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NEW WRITING

Out of Birmingham: Towards a More Peripatetic Cultural Studies (A Writing Experiment)¹

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Abstract

This piece of writing is an experiment in digressive and peripatetic cultural studies that follows a thought path around the city of Birmingham in England. Instead of constructing an argument it tries to perform a mode of enquiry that could be sensitive to the 'simultaneous non-synchronicity' of culture, and could craft a form of writing adequate to history's torn and crumpled state. It doesn't try to claim preferential treatment for such a practice, merely a marginal place for such a practice within cultural studies.

Keywords

Peripatetic; Birmingham; poetics; Serres

¹ *The author has added this parenthetical supplement in the vain hope of protecting himself from the kind of criticism that he too would probably make of this piece of writing: Isn't it overly-meandering, pretentious and self-indulgent? When adding it he thought that perhaps academic writing would benefit from the sort of distinctions that Graeme Greene made between those of his novels that were 'entertainments' and others which were 'serious'. But rather than this either/or coding he liked to imagine an elaborate taxonomy of scholarly genres that would offer readers a plethora of critical moods to inhabit.*

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Preamble

The world unfolds itself to us inadvertently. Its random disclosures suggest that happenstance could well be a realist methodology for our lively and unfinishable worlds. In these empirical worlds, insipient forms emerge out of unnoticed and unremarkable materials; they emerge out of something that a minute ago seemed completely in the grip of convention. What yesterday had so much potential today seems to be mere cant. What yesterday looked so unpromising is today revealing untapped possibilities. Serendipity rather than strategic planning constitutes a workable methodology.²

In responding to the on-going and unfinishable characteristics of the world, would it seem odd that intellectual life, as it is supported and hedged-in by the academy, insisted on values that wholeheartedly point to a world that had been stilled, often stifled? What does it mean to promote institutional values that insist on championing rigidity rather than flexibility, thoroughness rather than nimbleness, rigour rather than vigour? And what would that intellectual world look like if nimbleness and flexibility were its ascendant values?

If nimbleness and flexibility were the ascendant values perhaps the role of 'theory' would change from offering maps of a finished world to acting as a form of para-literature.³ Instead of offering us interpretative paradigms that could be filled-in with suitable materials, theory's role would be to act on us in the same way that literary forms often act on us. Theory, as para-literature, would offer forms for sensitising us to the world in particular ways; ways that activated our sensoria as much as our reason, alerting us to alterations in atmosphere and mood, to changes in sensation and habits. The sensitising properties of theory was something the scientist Louis Pasteur recognised when he claimed that 'in the field of observation, chance only favours the prepared mind': theory (along with artworks, films, literature, music and other encounters) prepares the mind, but it can also prepare perceptions, sharpen senses, and quicken responses to atmospheres and moods. (Which is not to say that there couldn't also be theory, artworks, films and so on that do the opposite: deaden senses, dull perception, and lower responsiveness.)

In what follows I want to pursue one simple procedure: the foregrounding of the detour or the digression.⁴ Perhaps one of the most 'sensitising' elements that academia produces is the finished argument (as book, as essay, as paper). This is our productivity, our product. As a sensitising 'event'

2 Robert K. Merton and Elinor Barber's *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity: A Study in Sociological Semantics and the Sociology of Science*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004, offers an endlessly generative historical discussion of serendipity. It also refers to the made-up word 'serendipper', which might be the name for a particular kind of cultural studies enquirer. The book wasn't published in English until 2004 (there had been an earlier version in Italian) though the manuscript was finished in 1958. I learnt of Merton and Barber's book from a yet unpublished manuscript by Derek Sayer, 'Making Trouble: Notes on Surrealism and Sociology' (personal correspondence) which is also keen to promote the generativity of serendipity for the social sciences.

3 Which has long been the position of many defenders of theory as well as many theorists. In 1980 the art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss framed a defence of poststructuralism in these terms, namely that it was being read as much as literature as a logically defensible method or theoretical exposition; Rosalind Krauss, 'Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary', *October*, vol. 13, 1980, pp. 36–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397700>

4 Initially the author was going to write about 'ordinary walking' (going to the shops rather than the more elaborate forms of flânerie like the psychogeographical *dérive*). There were going to be three walks, including one that was a dream. The problem with the walks, he felt, was that they just didn't go anywhere. Focusing his ruminations on one city (Birmingham, a city that already had a historical link with the disciplinary world [cultural studies] that he hopes might host his writing) felt more focused. Now he feels he could concentrate on going nowhere, via an essay that is a series of detours limited to one place. Even when he tries to struggle free from the grip of 'rigour', something pulls him back: here it is the question of how to be systematically unsystematic, how to find a form for formlessness.

