variant
Washington and the politics of drugs

Peter Dale Scott

Those struggling to solve America’s drug problems are accustomed to talk of “demand side” and “supply side” solutions. This language reflects a bureaucratic perspective: it tends to project the problem, and focus alleged “solutions”, on to others, often on to remote and deprived populations. On the supply side, eradication programs are designed for the mountains of Burma or the Andes. On the demand side, increasing funds are allocated for the arrest and imprisonment (and less often, the treatment) of the substance abusers, often ethnic and from the inner cities.

Increasingly, however, researchers are becoming aware of a third aspect to the problem: protected intelligence-drug connections. Within the U.S. government itself, intelligence agencies and special warfare elements have recurrently exploited drug traffickers and their corrupt political allies for anti-Communist and anti-subversive operations, often but not always covert, in other parts of the world. History suggests that this third aspect of the drug problem, the protected intelligence-drug connection, or what I call government-drug symbiosis, has been responsible for the biggest changes in the patterns and level of drug-trafficking. Thus, at least in theory, it also presents the most promising opportunity for improvement. No one now disputes that in the immediate post-war period CIA assistance to the Sicilian mafia in Italy, and the Corinthian mafia in Marseille, helped control and rationalize, and further empower the drug trafficking through those two areas. No one disputes either that a heroin epidemic in the U.S. surged and then subsided with our Vietnamese involvement and disengagement.

But the same upsurge of protected drug-trafficking was visible in the 1980s, when the United States received more than half of its heroin from a new area: the Afghan-Pakistan border, from drug-trafficking mujahedeen who were the backbone of the CIA’s covert operations in Afghanistan. Published U.S. statistics estimate that heroin imports from the Afghan-Pakistan border, which were insignificant before 1979, accounted for 52 percent of U.S. imported heroin by 1984.1 In the same period, at least a fifth of America’s cocaine, probably more, was imported via Honduras, where local drug traffickers, and their allies in the corrupt Honduran armed forces, were the backbone of the infrastructure for Reagan administration covert support of the contra forces in that country.2 These specific facts are not contested by historians, and even CIA veterans have conceded their agency’s role in the genesis of the post-war problem. Nevertheless, there is an ongoing and steadfast denial on the part of U.S. administrations, the press, and the public. The public’s denial is psychologically understandable: it is disconcerting to contemplate that our government, which we expect to protect us from such a grave social crisis, is actually contributing to it.

This denial is sustained by the general silence, and the occasional uncritical transmission of government lies in our most responsible newspapers of record.3 It is further reinforced by a small army of propagandists, who hasten to assure us that today “the CIA’s part in the world drug trade seems irrelevant”4; and that to argue otherwise is “absurd.”5 Because of such resolute denial, this most serious aspect of public crises is barely talked about. Yet the problem of a U.S.-protected drug traffic endures. Today the United States, in the name of fighting drugs, has entered into alliances with the police and armed forces of Colombia and Peru, forces conspicious by their alliances with drug-traffickers in counterinsurgency operations. It is now clear that at least some of the U.S. military efforts and assistance to these countries has been deflected into counterinsurgency campaigns, where the biggest drug traffickers are not the enemy, but allies.

Realists object that it is not the business of the U.S. to reform corrupt regimes in other countries, such as Pakistan or Peru. Unfortunately, it is not true that such programs in such countries are usually large enough to change these societies, anyway, if only to reinforce and harden the status quo. At the same time they affect the size and structure of the drug traffic itself. In the post-war years, when the drug-financed China Lobby was strong in Washington, and the U.S. shipped arms and Chinese Nationalist troops into eastern Burma, opium production in that remote region increased almost fivefold in fifteen years, from less than 80 to 300-400 tons a year. Production slowed (but not doubled again in the 1960s, the heyday of the Kuomintang CIA alliance in Southeast Asia.)

Drug alliances confer protection upon designated traffickers, and such conferred protection centralizes, rationalizes, and further empowers the drug traffic. When one American representative of the CIA-linked Cali cartel was arrested in 1992, the DEA said that this man alone had been responsible for 70 to 80% of U.S. cocaine imports (an estimate probably exaggerated but nonetheless instructive).6 It is true that this man, like many others, was ultimately arrested by the U.S. Government. But in many if not most such cases, key men like General Noriega or Aldrich subsequent to drug policy splits, and changes in the CIA structure, have been located not by the DEA. Instead, in the main, it has been the U.S. Government, along with other governments, that has done far more to increase the global drug traffic, than it has to diminish it.

The U.S., Drug-Trafficking and Counterinsurgency in Peru

Today one of the most glaring and dangerous examples of a CIA-drug alliance is in Peru. Behind Peru’s president, Alberto Fujimori, is his chief political adviser Vladimiro Montesinos, the effective head of the National Intelligence Service or SIN, an agency created and trained by the CIA in the 1960s.7 Through the SIN, Montesinos played a central role in Fujimori’s “auto-coup”, or suspension of the Peruvian constitution, described by a DEA analyst as then “the most frightening version of all the leading candidates for this job.”8

In late 1990, Montesinos also began close co-operation with the CIA, and in 1991 the National Intelligence Service began to organize a secret anti-drug outfit with funding, training, and equipment provided by the CIA. This, by the way, made the DEA…furious. Montesinos apparently suspected that the DEA had been investigating his connection to the most important Peruvian drug cartel in the 1980s, the Rodríguez-Lopez organization, and also to some Colombian traffickers. Perhaps not coincidentally, Fujimori made a point of denouncing the DEA as corrupt at least twice, once in Peru in 1993, and the second time at the Presidential summit in San Antonio, Texas, in February (1994). As far as I know, the secret intelligence outfit never carried out anti-drug operations. It was used for other things, such as my arrest.”


