pillars of the universe, as the mythological hero Titan did; rather, he uses his raised right hand to support an American car, a Kaiser that carries a number of occupants. Paolozzi has taken the Atlas figure from a 1936 American magazine and he has retained the word 'Bunk!' in the same position as it appeared in the original advertisement. Beneath the word 'Bunk!' is a diagrammatic erect penis whose head just penetrates the left edges of the collage and immediately beneath the head of the penis is a highly suggestive spatter of murky, translucent, grey paint. Inside the bladder is a pin-up girl in typical pose and underneath the base of the penis are fragments of cut out images of three equally suggestive halved strawberries. This is a highly charged, virile and fecund collage.

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46 Eduardo Paolozzi interview with C. Hogben and E. Bailey, 'About the prints, the artist talking at an interview', Eduardo Paolozzi, Bunk, n.p.
The spermatic form charging towards a small blotch of red paint underneath the scrotum, the semen-like leakage beneath the head of the penis, the large bloody red spot of paint between the woman in the bladder and Atlas, and the sliced vaginal-like strawberries, combine to convey a sexual encounter. However, Paolozzi adds a final twist. The image of the penis is made up of a spinal cord, a cerebellum and a brain case, in which sits the image of the pin-up girl. Thus, the brain and penis are forged into a union and become one. With a tremendous sense of humour, for the conflation of the brain and penis does give rise to several sexual puns, Paolozzi merges two sites of production.

The facts, as it were, speak for themselves.
To understand the advertisements which appear in the *New Yorker* or *Gentry* one must have taken a course in Dublin literature, read a *Time* popularizing article on Cybernetics and to have majored in Higher Chinese Philosophy and Cosmetics. Such ads are packed with information - data of a way of life and a standard of living which they are simultaneously inventing and documenting. Ads which do not try to sell you the product except as a natural accessory of a way of life. They are good 'images' and their technical virtuosity is almost magical. Many have involved as much effort for one page as goes into the building of a coffee-bar. And this transient thing is making a bigger contribution to our visual climate than any of the traditional fine arts...

Mass production advertising is establishing our whole pattern of life - principles, morals, aims, aspirations, and standard of living. We must somehow get the measure of this intervention if we are to match its powerful and exciting impulses with our own.¹

One of the more remarkable aspects of this statement is that it would cause little surprise if one discovered that it had been written in the thirties by Tom Harrisson. In fact, this frequently cited passage was written by Alison and Peter Smithson in 1959, some twenty years after Mass Observation had been propelled into existence out of a fascination with the role of the mass media in everyday lives. The Smithson's appeal for a widespread critical engagement with the mass media is revealing. It serves to remind us that, at the period of heightened interest in the relationship between the mass media and the broader cultural climate, an awareness of any previous interest in these relationships was considerably limited. The same cannot be said for the early work of Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi. Although their work may have appeared radical to members of the Independent Group it is less likely that Harrisson, Madge and Jennings would have found it as challenging or as innovative as those who attended Paolozzi's 'Bunk' lecture in April 1952.

¹ Alison and Peter Smithson, 'But Today we collect Ads', *Ark*, No. 18, November 1957, pp. 49-50.
Mass Observation posed radical questions about the representation of everyday life. Their explicit attempts to let the people speak for themselves, the unsystematic reporting procedures used, the eclecticism of topics surveyed, and, their self-conscious concern for the very means by which knowledge is generated and shaped by the forms of presentation, finds its parallel in Henderson’s photographs and in the early collages of Paolozzi. Mass Observation’s anthropological concern with the logic of lived experience necessarily entailed an understanding of documentation as letting the people speak. It sought to provide an alternative to a developing consumerism of communication forms and to restore complexity to social processes by articulating the efforts of the anonymous to speak for themselves. No experience was privileged; all was equally relevant in the sense that the movement was premised upon acceptance of a fundamental equality in contribution. In a similar vein, the early endeavours of Henderson and Paolozzi were characterized by a fascination with the whole of the visual environment. They too were concerned with arranging material in a non-hierarchical way so that snapshots of information and facts from everyday lived experience could collide and give rise to new alternative realities. This fragmented, non-linear approach to collating knowledge ensures a self-determining and liberating role for the reader since they are forced to engage with the constantly shifting flow of material and establish meaning for themselves. Paolozzi’s refusal to speak at the ‘Bunk’ lecture reveals a commitment to the egalitarian vision inherent in Mass Observation.
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