it has specific repercussions; it encourages us⁵ to search out an angle for 'our' intervention; we seek out 'our' specific contribution to knowledge; we look for 'our' original analysis and opinion. In a busy market we learn to identify our 'unique selling proposition', even if it is wrapped-up in a language of cultural politics and ethical engagement. Does it make us less sensitive to other qualities: to the atmospheres emanating from the objects we try and attend to; does it make us less amenable to the fussy business of trying to find an adjective that might momentarily reveal another aspect of a situation; does it make us less patient about the endless false starts and prevarications that writing seems to require?⁶

What would a cultural studies look like that made space for failure, for work that meandered, for work that over-reached itself? Could there be a form of cultural studies that was able to 'show its workings', as they used to say in maths lessons.⁷ Perhaps cultural studies would benefit from rougher work, from work that was more like a sketch-book than a finished painting, for work that was frayed, patched, and even threadbare in places.⁸

Amble: Birmingham

1782

Without more ado then I asked the way to Derby and got out of Birmingham almost as soon as I had reached it, so I can tell you nothing of this famous city of factories and organized industry.⁹

1933

In the midst of a russet solitude, we came upon a notice board saying, *This is the City of Birmingham*. There was nothing in sight but hedgerows, glittering fields and the mist of the autumn morning. For a moment I entertained a wild hope that this really was the City of Birmingham, that the town had been pulled down and carted away. Not that Birmingham had ever done anything to me. I had never been there; this was

5 The author may be hedging his bets by saying 'encourages us': he is holding back from words like 'inculcation' and the tacit pedagogy of the exempla. But why hold back when he knows that the procedures for such production are institutionalised in graduate schools and are the bases for evaluating doctoral scholarship, or peer-reviewed journal articles?

6 At this point the author recognises the circularity of his critique: expending energy on description and being attentive to atmospheres could easily be just another 'unique selling proposition'. To mobilise such a critique is to ineffectually point to a general complicity in 'marketisation' that implicates us all.

7 I think a case could be made to suggest that Roland Barthes, especially in the books *A Lover's Discourse*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1979, and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1977, takes 'showing your workings' to be his main rhetorical practice.

8 The author still toys with the idea of a 'little' magazine that would include book reviews of books that hadn't been written but could be imagined, obituaries of people who hadn't lived (but should have), and so on. It could also be a place where the little thought pictures that live among the footnotes of 'big' scholarship are given space to roam. Perhaps it could also house those beautifully crafted funding applications that never get chosen. The project is full of contradictions: it seems to love the incidental, to find a space for the minor, and yet its overarching logic is 'let nothing go to waste!'

9 Carl Philip Moritz, *Journeys of a German in England: A Walking Tour of England in 1782*, Eland, London, 1983, p. 146.

my first visit. I knew very little about it. The little I did know, however, was not in its favour.¹⁰

1964

In our day, Birmingham was still very prosperous, chiefly from the flourishing motor-car industry and its ancillaries. In spite of this it behaved, collectively and publicly, very nervously, like a bruiser with an exceptionally thin skin. No wonder that from the Sixties and onwards it has bred one of the most active ranges of alternative styles of living, voluntary bodies out to pierce air-holes in the great thick carapace, immigrant styles second only to London in their variety, a semi-Bohemian student quarter, and inner-city 'villages' which insist on their differences, their reality and distinction.¹¹

1983

First thing this morning we walked through the centre of Birmingham and then drove round it. Both journeys were equally depressing and the car ride frightening ... An elderly couple, clinging to each other, stood marooned on the pavement beneath the massive bulk of a multi-storey car park. They were trying to cross the road but they were on a corner and the traffic swept round and round without ceasing. We walked through the underground tunnel and onto escalators. There were hundreds of us, black, white, yellow, brown, a multifarious army riding up from the gates of hell to be spewed out into the heavenly halls of the shopping precinct.¹²

1996

Only the English Tourist Board really tries to make people believe that Birmingham is the Heart of England.¹³

Birmingham confession

Like many of my generation (I was born the same year *The Long Revolution* was first published, 1961) I came to cultural studies obliquely. I first heard the strains of cultural studies in the scratchy, stuttering guitars of post-punk; in the looping, lolling bass lines of punky-reggae; and in the expansive clattering of jazz drumming. It made contact with me through the lyrics of the first incarnation of the band Scritti Politti, and through the confrontational rhymes of The Last Poets (conveyed via groups like The Pop Group, The Slits and Rip, Rig and Panic). I felt its seductions in the hedonistic inundations of the writing of late Roland Barthes and in the 'wild' investigations of feminist art (Susan Hiller, Mary Kelly and Helen Chadwick).

10 J.B. Priestley, *English Journey: Being a Rambling but Truthful Account of what one Man saw and Heard and Felt and Thought during a Journey through England During the Autumn of the Year 1933*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, p. 78.

11 Richard Hoggart, *An Imagined Life: Life and Times 1959–1991*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 87.