Others have pointed to the drug corruption of Peru’s government, naming not only Montesinos, but the military establishment receiving U.S. anti-drug funding.9 Charges that the Peruvian army and security forces were continuing to take payoffs, to protect the cocaine traffickers that they were supposed to be fighting, have led at times to a withholding of U.S. aid.10 Such charges against Fujimori, Montesinos, and the Peruvian military are completely in line with what we know about Peru over the last two decades. In the 1980s the same Peruvian drug-trafficking organization, that of Reynaldo Rodríguez Lopez, incorporated into itself several generals of the Peruvian Investigative Police (PIP), at whose headquarters Rodríguez Lopez maintained an office, and also the private secretary to the Peruvian Minister of the Interior.11 Before that senior PIP officials and Army generals were controlled by the Paredes family organization, described by a DEA analyst as then “the biggest smuggling organization in Peru and possibly in the world.”12

In the words of James Mills, the Paredes were part of the established Peruvian oligarchy that goes back to the Spanish viceroyalty, an oligarchy which “controlled not only the roots of the cocaine industry but, to a large extent, the country itself.”13 Other observers have given a much more marginal account of cocaine’s role in Peruvian society. Patrick Clawson and Kessler Lee estimated that nearly all Peruvian cocaine base and hydrochloride is sold to Colombians who fly in payments and fly out product.” In their words, “As a $1.3 billion industry, coca accounted for 3.9% of the 1992 $33 billion GNP,” and furthermore was “of shrinking importance.”14
It is important to stress that the CIA-drug symbiosis is not anomalous, but paradigmatic of the way the U.S. is consolidating its power and its allies in parts of the Third World where drugs are a part of the de facto political power structure. In the name of law and freedom, alliances have been made for decades with criminals and dictators. Now, in the name of fighting drugs, U.S. funds are channelled to those whose political fates are allied with those of the drug traffickers. Such would-be realists should listen to the arguments of Gorùriti and others that what the U.S. is doing now in Peru, as earlier in China, Laos, and Vietnam, only plays into the revolutionaries’ hands.16

The CIA-Government-Drug Symbiosis in Mexico, Colombia, and Elsewhere

It is important to stress that the CIA-drug symbiosis described by Gustavo Gorùriti is not anomalous, but paradigmatic of the way the U.S. is consolidating its power and its allies in parts of the Third World where drugs are a part of the de facto political power structure. In the name of law and freedom, alliances have been made for decades with criminals and dictators. Now, in the name of fighting drugs, U.S. funds are channelled to those whose political fates are allied with those of the drug traffickers. Such would-be realists should listen to the arguments of Gorùriti and others that what the U.S. is doing now in Peru, as earlier in China, Laos, and Vietnam, only plays into the revolutionaries’ hands.16

The CIA recruitment of assets from the local Army G-2 was not an isolated event. In Colombia, according to authors Andrew and Ledlie Cockburn, “U.S. officials...knew that millions of dollars of U.S. aid money, earmarked for the war on drugs, was being used instead to fight leftist guerrillas and their supporters. When [drug] cartel-financed paramilitary forces entered the town of Segovia in November 1988, the military stood by and watched. As Colombian Professor Alejandro Reyes remembered, ‘They killed forty-three people, just at the center of town. Anybody who was close to that place was shot. They were defenseless people, common people of the town....[T]hey were a kind of sanction against the whole town for their political vote....’ Forty-three people had been killed for voting the wrong way.” In 1989...the U.S. shipped $65 million of military equipment to Colombia. The Colombian chief of police politely pointed out that the items received were totally unsuitable for a war against the traffickers. They were, however, suitable for counterinsurgency. U.S. military equipment turned up in...Puerto Boyaca. [This was a region centered on the Bank of Credit and Commerce International, or BCCI. The President until 1993 of America’s traditional ally Pakistan, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, was the man who as finance minister granted special tax status for the CIA and druglinked BCCI. A bank of his close advisors, Agha Hasan Abedi. Ghulam Ishaq Khan also served as Chairman of Abedi’s BCCI Foundation, an ostensibly charitable that in fact fronted for BCCI’s concertated efforts to make Pakistan a nuclear power.24 BCCI’s involvement in drug money-laundering, drugtrafficking, and related arms deals is now common knowledge; but the U.S. Government has yet to admit and explain why BCCI’s owner Abedi met repeatedly, as reported by Time and NBC,
with CIA officials William Casey and Robert Gates.34
BCCI became close to the CIA through its deep involvement in the CIA-Pakistan operation in Afghanistan.35
This in itself was a drug story: by their aid in the 1980s Pakistan and the CIA built up their previous insigificant client, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, to a position where he could become, “with the full support of ISI (Pakistan intelligence) and the tacit tolerance of the CIA...Afghanistan’s leading drug lord.”36
BCCI was in a position to launder much of the drug proceeds.37
Inside Pakistan in the 1980s, the CIA’s man for the Afghan arms-drug support operation, banked and even staffed through BCCI, was the North-West Frontier Provincial Governor, General Fazle el-Haq (or Huq), who continued to run the local drug trade with ISI.38
Haque and BCCI President Abedi met regularly with the then President of Pakistan, General Zia; Zia and Abedi in turn would meet regularly to discuss Afghanistan with CIA Chief William Casey.41
BCCI corruption extended to the prominent drug lords in the region. It extended also to the notorious CIA-Noriega alliance in Panama, and in the 1990s to the drug-corrupted military leaders in Guatemala that the U.S. turned to lead the war on drugs in that country.42
BCCI, along with the United States Government’s Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), even played a role in the supply of arms and trainers to the Colombian drug cartels’ death squads in Puerto Boyaca, mentioned above.43
It would be wrong to blame this pervasive drug corruption on BCCI alone, or to expect that the exposure in 1991 of BCCI, which was only achieved after great opposition and obstruction in Washington, will make the problem go away. BCCI was just one major player in a complex multinational intelligence game of drug trafficking, arms sales, banking, and corruption. Other CIA-linked and drug-linked banks, to which BCCI can be connected, such as the Castle Bank in the Bahamas, the World Finance Corporation in Miami, and the Nugan Hand Bank in Australia, have risen and fallen before BCCI’s spectacular demise, and we should expect more such scandals in the future.44
It is the same with the drug traffic itself. As long as we do not address the root problem of governmental drug connections that make and break the kingpins, traditional law enforcement will continue to be ineffective. The kingpin is dead; long live the kingpin.

Protection for Drug Traffickers in the United States

These gray alliances between law enforcement and criminal elements lead to protection for drug-traffickers, not just abroad, but at home. Drug-traffickers who are used as covert assets abroad also are likely to be recruited as informants or other assets in the U.S. Thus for example, a syndicate headed by Bay of Pigs veteran Guillermo Tabraue was able to earn $80 million from marijuna and cocaine trafficking from 1976 to 1987, while Tabraue was briefly installed in an open and decent America, the results will be difficult and painful. For those who believe in an open and decent America, the results will also be rewarding.

rumoured to have deposited hundreds of millions of dollars. The deal went sour, and the BCCI branch was bought instead by the Australian Alan Bond. After Bond in turn went bankrupt, the Lippo Bank bought him from the old Hong Kong Bank building, which it renamed the BCCI.

The root problem however is the U.S. decision to play Realpolitik in regions where the reality of right-wing power is its grounding in the resources of the drug traffic. Alternatives to this easy route of drug traffic symbiosis and co-dependency are not easy, but they must be turned to. The government of global Realpolitik has helped to expand the global drug traffic to the point where the strategy itself, strengthening the flow of drugs from one CIA-protected network to another around the world, has become a more genuine threat to the real security of the domestic United States, than the enemies it allegedly opposes. The United States certainly does not control these dangerous allies; it has strengthened them in some cases invented. The problem of disengagement from such world-wide alliances is complex, and disengagement by itself will not bring an end to the traffic which U.S. policies have fostered. But it is clearly time, with a new Administration and a new post-Cold War global environment, for a decisive repudiation to drug alliances, and a move towards new global strategies.