12 Beryl Bainbridge, *English Journey, or the Road to Milton Keynes*, British Broadcasting Corporation and Gerald Duckworth and Co, London, 1984, p. 58.

13 Charlotte Brunson, 'A Thief in the Night: Stories of Feminism in the 1970s at CCCS', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 276.

I heard its prairie howl when I saw Patti Smith perform on TV (where, by the end of the performance, her guitar had only one string still attached).

For those, like me, who hated school, who didn't do 'A' levels, who were bored of being on the dole and who didn't want the sorts of jobs that seemed most available (restaurant and bar work or low-level civic administration), art schools were a godsend. In the 1970s and 1980s they were free, they were ubiquitous (every small town had one) and they didn't require much in the way of qualifications (you could start off with four Certificates of Secondary Education, and as I'd been to posh school, I had certificates to spare).¹⁴ And if you didn't do 'A' levels, art school was five years of 'time out' (two years of foundation, three years of undergraduate degree). Art school wasn't so much an education as a form of osmosis: you met people who told you about what films to see, records to listen, books to read. Art school made those resources available. You picked up names along the way: they supplemented core reading (*The New Musical Express*) and core listening (the John Peel show, weekdays 10pm to midnight).¹⁵ Art school was anti-academia; it was a bizarre contradiction—it was an institution dedicated to the obliteration of administrative reason. Or that's how it felt as a student.

I fell into being an academic incrementally and incidentally, primarily because I enjoyed the company of the names I was picking up and because I hated the idea of relegating such contact to my 'spare time'. Postgraduate education introduced me to a world where quoting lyrics from The Fall was, for some reason, no longer an acceptable citation practice. It was a world of discipline and professionalism. It was a whole different ballgame. I liked some of the discipline (it spoke to my inner-librarian) and I liked the tensile ambition of postgraduate work. My first professional conference nearly killed me with embarrassment; I was totally unprepared for the sort of critical hostility that can circulate at such events and I became aggressively defensive in turn. I ran out of the room in abject misery, upset with myself, raw and ready to throw in the towel. Today I have to take beta-blockers before I can talk at a conference.

I studied for a PhD at the same time as teaching cultural studies full time. This was a different cultural studies. It had a history, a location: it wasn't the name for a wail of inchoate energy. And that history and location came with a proper name: Birmingham. It was mythic space, mythic time, and it wasn't mine. Birmingham was the name of a superego, of a propriety that surrounds cultural studies. My attachments to it are deeply ambivalent. It inspires me, it goads me. I hate it, I love it: it isn't mine. I don't match-up. It is a clerisy where laws were passed, sacred texts produced. I feel it as a machine for producing radicalism as a competitive form. I meet it, not head on, but as a distorted and discordant echo. And I know it isn't Birmingham, but an imaginary formation, propagated across an academia that had turned 'critique' into a form of one-up-manship where it was preferable to be against something (anything) than to champion it.

14 For more on art schools in England and Wales see John Beck and Matthew Cornford, 'The Art School in Ruins', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2012, pp. 58–83. DOI 10.1177/1470412911430467. 'Like the mills, factories, cinemas and other defunct places of work and leisure ripe for asset-stripping during the long "boom" from the mid-1990s to 2007, the purpose-built art school has long since disappeared from British town centres as a functioning proposition' [p. 60]. Beck and Cornford's article includes photographs of defunct art schools. For a London-centric account of art schools see Nigel Llewellyn (ed.), *The London Art School: Reforming the World, 1960 to Now*, Tate Publishing, London, 2015.

15 For a history of the *NME* see Pat Long, *The History of the NME: High Times and Low Lives at the World's Most Famous Music Magazine*, Portico, London, 2012. On John Peel see David Cavanagh, *Good Night and Good Riddance: How Thirty-Five Years of John Peel Helped to Shape Modern Life*, Faber & Faber, London, 2015. Cavanagh's book is an account of hundreds of Peels radio shows (265 to be precise) and each account begins by juxtaposing playlists with contemporary news headlines. There is a website dedicated to Peel's extensive record collection and archive: <http://www.johnpeelarchive.com/>.

I talk a different language now. Words that would have stuck in my throat when starting out, now trip off my tongue and seem the least offensive words in a vocabulary that appears to be irreparably damaged by an audit culture where administrative reason won out. I remember meeting someone in the early 1990s at a conference in the North American mid west who was having a hard time as a junior professor at a university and said to me ‘I want to be valued for my scholarship’. All I could think was: why would you want to sound so utterly square? I had a PhD and I couldn’t stand to think that what I did was ‘research’. Now ‘scholarship’ and ‘research’ suggest values worth supporting at a time when instrumental forces want to measure them for their financial and social impact. I know such instrumentality had killed cultural studies at Birmingham.

Another Birmingham

I like listening to people recount their days at the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), especially when it goes against the grain of how I imagined it to have been. I like to hear tales of the machinery of ‘cultural studies’, particularly about the Gestetner mimeograph copier, which allowed students to share in the excitement of publishing.¹⁶ I like to think of this mimeograph machine gathering together dispersed and incipient energies and sending them out far and wide. I like to hear about those projects that never became part of the ‘brand identity’ of Cultural Studies in the United Kingdom: the work on the meaning of the Loch Ness Monster; the studies of local churches; and the ethnography of the Scouts movement.¹⁷ In the late 1990s a colleague retired and I inherited her copy of the first edition of *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (Spring 1971). The spine had totally disintegrated and it was held together with a plastic clasp. I liked the fact it was printed on light blue paper with dark blue ink for the text and the photographs. It made the CCCS seem much more eccentric than the image I had received.

Recently another side of the CCCS’s project has emerged that potentially makes visible a host of connections between the CCCS and investigative cultural projects that occurred before the CCCS existed, and during and after its heyday. Janet Mendelsohn, a postgraduate student working at the CCCS between 1967 and 1969 took over three thousand photographs of the Balsall Heath area of Birmingham. Balsall Heath is a working-class enclave of Birmingham that holds a large concentration of Muslims mainly

16 My mother was a secretary in a large office and during school holidays I got to hang out among mimeograph machines and carbon paper: I know the smell, tang and feel of a ‘stencilled paper’. My colleague and friend Janice Winship (who was part of the CCCS in the 1970s) has been my main supplier of CCCS anecdotes. For further information about the CCCS as informal publishers see Ted Striphas and Mark Hayward, ‘Working Papers in Cultural Studies, or, the Virtues of Grey Literature’, *New Formations*, no. 78, 2013, pp. 102–16. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.78.05.2013> For recent historical work on CCCS see Kieran Connell and Matthew Hilton, ‘The Working Practices of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’, *Social History*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2015, pp. 287–311. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2015.1043191> Work by Connell and Hilton is the outcome of a large historical project on the CCCS, see <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/historycultures/departments/history/research/projects/cccs/index.aspx>.

17 See for instance Roger Grimshaw and Paul Lester’s pamphlet, *The Meaning of the Loch Ness Monster*, University of Birmingham, Centre for Cultural Studies, 1976. Work on scouting is included in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, Hutchinson, London, 1980. CCCS work in history (history of domestic service, cultural memory, Marxist historiography, and so on) as well as work on education and its histories were also never quite incorporated into the main CCCS image.

because Muslim pioneers in the 1940s founded the first mosque in Birmingham there. Today the area is known for the so-called ‘Balti Triangle’ of restaurants serving various versions of cuisines from the subcontinent. In the 1960s it was primarily known for prostitution and was the ‘red light district’ of Birmingham.

Janet Mendelsohn’s photographs detail a complex community and a neighbourhood in transition. Many of the photographs show ‘mixed-race’ couples posing for the camera, and the interiors of cafes and bars demonstrating the lively convivial culture made by various ‘Commonwealth’ communities. Other images show Balsall Heath as an environment of closed-down shops, derelict houses and areas of waste-ground (are these bombsites from World War II or the beginnings of slum clearances—who can tell?) A large number photographs feature Kathleen, a prostitute with whom Mendelsohn developed a close relationship. The photographs depict Kathleen’s everyday life (childcare, shopping and so on) and the life of the particular street where she lived and worked (Varna Road, since demolished). Like all the other streets in Balsall Heath it is multicultural (before that name was coined), impoverished and ‘of interest’ to outsiders in the shape of curb crawlers, sociologists, photo-journalists and cultural studies students.¹⁸ Mendelsohn was taking her photographs at exactly the same time Enoch Powell gave his infamous ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in Birmingham city centre (the speech predicted a bloody catastrophe unless Commonwealth ‘immigrants’ were repatriated).

Neither the photo-essay (and its various cognates) nor long-form descriptive journalism are seen as central genres of cultural studies’ working practice. They should be. Cultural studies as a ‘pattern of feeling’ emerges not just from the energies of the New Left, but from a wide range of previous examples of engaged cultural work—often coming from long-form journalism and innovations in documentary film. Mendelsohn’s photographs are understandable within a tradition of documentary photography but also within an engaged history of critical journalism that would include the work of George Orwell (*The Road to Wigan Pier*, *Homage to Catalonia* and *Down and Out in Paris and London*) and Siegfried Kracauer (*The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*).¹⁹ But they are also understandable looking forward to film and photographic practices that emerged in the late 1970s and into the 1980s.²⁰ The reinvention of the poetics of documentary film and photography was one of the ways cultural studies revealed its

18 Janet Mendelsohn’s photographs can be found here, <https://ikon-gallery.org/event/janet-mendelsohn/>, or by searching her name under images on the internet. A catalogue of her photographs has recently been published as Janet Mendelsohn, *Varna Road*, Ikon, Birmingham, 2016. This catalogue includes essays by Kieran Connell and Matthew Hilton, ‘Janet Mendelsohn, Cultural Studies and the Social “Conjuncture”’, pp. 10–14, and Val Williams, ‘Janet and Kathleen: 1967–69’ pp. 60–5. Kieran Connell kindly allowed me to read a draft of his essay ‘Race, Prostitution and the New Left: The Post-war Inner City through Janet Mendelsohn’s “Social Eye”’, which is forthcoming from *History Workshop Journal*.