What Can Be Done?

What can be done to stop this governmental protection of drug-traffickers? In the short run we need an explicit repudiation of former drug-linked strategies, and an admission that they have been counter-productive. This might take the form of an explicit directive from the Clinton Administration, that old strategies to shore up corrupt right-wing governments abroad, like Perú’s, must be clearly subordinated to the new domestic priority of reducing this nation’s drug problem.

More specifically, the misnomer “War on Drugs”, a pernicious and misleading military metaphor, should be replaced by a medically and scientifically oriented campaign towards the end of reducing this country’s drug sickness. The billions that have been wasted in military anti-drug campaigns, efforts which have ranged from the futile to the counter-productive, should be diverted into a public health paradigm, emphasizing prevention, maintenance, and rehabilitation programs. The experiments in controlled decriminalization which have been initiated in Europe should be closely studied and emulated here.44

The root cause of the governmental drug problem in this country is the National Security Act of 1947, and subsequent orders based on it. These in effect have exempted intelligence agencies and their personnel from the rule of law, an exemption which in the course of time has been extended from the agencies themselves to their drug-trafficking clients. This must cease. Either the President or Congress must proclaim that national security cannot be invoked to protect drug-traffickers. This must be accompanied by enacting orders or legislation, discouraging the conscious collaboration with, or protection of, criminal drug-traffickers, by making it illegal for them to themselves normally constitute grounds for prosecution.

Clearly a campaign to restore sanity to our prevailing drug policies will require an uphill battle, if it does not contemplate a struggle to realign the power priorities of our political system. Such a struggle will be difficult and painful. For those who believe in an open and decent America, the results will also be rewarding.
Looking back on it, the hippies, dopers and beats in Edinburgh in the Summer of Love, 1967 got a shitty deal. Where their equivalents in London got to sit and get blasted in front of light shows, accompanied by early versions of the Soft Machine and Pink Floyd at UFO, their Scots cousins’ first exposure to light shows was accompanied by a rambling avant-garde jazz band called the Assassination Weapon. By now it was definitely 1967 and Jamie and Bernie decided to move to London to join the free music scene there, centred round the Little Theatre Club. I didn’t fancy going to London with no money, went to University instead, lasted a term and dropped out and went to London. But there was no scene at the Little Theatre Club. Most nights the people on stage outnumbered the audience. Jamie and I played there once, I seem to remember, and John Stevens invited me to play with the SME after our set. So I got to stand to the side of the solitary Albert Ayler LP still in my collection.

Of that period I remember little. But one highlight remains in my memory. In 1968—or was it 1969?—messers Murray, Johnson et al conned the Arts Council of Scotland into giving them some money to put on a concert of ‘contemporary German music’ and brought over Peter Brotzman on sax and Hann Bennink on percussion. The gig was in the Traverse Theatre, the old Traverse, which was about 25 feet square and was packed with every shade of underground alternative people and there was this funny smell in the room. 18 years did at the time, I didn’t smoke fags and had no idea what dope smelled like. But dope was and after half a dozen? ten? nights in the place the police came along and leaned on the landlord and we were expelled from the room, ‘for inducing a drug-like atmosphere’, we were told. It must have been the light-shows: the music would only have induced a headache. Somewhere along the way a group of art students, Alan Johnson, Graeme Murray and Ken Duffy—friends of Muir who was an art school drop-out—adopted the band. (Johnson did the artwork for the first Evan Parker LP on Incus, The Topography of the Lungs.) They got some money from the Art College and brought up from London the Spontaneous Music Ensemble—at the time just a name I saw occasionally in articles in the Melody Maker. My memory says that the late John Stevens, Kenny Wheeler and Trevor Watts came up from London—no small trip up the A1 in those days—in a Mini, for £50. They blew us away: goodbye Albert Ayler and Pharoah Sanders. The SME’s sound was the one in my head from then on.

Expelled from the pub the band began to change. Adrian the light guy went off—to do Scientology?—and the band shrank. The SME showed us that bands could be any size or line-up and the Assassination Weapon changed its name, became the Free Association Quartet—or was it Ensembel? And did the name change happen then or later that year?—and moved to a basement bar in one of the roads leading off Princess Street. Some nights it was just me and Jamie Muir, drums and trumpet, thrashing away in front of the audience. I blush at the thought of how that must have sounded.

By now it was 1967 and Jamie and Bernie moved to London to join the free music scene there, centred round the Little Theatre Club. I didn’t fancy going to London with no money, went to University instead, lasted a term and dropped out and went to London. But there was no scene at the Little Theatre Club. Most nights the people on stage outnumbered the audience. Jamie and I played there once, I seem to remember, and John Stevens invited me to play with the SME after our set. So I got to stand to the side of the solitary Albert Ayler LP still in my collection.

A bout ten years ago, when I was about 40 and hadn’t played for nearly 20 years, Evan Parker brought a band to Hull where I live. I went to see them. At the interval he came over and said hello to me and my partner, Sally. He said something like this to me: ‘You were good. If you’d kept at it, you could be playing with me.’ I said, ‘Thanks a lot Evan. Pity you didn’t tell me I was good in 1967, when I was a pimply, fucked-up, adolescent having a horrible time in London. I might have stuck at it longer.’ But he didn’t and I didn’t. Life is full of what-ifs.
Critical Artists Devolve to Political Technologies

Artists as Workers and Technology as Artists

Critical Images II: D Evolution!
The Lux Centre, London, 27th May, 2000

Apparently the artists at Andy Warhol's Factory spent most of their time doing celebrity portraits and promotional work, just so they could pay the rent. At the end of the day Andy would assemble his staff around the table and say "Now, what are we going to do for Art? I can't think of anything today, does anyone have any ideas?" Artists that work with forms of mass media can be faced with the double edged sword of having to afford access to the relevant equipment and also the opportunity to pay for it by using their skills to accept commercial work. But balancing time spent working on paying jobs against time spent on "personal work" has led to unique conflicts in their roles as well as unique insights for media artists.

Critical Images II was a four day programme of events at the Lux Centre, London, culminating in a one day conference on strategies for moving image based arts in online and interactive contexts like the digital performance of last year’s Critical Images conference where panels of tasteful art house film makers and trendy 'Hi-Tech' multimedia designers engaged in an endless orgy of professional backslapping, the emphasis this time was on practitioners from further outside mainstream culture.