19 George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1962 [first published 1937]; *Homage to Catalonia*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2003 [first published 1938] and *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2003 [first published 1933]. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans Quintin Hoare, Verso, London, 1998 [first published 1930]. This short list of course could be vastly expanded.

20 I think that the first time I met cultural studies ‘head on’ was in an interview with the photographic artist Victor Burgin in the magazine *Block* that a friend lent me in 1982; Tony Godfrey, ‘Sex, Text, Politics: An Interview with Victor Burgin’, *Block*, no. 7, 1982, pp. 2–26. I started my degree in fine art the following year.

presence in art schools and art practices at this time.²¹ And perhaps the high point of this reinvention was the way a distinct Black aesthetic emerged in film and photography (and other art forms) at this point.²² One film, more than any other, established the ambition for reimagining a documentary tradition, and that was *Handsworth Song* (1986, directed by John Akomfrah, written and produced by the Black Audio Film Collective). The film was based around the civil disturbances that had been taking place in the Handsworth district of Birmingham (where a sizeable proportion of young British Caribbean people lived). But this was nothing like other documentaries of the time and deployed a montage poetics that was disruptive of time and place and deeply melancholic:

In the aftermath of the protests in Handsworth, the film inhabits a different order of things: it is as much about elsewhere as about Britain. That elsewhere in the broader post-colonial world. This feeling of disjuncture is reflected not only in jump cuts of the film's narrative discontinuity—moving between archival photographs, newsreel fragments, media reportage, and on-site interviews—it is also deeply anchored by the sombre aural pulse, the disjunctive syncopation of the snare drum beat, the mournful reverb of the dub score that sustains a quiet rage.²³

It is nearly fifty years since Mendelsohn photographed Balsall Heath and a lot has changed of course. Some of the houses and roads have been demolished as part of a slum clearance that took effect right at the end of 1960s (probably just months after Mendelsohn returned to the United States). Other houses (many of which didn't have hot water or an indoor toilet in the 1980s) have since been modernised. The landscape of prostitution has fundamentally changed. What is left from Janet Mendelsohn's time includes an archive of photographs that in 2014 were donated to the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham as part of the fiftieth anniversary of the CCCS and as material for a historical research project on the CCCS. Many examples of her photographs were shown at the Ikon Gallery (a former board school established in 1877 to teach primary school children free of the influence of the church) in Birmingham between 27 January and 3 April 2016.

21 *The author has always felt that the formation 'British cultural studies' could never adequately be grasped unless the place of British tertiary art school education and community art organisations were also taken into consideration. Cultural studies, though, didn't enter the art school 'out of nowhere'. It met an already primed, already sensitised intellectual and affective community. This was a community who also felt that attention should be paid to 'juke box culture', but with less puritanism than you find in Hoggart. It was also a community whose idea of cultural studies work didn't necessarily result in academic monographs and peer-reviewed articles.*

22 There is a growing literature investigating this period of cultural production. See Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar (eds), *The Ghosts of Songs: The Art of the Black Audio Film Collective 1982–1998*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2007; Kobena Mercer, *Travel and See: Black Diaspora Art Practices since the 1980s*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2016; and David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce (eds), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005. Film and photography as an engaged practice of cultural politics was also massively influenced by the journal *Screen*. The relationship between cultural studies at Birmingham and *Screen* (whose institutional home at the time was the British Film Institute's education department rather than a university) remains to be detailed. It is clear that there was a strong cultural studies proclivity within *Screen* (taking cultural studies to be a broad set of interests and concerns) before the CCCS was established.

23 Okwui Enwezor, 'Coalition Building: Black Audio Film Collective and Transnational Post-Colonialism', in *The Ghosts of Songs*, ed. Eshun and Sagar, p. 120. The film was the subject of a heated exchange in *The Guardian* newspaper between the novelist Salman Rushdie, the academic Stuart Hall and the black activist Darcus Howe. The debate is reprinted in James Proctor (ed.), *Writing Black Britain 1948–1998*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, pp. 261–5.