In fact, nearly all the speakers present could have been described as "artists". In the morning film maker Ana Kronschnabl showed examples of online movies from her Plugincinema site while artist Nick Crowe presented his web based movie Discrete Packets which showed how linear narratives could be stretched by using links to live real and fictional web sites. Then film maker Jon Jost took the floor and directed the debate away from aesthetics as such by talking about the problems artists had in gaining access to the expertise that would enable them to pursue these more technologically sophisticated forms of movie making. Nick Crowe made the crucial point that artists must avoid relying too much on technical experts because they always work with a sense of the social critique of "quality"—technicians are not trained to exploit "bugs", only to erase them, and in doing so new avenues of exploration are missed. If the art world pursues these technical standards blindly then it would lead to the situation that Jon Jost described where art galleries would become cineplexes that just made people want to see more Hollywood films.

In the afternoon Kate Rich from the Bureau of Inverse Technology (BIT) showed several projects which involved the placement of video cameras in spy planes flying over the high security bunkers of Silicon Valley companies or planted in children's toys to create films of the consumer landscape from the point of view of the technologies that created it. Jim Fetterley and Rich Bott of Animal Charm recycle footage from industrial documentary and corporate videos. In picking out the bits inbetween moments of dramatic significance they create an eerie world made up of figures distractingly waiting or standing around with looks of misplaced concern. These are the minute things the camera records when it is being least influenced by the desires of its human operators. Chris Wilcha talked about his documentary The Target Shoots First which was composed out of camcorder footage shot while he worked as a marketing manager for Columbia House records, exposing a corporate culture which erases distinctions between personal values and marketing strategies.

The writer Chris Darke chaired the final session which used the objective narrative critical voice of the Tag喱S event entirely and not leave everything to the unfolding of the technology (or perhaps some technologies make bad "artists" just as some people do). Technicians pursue "quality" and artists seek "meaning"—either may imply technical standards as well as other agendas.

The general tendency of the work shown at this event was to allow the technology to suggest its own internal potential or structures of meaning. This strategy works for a while but breaks down at the point where it comes up against how the technology is already being deployed by other parties for their own interests. The best you can then do is to expand your field of reference to include the social and political dimensions. At the moment when you find yourself in a world where standards, protocols and channels of communication are already in place then a space for technological neutrality and objective experimentation no longer exists. We are now in that world.

Web links
Anna Kronschnabl
http://www.plugincinema.com
Nick Crowe
http://www.nickcrowe.net
Lev Manovich
http://visarts.ucsd.edu/~manovich
http://www.manovich.net/littlemovies

Manovich showed his Little Movies project. He had taken some footage from the early cinema of the 1880s of characters involved in simple, gestural actions like circus performers posing and progressively reduced them down to single pixels to create an alternative movie aesthetic that preceded Hollywoods technical standards. However, the Lux Centre's internet connection proved unable even to cope with this as the sluggish playback stuttered to a halt during the presentation. But was this a technical "problem" or a further "feature" of Manovich's digital "aesthetic"? Perhaps this means we should not discount human intention entirely and not leave everything to the unfolding of the technology (or perhaps some technologies make bad "artists" just as some people do). Technicians pursue "quality" and artists seek "meaning"—either may imply technical standards as well as other agendas.

The complexity of this relationship between artistic intentions and the language of the technology itself had been made plain when Lev
Over the years we have become accustomed to appallingly bearded ex-teachers passing themselves off as the voice of the proletariat by penning supposedly realistic plays and films that only add to the embarrassment of Liverpool’s long suffering populace. Inexplicably, extremely familiar faces we have been known to treat Jimmy McGovern as a special case, some offering the opinion that he is somehow ‘right’. In my opinion he is the equivalent of J. John Prescott: he is the man people who don’t want to admit the truth cling to. But, like the lovable deputy PM, he is deep down ‘one more whore at the capitalist gangbang’, as Bill Hicks put it. It’s not surprising to examine McGovern’s record.

That he started out at Brokeaside is probably enough to condemn him, but we can all make mistakes in our early years. He was involved in transforming Bobbie Grant from a principled trade unionist into a misogynist caricature who cared for nobody but himself when his wife got raped. He also made that scab Billy Corkhill into a lovely fellow who ended up snaffling Bobby’s bird. None of this was anti trade union of course, just Jimmy was only breaking new dramatic ground by questioning a concept delivered to the dog with a stick. That is how McGovern found himself at this stage with all the grotesque of Mosey descending from that mountain with a few rules. But why does the scab have to be lovable? It’s always possible that one or two scabs in the entire film would have been quite nice to their kids, but the vast majority are despicable twats. However Jimmy’s a groundbreaker and an innovator, so the scab gets to be played by the only decent actor in the entire film—are there no actors who are actually from Liverpool?—and the trade unionist gets to treat his wife like shit. Haven’t we heard this somewhere before? To suggest that the Dockers are being represented in the highly praised Cracker is a lie with all the addition of the already well overstated world view of the scab says a lot about McGovern’s approach. And given that he is seen as radical it says even more about TV and film in general.

While at least relatively easy to pick holes in McGovern’s films, he is often defended on the grounds that he does his ‘research’ and that he ‘wants to be lovable’. This news was more than enough to the trade unionist with all the ‘lovable’ of Mosey descending from that mountain with a few rules. But why does the scab have to be lovable? It’s always possible that one or two scabs in the entire film would have been quite nice to their kids, but the vast majority are despicable twats. However Jimmy’s a groundbreaker and an innovator, so the scab gets to be played by the only decent actor in the entire film—are there no actors who are actually from Liverpool?—and the trade unionist gets to treat his wife like shit. Haven’t we heard this somewhere before? To suggest that the Dockers are being represented in the highly praised Cracker is a lie with all the addition of the already well overstated world view of the scab says a lot about McGovern’s approach. And given that he is seen as radical it says even more about TV and film in general.

It is perfectly possible—I would say vital—to make a film entirely from within the Bogside. The debates and discussions within that community at that time—against the backdrop of the Battle of the Bogside you had questions about the role of the State the logistics of urban guerrilla warfare self organisation of policing, welfare and social provision; links with other liberation movements etc carried on at a high level and leading to immediate practical action; as well as there being the generational divide over rioting, the fact that we were only two years on from the troops being welcomed—were more than sufficient as subject matter and as an audience we should be forced to face the actions of the British Army on the day with the same degree of bewilderment and unpreparedness as the people on the march did. There is no need to restate the Army’s view of the day, and even if there was it is surely not the role of a radical dramatist working with families of the victims of Army terror to do so.

This debate is by no means confined to drama, the tyranny of balance pervades television and infects documentary making even more. But of course the balance demanded is selective. A documentary on victims of crime is not required to be balanced by an interview with a burglar or mugger; documentaries on the financial system are not required to present us with the human casualties of stock market fluctuations; a film on child sex abuse need not bother interviewing a paedophile. So balance is optional and negotiable; what’s wrong with us negotiating it from our side. What’s wrong with excluding the viewpoints of the police, the judiciary, big business and other over represented bodies from drama and documentary depictions of working class life and struggle?

Myself and others made a series last year for Granada television called Tales From The Riverbank. The first point we made in the treatment for that series was that there would be no balance, that it was unnecessary given the volume of negative, anti-working class coverage of Liverpool’s history over the years. The series was essentially a working class history of Liverpool over the last forty years. It was an unashamedly rank and file, bottom up history that contained no balancing interviews on any issue; riots, rent strikes, strikes and council rebellions included. If a tiny independent company in Liverpool can do that, then much easier would it be for a bankable ‘name’ script writer? And how liberating would it be for others to have successful examples of unashamedly biased films to point to as precedents.

All film making, documentary and drama, is authored. All script writing is biased. Until film makers, screen writers and others consciously acknowledge this and really do experiment with the fundamentals of the grammar and narrative voice of film, along the lines of James Kuhn’s seismic shifts in literature, we will remain trapped in the current situation where attempts to make ‘balanced’ films lead to the more or less conscious adoption of the prevailing ideology.

A version of this article originally appeared in The Guardian magazine.
Introduction

We usually think of order as confronting chaos, pitting structures and plans against random unpredictability. But another approach is to distinguish different types of order precisely in terms of how they interact with indeterminacy. A type of order that was in some way open to indeterminacy might seem to be more subtle and complex, with a wider range of possible responses to the unexpected. A type of order that never interacted with indeterminacy would, in contrast, stay fixed and closed. Whatever the advantages of openness however, the open type of order clearly has a problem, which the closed type doesn’t: how does the system ensure that the input of indeterminacy doesn’t directly erode, and even finally dissolve, its own organisation?

Human cultures have, I suggest, adopted a specific solution to this problem: openings to the indeterminate occur only at specific places and times, or “phases”, these being clearly distinguished from the other more widespread phases during which indeterminacy is immediately assimilated to determinate models. The cultural practices identified as religion and art provide the main contexts within which these special phases happen. However, religion and art also offer modes of retrospective integration of the indeterminate, with religion typically re-presenting it as an expression of universal order.

What they utilised of chance in divination practices was absolutely not considered as such but as a mysterious web of signs, sent by the divinities... (who were often contradictory but who knew what they wanted) and which could be read by elect soothsayers.

Iannis Xenakis Towards a Philosophy of Music in Formalised Music

From amongst the many types of phases for the interaction of order and indeterminacy within human cultures, this article will single out shamanism. I will argue that the technique of the shamanic trance is a method for deliberately exposing the shaman to the aleatory within the human psyche as a model or equivalent for the larger indeterminacies of the natural environment.

Indeterminacy and Shamanism

My argument will partly build on, and partly depart from, what I consider to be the single most important work of modern ethnography on Siberian shamanism, Roberte Hamayon’s La Chasse ?ame. Towards the end of this work, Hamayon sums her account of the functioning of shamanism into the phrase la gestion du destin (roughly, the management of indeterminacy, although gestion has less administrative connotations than the French term management in English). It is still possible within this perspective to read the shaman’s relations of exchange with the spirits, expressed in alliance (for hunters), or flattery (for pastoralists), as an interaction between order and indeterminacy. But for Hamayon the act of shamanising, or conducting a shamanic seance, is no more or less than the symbolic exchange itself. Only in her conclusion does she retreat from this unyieldingly semiological account of what happens in a shamanic trance, to remind us that, if the sociology of shamanism can now be sketched in—perhaps more than sketched for cultures where information is adequate—the psychology of shamanism still waits to be written.

It is the hint of this opening left by Hamayon that I shall use to introduce a distinct but complementary reading of the data—a reading based on the notion that, although the indeterminacy which shamanism explicitly addresses may be in the external environment, in the form of uncertain food supplies (for hunters), or uncertain health (for pastoralists), the act of shamanising activates the potential indeterminacy of the human mind and is therefore not reducible to a symbolic exchange dependent on, and conducted by, a continuously present and responsible narrative self.

Indeterminacy and Self

I draw from the work of Daniel Dennett the idea that the continuity of the human conscious self is an illusion made necessary by a cultural need for the continuous narrative projection and interaction of all members of society. In fact, according to Dennett, in day to day life, consciousness constantly suffers microslips which it then papers over, so to speak, to project to itself, and potentially to others, an appearance of ongoing control. Much of the time, says Dennett, experience just happens: the integral sense that is given to it is a retrospective construction, and the all-powerful all-active decision-maker seated at the centre of the human mind is simply an illusion.

The real matrix of experience is what he calls the parallel architecture brain, or PAB. This is not an integrated structure with a central decision-making core, but a cluster of many different kinds of modules, all with different yet flexible modes of functioning, all having evolved in different evolutionary epochs as responses to the changing demands of Darwinian evolution.

One implication of Dennett’s account is that, if it is narrative that defines the sense of self and is the essence of the human psyche’s auto-structuring process, then societies could, at least in theory, suggest not only other narratives but other kinds of narrative. I propose that types of symbolic exchange that putatively involve direct encounters with other worlds, such as those of the spirits, will require a local and temporary lapse in the normal social narrative. Dennett’s unified narrative self, or UNS, is not only an act in this kind of exchange, but the bearer of a symbolic value that is here given up and then returned. For this to be the case, the relation between the UNS and the parallel architecture brain has to be abnormally. The UNS has to enter a phase of temporary abeyance, allowing in a lot more from the PAB, and only later reconstituting the significance of the new material into a narrative. The micro-slips of everyday living that are usually constantly reabsorbed into the continuum of the social narrative and its self, now become a continuous and prolonged lapse.

After the travel episode, the shaman sits down and starts telling stories about what he has seen on his journey, and at the same time the spirits rejoin who helped the shaman with his indeterminacy strongly different from that proposed for other types of social practice.

Even though a shamanic trance is an opening to indeterminacy, the trance is evidently set in motion and brought to a conclusion by the use of determinate ritual sequences that are carried over from one session to the next. This is what makes shamanising a method, and distinguishes the trance from an attack of madness. The elements of these sequences carry determinate meanings. That is: the ritual is not the indeterminacy itself, but the method for opening and closing a boundless zone of indeterminacy right inside the ordered cultural system.