Birmingham's Brutalism

I travel to Birmingham to meet an American friend who is briefly in the United Kingdom.²⁴ We meet at the Ikon Gallery. After lunch I want to visit the 'old' library, the one that was opened in 1974 and was closed in 2013. It is funny to think of a building in the United Kingdom as being 'old' when it was built when I was a teenager. A version of the recent past is being systematically erased from our memories. Whole neighbourhoods that were built in the 1960s have been demolished before they even reached forty years old. Meanwhile we preserve much older buildings that fit with ideas of what is pleasing, humane and so on. What does it mean for large civic buildings to have a lifespan of a mere forty years? I have been writing a book on 'Brutalism' and everyone tells me to go and look at the library before it disappears.²⁵ Birmingham central library (the 'old' library) is said to be a stunning example of Brutalism.

To get to it from the Ikon Gallery you have to walk past the new library (now called 'the Library of Birmingham'). It has a fleeting look to it: like some of the spectacular architecture that is produced for World's Fairs, Olympic Games and other 'mega events'. It has the aesthetic ambitions of a concession stand; it wants to be memorable, noticeable, describable. And it succeeds. It is a stack of bright boxes with a motif of interlacing circles overlaying the whole thing. And it is these Spirograph decorations that you remember. The old Brutalist library is now, in the summer of 2015, a walkway that takes you from a shopping centre out into the main civic square in Birmingham. The old library has been totally gutted and exists as a skeletal behemoth from another era. It is strange walking through it in this derelict state; it feels like a giant sarcophagus, a vast carapace of glass and concrete shielding walkers from who knows what. It isn't until you get outside that you can really see its stature—an upside-down concrete ziggurat half buried in the ground.

Brutalism, of course, has a bad reputation. It seems to shout loud and proud that the architect's vision comes before anything so trivial as human needs. Brutalism, it would seem, is all about the architectural statement, all about an arrogant declaration of an avant-garde style. Brutalism communicated to other architects, never to a broad public. Or so the story goes. After years of wandering through the byways and thickets of the artistic milieu around Brutalism I have a very different sense of its aesthetic proclivities, of its sensibilities. Setting out to produce a 'rough poetry' it seems that its initial tendency was stringently against the grand statement, against the purism of modernism. There was also a side to it that feels simultaneously carnivalesque and religious. Or rather, it taps into the same pattern of feeling that Christianity and other religions borrowed from folk festivals and carnivals. Carnival days played with social hierarchies: the landowner played servant for the day; men dressed as women and women as men; humans dressed as animals; and the lowliest souls were made king and queen for the day. The story of Jesus as the son of god, riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey (instead of a magnificent chariot, say) wearing peasant garb (rather than royal robes) mines this tradition. It is bathos and pathos

24 There seems to be no way of making the United States or the United Kingdom adjectival.

25 *The author's book has been a long time in the making and even though it is with the publishers and has a contract he can't believe it will actually see the light of day. As with previous books he knows it will look as if he is riding the coat tails of fashion—modishly aping the zeitgeist. He likes to think of it as simply being 'determined'.*

combined. It brings the pretensions of the high and mighty down to earth, but with a glorification of dirt, of the low, of the despised.

Brutalism's love affair with raw concrete resonates with this sentiment. Untreated concrete, especially when you can see the imprint of the wooden shuttering that was used in its construction, is unloved and unlovely. To want to glorify it, unadorned, unpolished, ungarnished, is an act that is once humble and critical. It is also tender. What would a world look like that emerged from the one that had been wrecked by the evil that had been unleashed across Europe in the 1930s and 1940s?²⁶ Who knew how that world could be remade? Brutalism knew as little as anyone else. But what it did posit was that a new world would be built out of lowly materials, that the civic world would empathise with the lowly, with the base, with the common. The antithesis of Brutalism was the showy surface, the glittering prize, the world that thought it was something special. The old library in Birmingham had a humility and seriousness of purpose that tells of another time. Brutalism's humility and seriousness are misrecognised as arrogance. The old library didn't figure the transcendent qualities of 'poor' materials. Its feet were firmly on the ground. Rather it transfigured the civic world, bringing it back to earth, showing that it was made of clay.

Who is right and wrong? Who is mistaken? Faced with dank concrete, with an empty ziggurat, who is to say that public perception (framed by a snarling press that has no humility but an endless desire to humiliate) has got it wrong? Perhaps it isn't humble and tender at all? Perhaps it is arrogance, careerism, a spectacle of prestige? What sort of effort would be required to change perception, to alter the general aesthetic atmosphere such that the humility and tenderness of that building could be recognised? It is no small question. It is a pressing concern when people complain of wind turbines 'ruining' the landscape.

The final demolition of the old library was completed in February 2016. It is rubble now. Ashes to ashes, dirt to dirt. In the city, destruction is often the doorway through which history enters the stage.