In fact I define ritual as a technique for separating out phases that are normally intertwined and in mutual dynamic balance. On a psychological level ritual reorganises the rhythm of experience, and, where it is used for shamanic trance, this leads to episodes during which the narrative of the self is postponed. Right now, however, I want to apply this definition of ritual to the macro-level of the culture as an informational system. On this level, ritual frames or separates out different phases in the total informational process of the culture. It is not a completely different category of actions but a set of formal changes in the informational aspect of whatever objects, words or actions are brought into its sphere. These formal changes have long been identified in anthropological literature as exaggeration, strengthening, and repetition. They represent a disruption of the formal surface of functional communicative modes, and this corresponds to an important shift in the
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And, as every ethnographer knows, interviews with shamans usually start with the shaman displaying her or his knowledge in list form even if the question was intended to avoid just that. Again what is important here is not the “content” of the lists, the fact that each item can be allocated a cultural meaning to be decoded or not decoded by the ethnographer, but the repetitive parallelism of the form.

This distinct organisational character of ritual and symbolic information shows that the nature of the determinate elements in shamanic practice is such as to preclude their recuperation into the semiotic totality of the culture. Such a recuperation is reductive because, judged as a sign, a symbol is inefficient, ambiguous, and polyvalent, so that semiotic interpretation leaves out the main thing that symbols do, which is to herald, activate, or refer back to, zones or phases of indeterminacy.

In some episodes of the shamanic trance we see the shamen acting out memorised ritual sequences, whereas in others he or she appears physically disorganised, or at least differently organised, and so incapable of intentional action, and perhaps dependent on help from an assistant. If shamansing is nothing else but symbolic exchange, this lack of control must be a theatrical effect geared to a symbolic and communicative function. Are shamans then just actors? Is the shamanic trance in fact a theatrical performance in which the shaman pretends to communicate with spirits—presented as autonomous and volatile—while actually enacting a symbolic exchange according to the rules of that exchange so as to arrive at a predetermined or otherwise determined result—the verdict, diagnosis, or healing?

Hypnosis

There are parallels here with the current debate about hypnosis: do hypnotised subjects just simulate being hypnotised or do they really enter a different state of mind? The psychologist J ohn Gruzelier identifies two main characteristics of mental behaviour under hypnosis that indicate what can legitimately be called a different state of mind. The first of these is that the brain “turns in on itself”, losing interest in sensations from the external world and paying more attention to products of the imagination. The second is that the brain stops testing, criticising, and verifying perceptions; therefore products of the imagination become more credible.

I suggest that the shaman engages in partial self-hypnosis and that the lapse in the UNS and opening towards the PAI is achieved via the inhibition of both attention to the outer world and criticism and verification of perceptions. Furthermore, the shaman’s withdrawal of attention from the outer world seems often to be achieved by the intermediary step of focusing the entire attention on a highly present object to the exclusion of everything else, just as it is in hypnosis with the focus on the hypnotist’s voice. The shaman’s personal equipment (in which I include not only actual objects and their ritual uses but also mental images and sensations acquired by training) contains one or more element that function as the equivalent of the hypnotist’s voice: that is, it is an object towards which the shaman has built up the mental habit of exclusive attention. It triggers the characteristic state of mind of the shaman during the trance.

I have found that, when questioned about what happens during trances and rituals, shamans emphasise seeing—meaning inner seeing. This is consistent with the observation that where attention is withdrawn from the external world, brain areas normally occupied in processing sensory information begin to present experience on the basis of random fluctuations and feedback within the sensory system. For visual centres this tends to produce a raw material of symmetrical and geometrical shapes, which are then interpreted as substitute visual impressions of things that they resemble, with their appropriate emotional and contextual connotation filling in the image, fleshing out, so to speak, the geometrical bones. At the same time, the shaman typically dances and drums, so that the visual information is dynamic. Physical movement dynamises and shapes the fluctuations in the sensory systems. Hence images appear and disappear, move, approach, lead away, fly, and so on. The state of mind of the shaman might be compared to that of a person manoeuvring a canoe down a fast-moving stream; the difference is that the stream is now inside the person and not in the outside world.

My conclusion is that shamans are not just actors. They do not maintain the continuous narrativise self that an actor maintains when acting a role. In a particularly revealing interview with a Tuvan actor specialising in playing the part of shaman in touring theatre performances, the actor...
described how he was sometimes mistaken for a real shaman and invited to heat people; the reason he did not do so was that “He did not see.”

This is underscored by the fact that sometimes even real shamans fail to see. In Friedholm Brückner’s documentary film Boo Nar on the shamans of Mongolia, at least one of the trances is abandoned quite early on as the shaman decides that it is not going to work on that occasion; this despite all the preparations having been correctly made, an audience assembled, and so on.

Provisional Conclusions

Evidently religion and ritual have long been identified as distinct objects or fields of academic study. The types of explanation or analysis offered for these objects have tended nevertheless to see them either as results of the general social structure and social process or as the cause of effects required by that structure and process. Whatever can’t be explained this way is allocated either to the transcendent itself, for those who “believe”, or to psychology, for those who don’t. In the case of shamanism studies, the political history of this territorial division is particularly evident. Thus the terms “ecstasy” and “trance” were applied early on and reflected a Christian horror of illegitimate and pathological forms of transcendence. (Ironically enough, by divorcing shamanic practice from its social background this later made shamanism highly exportable to post-Christian western societies.) Furthermore, anyone involved in shamanism studies still has to reckon with the enduring charisma of Mircea Eliade and his fascistic idea of a transcendental cosmic imperative; this alone provides a strong incentive to explicate religious experience exclusively in terms of social structure and social meaning. This is the background against which we must understand Hamayon’s assertion (1993) that:

According to the symbolic representations of shamanic societies, the shaman’s ritual behaviour is the mode of his direct contact with his spirits; hence it is functional behaviour that follows a prescribed pattern.

My answer to this is that if the shaman’s ritual behaviour is the mode of his direct contact with his spirits, then ritual behaviour must be understood in the broad sense of everything that happens to, or is done by, the shaman. In this case the shaman whose behaviour literally and exclusively follows a prescribed pattern is either doing a small ritual which does not require a trance as such, or is not a very good shaman. There may well be prescribed patterns which the shaman learns during training, but in an actual trance the shaman will mentally grapple with spirits with their own highly unpredictable behaviours. It is not that symbolic exchange with the spirits does not take place, but that the transactions, negotiations, and dialogues with the spirits are open, left open by the rituals, and that their openness is precisely why they take place at all. This, in turn, is why these exchanges must be represented specifically by symbols and groups of symbols, that is to say, by using the particular open relation between signifier and signified that we find in symbols, to mediate between indeterminacy and determinate meaning.

Although ritual as we know it in ethnography is social only in that it arises out of the problematization of a social being, but it does not express a given social logic, only how that logic engages with what is intractable to it.

Notes

1. For reasons of brevity, this article is absolutely not exhaustive in terms of covering even the main headings under which shamanism is normally considered: in particular I have had to refrain from situating my analysis in relation to other analyses in the literature. In a general way I have drawn on my own field notes and recordings made in Siberia during several extremely informal study trips made since 1990.

2. The idea of linking shamanism to hypnosis is absolutely not original, the classic version being the adaptation made of Shor’s work by Siikala (see bibliography).

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-Any chance of a late lunch?
-How?
-I'm away down the town to see Muhammad Ali.

Marty just laughs, but he doesn't know the man in town for the book signing. If he knew he'd be wanting to go as well. But I only just got the call from my brother to say that the man's definitely showing, so I've says we'll meet down The Shoe.

He lets me go at one on the dot cos the place is pretty jacked out. If Mark would've called me earlier I could've nipped home and grabbed the bunnet and gloves and that, but no chance now. So it's only the wee thin cagoule I've got and the trainers are totally dodgy, big wide mouths at all sides and much coldness coming in.

Thank god it's not wet. The sun's out good-style, but it's the likes of that winter sun with no heat in it. It's dead bright, and it's coming at you from a dead low angle so you think you're a wee microscopical beastie getting examined, and every hair on your head, every crease on your clothes, every movement you make is like dead obvious and clear to everyone, and even the folk you pass in the Sauchie, they're all dead bright and feel really close, like you can see all their pores and that, every bit of them, and the likes of the lasses with the make-up, you can see where the make-up's on their skin and where it isn't.

So I make it down Sauchie, and it's dead busy with what it being like office lunchtime, and all these punters from the lawyers and accountants and call centre offices and all that are all sort of running about giving it shop and grub and dash and panic, back before they're late and all that, and I know I'm rushing as well but it's nice to think that I just work in a bar and I don't have all this big hassle about clocking in and out and all that.

Marty's great about a wee ten minutes here and there, it's fair enough cos I'm always in dead early. I really am, every day. I'm in there first thing, when the rolls and pies and that are getting delivered, and that's usually half-seven. So I slow down a bit and try to look cool, or cooler than the panicky types anyway. I'm just having a wee walk. I'm walking brink-style to combat the cold. That's it. I'm a student, I'm studying Chinese medicine or, ay, I'm in ancient languages and that and I'm having a wee lunch-time stroll to ponder what I got at the lectures this morning. That's it. Maybe one of these office babies will stop me and have a chat, and I'll tell her, well, I'll tell her a guess cos I don't have a watch, but she'll be smiling anyway and ask me if I fancy grabbing a quick coffee somewhere but I'll be like that, sorry doll, I'm off to meet Muhammad Ali and I'll walk on as cool as you like, and she'll stand watching me heading off round the corner into Buchie, and she'll wonder if she'll ever see me again.

By the time I reach The Shoe I'm totally freeze-ing, and I know my nose is starting to go that way it does. My ears are nipping something desperate, but I don't rub them cos that just makes them worse. No sign of Mark. He says he would be right outside, likely coming usual. But he maybe nipped in to use the bog, so I go in.

The place is packed. The Shoe has one of those like really old fashioned insides, with a massive great bar that runs right round the place in a big circle. It's stocked with yet more officy types, all these guys with cracking long coats on and smart beginners and bright red of all colours and patterns, and they're all laughing and smoking, and the box is showing some football on about twenty different screens of all sizes, and it's just pasted to see a squeeze for a way past a few of these guys and the smell of the boozie is a bit boaky when you're not drinking yourself. Don't get me wrong, I like a few pints, but when you're working with it all the time and then suddenly you're on the other side of the bar, it's a bit weird sometimes.

So I go round the whole place, check the bogs, no joy, so back outside. It's quiet compared to The Shoe. I stay in the doorway, cos it's big enough that you can stand there and folk can still come and go and that, and I make a smoke. That takes ages right enough cos my fingers are sort of stiff and like frozen, but making the smoke is good cos it loosens them up a wee bit and they get tingly and I come heat back in them and I start smoking the thing and that's when Mark turns up, standing at the end of the lane looking down. He doesn't see me at first, so I raise my arm. He looks even colder than I feel. The coffees last about twenty minutes.

We plod round to the book-shop, and right off, the place is packed. The Shoe has one of those great bars that runs right round the place in a big circle. It's stuffed against the window outside, cos they're so frozen and stiff, and I take what change he has and put it with mine and it's enough there's this almighty queue from the door downer just waiting for it to happen.

So we're just kind of hanging about near the door, like you can hardly move your face, and after about five minutes Mark's teeth are going.

Got any dough? he says, and he rakes about in his pocket and I take ages getting my fingers into mine cos they're so frozen and stiff, and I take what change he has and put it with mine and it's enough there's this almighty queue from the door downer just waiting for it to happen.

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gets involved then and says how he's a hero and he never did anything against anyone and it's not right talking him down and you can see this old lad getting a bit sort of wound up and like mad about the eyes, then he calms down a bit and asks us if we've any spare change and Mark tells him where to go and starts loosing the rag a wee bit so I have to sort of step in halfway. So this old bloke kind of shuffles off, but he only goes so far as the corner by the shoe shop across from the book shop, and he stands there watching, same as us.

Two o'clock. That's me well late now, even if I head back. Mark's leaning against the lamp post, shaking. He doesn't want to go yet. Neither do I. There's a phone box on the other side of the street just by the entrance to Central, and I'll still have a view of the main doors, so I head over, call the work. Marty's on like a shot. Any chance of an extra half-hour? No way. He's in a right mood as well, says he's to meet the regional manager at that trade show at half-three, and if I'm not back Sharon'll tell him, and I'll have my balls in my hands. Half-two latest, or else. He wants me to sort the snacks order for next week and he's on about something else when this cracking big black limousine draws up outside the shop and the beeps start going so I hang up, and before the receiver hits the box I can hear Marty shout, half-two, half-two.

Another half hour later, the limousine cows out and got moved on by the cops. The queue doesn't seem to have moved at all. We see a couple of footballers knocking about, trying to get in, and a guy who used to be a boxer but we can't remember his name, but no-one bothered with them.