Bombed Birmingham

Birmingham, like many other large cities in Britain, was heavily bombed during World War II. It was bombed because it had a large population (second only to London) and because it was a centre for the production of military aircrafts, vehicles and equipment (bombs, bullets and guns). Birmingham has always been the centre for car manufacturing in the United Kingdom and these factories were an obvious choice for re-purposing for the war effort. In the 1970s Birmingham was bombed again, but not from above. In November 1974 two city centre public houses were bombed (probably by the provisional IRA) resulting in twenty-one deaths. Six people were subsequently arrested and given life sentences. In 1991 their convictions were overturned as 'unsafe and unsatisfactory'.

²⁶ In the 1950s and 1960s it was easy for many people in Britain to find evil in the 'day before yesterday' of World War II. Others, with longer memories and a larger geographical purview, might see their evil in the long histories of colonial expansion and the forms of slavery and indenture that shaped the modern world. The history of postwar Britain is one where the story of vanquishing Nazi evil gradually establishes itself as a comforting nostalgia of 'Britain's finest hour', while the 'other story' is endlessly suppressed as a shameful 'skeleton' to be repressed and disavowed at every opportunity. The history of postwar Britain is also the story of the cost of that repression and disavowal, and the story of what it looks like when the repressed returns.

Jonathan Coe's 2001 novel *The Rotters' Club* is set in Birmingham, and the Birmingham Pub Bombing plays a key role in the narrative. But the event itself provides no thematic content. The novel is a comedy of manners. It tells the story of a group of boys at a grammar school in the mid 1970s. Two of the boys are good friends and their fathers are on different sides of a union dispute at the vast British Leyland car plant in Longbridge, Birmingham. Benjamin Trotter (known to his peers as 'Bent Rotter') is the novel's main protagonist and his father is a middle manager (in personnel) at British Leyland. His friend's dad is a very active shop steward. A third friend (whose father is a bus driver) is in a progressive rock band with Ben. Class and generation percolate across the narrative. Can a meritocratic education system make class an outmoded social phenomenon? A senior manager at British Leyland would like to think so:

Britain in the 1970s. The old distinctions just don't mean anything anymore, do they? This is a country where a union man and a junior manager—soon to be senior, Colin, I'm sure—can send their sons to the same school and nobody thinks anything of it. Both bright lads, both good enough to have got through the entrance exam, and now there they are: side by side in the cradle of learning. What does that tell you about the class war? It's over. Truce. Armistice.²⁷

The novel looks back at a teenager's experience of the 1970s from the perspective of a generation that follows (the children of Ben and his peers). We and they know what is coming. We and they know that union power becomes eroded and that a nationalised car industry will be dismantled and sold-off on the cheap. We and they know that the egalitarian aspirations of the postwar settlement will get traded-in for the grotesque pantomime of free market economics and the outsourcing of services. We and they know that punk rock will make the ambitions of 'prog-rock' appear bombastic and antediluvian. The novel also shows us the casual and not-so-casual racism of the 1970s (at school and in the workplace); the little humiliations of being a junior manager; the oppressive boredoms of the patriarchal family: social phenomena that will take on a different hue by the new millennia. The bombs of the Birmingham Pub Bombing, however, are not woven in to the lives of the characters in the novel apart from as a rupture, as an event whose past remains unacknowledged as a living history within which characters in Birmingham might move.

The Rotters' Club, as the title of the novel, sets various connotations in motion: it names the group around Bent Rotter (Ben Trotter); it names an actual album by the progressive rock band Hatfield and the North (from 1975, it was the band's second and last album); and it names, potentially at least, all sorts of 'rotters' who might be managers or workers, parents or children, the radical left or right. If Coe's novel is a state-of-the-nation novel, it configures the past 'state' not as a conjuncture, but as something much more unmanageable, much more ragged and unfathomable.²⁸ If the discipline of cultural studies asks us to study the conjuncture of active ingredients at work in the culture, to feel out the dominant moods, the emergent energies and ascendant values, then a novel like *The Rotters' Club* suggest a different mode of operation; a form of attention more sensitive to the wilful messiness and unpredictability of history.

²⁷ Jonathan Coe, *The Rotters' Club*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2002, p. 16.

²⁸ Today the most vociferous champion of cultural studies as 'conjunctural studies' is Lawrence Grossberg, see in particular his *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2010.

In his conversations with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres proposes an ‘anti-model’ of history based on the idea of a torn and crumpled handkerchief. In its newly washed and ironed state, the handkerchief can map out various proximities of historical durations and unfolding events and processes. But the actuality of living time is much closer to a torn and crumpled handkerchief where unexpected clashes are found and where non-synchronous durations find themselves proximate: ‘Time is paradoxical; it folds or twists; it is as various as the dance of flames in a brazier—here interrupted, there vertical, mobile and unexpected.’²⁹ The novel has had an enviable record in performing the ‘crumpled handkerchief’ of history; academic analysis, unsurprisingly, has tended to be much better at the newly ironed version. A conjunctural analysis fits somewhere between the two: attentive to the contingencies of history and the undulating energies of the moment, but never that curious about what seems to be marginal and residual to the dominant configurations. Could a more peripatetic cultural studies encourage a more crumpled and torn approach to the past, an approach to the past (as it is continually enfolding into the present) that could *simultaneously* juxtapose the fraying of labour unions, the concerted noodling of progressive rock and the explosion from the violence of a colonial past without having to ‘explain’ (in the last instance) their relationship and confluence? Crumpled history is what Mendelsohn seems to have found in Balsall Heath: she left before witnessing the attempts to iron it smooth. Brutalism purposefully refused the lure of a pristine futurism and studiously threw together the age old, the brute material, with egalitarian social purpose (even if this wasn’t how it appeared). Perhaps a more peripatetic approach to the study of culture wouldn’t have to *always* explain such juxtapositions, but could still productively tally at their meeting point for a while...

Postamble

*We have to leave these meanderings—time is running out. When is the right time to leave? When is a sketch ‘finished’? When is it enough? When is it too much?*³⁰ *Should a peripatetic form of cultural studies expect to get somewhere? Clearly there are far too many urgencies in the world of culture, too much work to do within cultural studies—work which desperately needs to ‘get somewhere’ (anywhere), to imagine that a peripatetic cultural studies should have a particularly prominent position within the field. Indeed I think it would be politically perverse to argue that a peripatetic cultural studies should play a central role in cultural studies. But cultural studies has been (and continues to be) a hospitable place to foster some minor genres of cultural studies (facto-criticism, ethno-fictions, and so on).*³¹

*When, in the early years of World War II, Bertolt Brecht wrote the poem, ‘To Those Born Later’, he began by writing ‘Truly, I live in dark times!’ He went on to write: ‘what kind of times are they, when / a talk about trees is almost a crime / because it implies silence about so many horrors.’*³² *It is a sentiment that clings to all dark times and has been absorbed into our contemporaneity as we live in*

29 Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995, p. 58. A couple of pages later Serres notes the ubiquity of non-synchronous simultaneity: ‘we are always simultaneously making gestures that are archaic, modern, and futuristic’ (p. 60).

30 *The author recognises that these are rhetorical ploys to hide what is a random act of closure. But what is he to do? The digressive, the peripatetic, has no natural ending, no dénouement.*

31 The literature for these ‘minor genres’ is growing fast and I can’t hope to itemise it here.

32 Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, Methuen, London, 1976, p. 318.

the shadow of an unfolding catastrophe.³³ It is a hard logic to refute. In an emergency you reach for the life-vest not for the paintbrush, surely? And yet the knowledge of what will help you survive and thrive and what won't, isn't given in advance, or not with any certainty. Perhaps in an audit-driven world, where the academy is continually measured for its productivity (a productivity of 'finished' products, products that have got somewhere), a form of attention that is precisely designed not to get anywhere might just open up a space for another kind of work, another kind of writing, and perhaps another kind of flourishing. At about the same time that Brecht was penning his poem his friend Walter Benjamin was contemplating the concept of history. He wrote: 'Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.'³⁴ And if the emergency brake requires relearning older techniques of social care and planetary stewardship (as well as developing new practices of social justice) then who is to say what a 'revolutionary' cultural studies could gain from practising quieter craft-based forms of cultural studies; investigations that are closer to pottering in the garden than clamouring for attention? Just as there is a social form to all genres, then developing new genres of cultural studies writing is also to suggest new ways of being in the world, new ways of being together in the world.

A minor genre of cultural studies' writing that is endlessly attracted to the frayed edges of our attachments and purposefully attuned to the simultaneity of irreconcilable realities, might foster a range of moods. It may at times flirt with wistfulness, often it will be perplexed, sometimes anxious, but it will always, at heart, be a forward-leaning kind of striving. It would need, at times, to embrace the odd non-sequitur. It would doggedly search out the insignificant, not out of a desire for obscurity, but as a working strategy for loosening the normative grip of a world already marked with significance.³⁵ Such heuristic techniques are future-oriented. In that refusal to meet the world as it is already revealed to us, there is a modest gamble that another insipient world is, perhaps, already with us...

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³³ *Something in this phrase 'unfolding catastrophe' seems to the author to strike a false note. Does he experience global warming in this way? As something gradual? Or does it enter his world in fits and starts? And in-between? In the interstices and margins of this fitting and starting, something continually emerges which is life, and sometimes in exuberant forms: music, films, the ridiculous kindness of his fellows, the utter unfathomable 'there-ness' of animals...*

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938–1940*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003, p. 402.

³⁵ *Once the author had admitted his weakness for tautological thoughts he began to find them helpful. The formula that defines the insignificant as that which isn't yet marked as significant, recognises that to shine a light on something deemed insignificant is to produce it as significant. There is no way that attention can remain true to the cultural shyness of the insignificant.*

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