Mark gets another coffee, and we share it. The old guy comes back over. He's worse than us, totally freezing. Mark gives him the last of the coffee and I pass him my baccy to make a rolly. He must've managed to get some dosh off someone cos he's got a fresh can of dead strong cider, and he cracks it open and offers us a slug but we both say no thanks. He starts on about how he remembers when Ali was drafted and that, how he lost the best years, and Mark starts asking him stuff, like quizzing him about the early fights and that and you can tell this old lad knows his stuff. He gets some of the names and dates wrong, but Mark puts him right, and after ten minutes it's like they're having a competition, and I'm happy to listen cos I'm no use at all that stuff. And all the time we've got our eyes glued on the big windows. The sun's shifted away behind Central. I can't feel my toes any more, and even jumping on the spot is just pure sore. The limousine draws up again, but there's no reason to suppose he'll appear this time either. The punters in the queue in Edinburgh must be freezing as well. The glass shifts away behind Central. I can't feel my toes any more, and even jumping on the spot is just pure sore. The limousine draws up again, but there's no reason to suppose he'll appear this time either. The punters in the queue in Edinburgh must be freezing as well.

Then, right across from us, the limousine draws out and gets moved on by the cops. The queue doesn't seem to have moved at all. We see a couple of footballers knocking about, trying to get in, and a guy who used to be a boxer but we can't remember his name, but no-one bothered with them.

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Then, right across from us, one of the windows moves. Not the folk inside, the actual glass shifts and swings, and it turns out it's not a window, it's a door at the side of the shop. There's reflections, black and white on other glass, a kind of a metallic scrape, and he's here. He's right there. Ali. Me and Mark move across the road. The old guy stays put. We go back over and see the old lad, and he's well chuffed, makes us takes a swally of his cider to celebrate. I saw Cassius, he says, I saw Cassius.

Mark walks me back up the road so I can see if I've still got a job. We horse about in the precinct, boxing the air as we jog up Sauchie. We saw him. No picture right enough, and no autograph. But we saw the man. So we did.
Degraded Capability: The Media and the Kosovo Crisis


"While the role of the journalist is to present the world in all its complexity, giving the public as much information as possible in order to facilitate a democratic debate, the propagandist simplifies the world in order to mobilise the public behind a common goal."1

The conclusion to be drawn from Degraded Capability is that during NATO’s 78-day bombing of Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro from March 24th-June 10th 1999 the media overwhelmingly acted in effect as a propaganda machine. As a collection of writings by a variety of experts, Degraded Capability provides a necessarily patchy and incomplete look at the coverage of the war and how these were maintained. In conjunction with a reading of Philip Knightley’s chapter on Kosovo (provocatively titled “The Military’s Final Victory”) in his classic history of the war correspondent, “The First Casualty”,2 a picture starts to emerge of the mechanics of media management: blanket coverage of NATO sourced news, lack of investigative reporting, easy obfuscation of the plain old peddling of lies. Whilst Knightley provides a roller coaster of a ride through the British media’s coverage of the war, Knightley reasons that “in wartime (the media) is operated in control; nullify rather than conceal undesirable news; eager to help; never go in for summary repression or censorship; that stayed in Belgrade to find out what was happening on the ground... There seemed to be a pattern of obfuscation that was supported in moments of embarrassment by a flow of artfully drafted semi-admissions.” Yet NATO continued to enjoy virtually blanket and predominantly uncritical exposure.

Editorial control—the myth of a liberal media

All the British newspapers except the Independent on Sunday (whose editor, Phil Porter—an ex-columnist and TV presenter/propagandist) was replaced shortly after the war by Janet Street Porter)—an ex-columnist and TV presenter/producer without any background in news reporting) took a pro-war stance in their editorial columns. As Hammond asserts, the fact that this included the liberal press is one of the things that distinguished Kosovo from previous military campaigns. Whilst the conservative papers supported the war, at least they voiced some doubts about the wisdom of the action. The Guardian and The Independent, on the other hand, seemed sold on the moral purpose of the devastating air campaign.10 This was in spite of the fact that throughout the war The Guardian received around 100 letters a day about the bombing campaign, the overwhelming majority of which were against it.11

Evidently it was considered important to neutralise what was regarded as a significant source of opposition. How was this achieved? John Pilger claims that at the beginning of the Kosovo campaign, “Editors were called to the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and handed their guidelines” though he gives no source or grounds for this remarkable assertion.12 Even in the absence of such direct control, Knightley reasons that “in wartime (the media) considers its commercial and political interests lie in supporting the government of the day.”13 Then there is the ongoing compromise brought about by the media’s all-too-tactful relationship with power. Eve Ann Prentice of The Times for example, says that foreign editors are too close to the Foreign Office, that they dine together etc.14

Guardian staff were certainly acting as NATO apologists through their control of emphasis. In an interview with BBC Radio Scotland, Hammond gave the following example of a report on the bombing of a bridge in Varvarin in Serbia. “The Reuters report from the scene was headed ‘NATO Bombing Wreaks Carnage on Serbian Town Bridge’. But by the time that same report appeared in the following day’s Guardian newspaper the headline had subtly changed to ‘Planes Buzzed Overseas and then Death Came: The Guardian had shifted from an active to a passive acceptance of any form of NATO bombing wreaking carnage had disappeared. Instead there were innocuously blurring planes and death appearing somehow out of the blue.”15

The fact that even John Pilger, a highly respected, award-winning journalist, had difficulty getting published during the war suggests that voices of opposition were being stifled. The day after he finally had a piece published in The Guardian his factually accurate work was published by the paper’s diplomatic editor, Ian Black.16

Broadcasters who failed to follow the NATO script were subject to personal attacks from politicians. BBC Radio 4’s John Humphries, for example was criticised for asking awkward questions during the war. His suggestion that NATO had replaced one type of ethnic cleansing with another in February this year brought him up for criticism again. BBC governors were heard: “I complained by NATO secretary general, Lord Robertson and concluded that “The tone of his questioning was inappropriate at times, and the frequency of inter- ruption was ill-judged.”

Hammond, though, suggests that this is largely a ritual and that, in the words of the BBC’s first Director General, Lord Reith, “they know that they can trust us not to be really impartial.”17

Sheep, brotvers, cheerleaders and veterans

Robert Fisk of the Independent identified two types of journalists during the war—the “sheep” and the “frothers”. The sheep were in the main a flock of young, ambitious, and often freelance reporters who faithfully reproduced the NATO line. The frothers were more likely to be staff writers who often became “cheerleaders and advocates” for the war. Thomas Friedman of the New York Times, for example: “Every week you ravage Kosovo is another decade we will set your country back by pulverising you,” Friedman said. “You want 1950, we can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389 too.”20

Such emotive writing raises the disturbing question of to what extent the media coverage not only ensured domestic support for the war (and stifled opposition) but also influenced the course of the war itself? Disturbingly, a UN survey of officials with experience in the Yugoslav area found that 75% believed the media had played a part in determining the course of the war.21

News of the carnage, destruction and havoc wreaked by the NATO bombing—and celebrated by the frothers—was strictly unwelcome. Veterans that stayed in Belgrade to find out what was happening on the ground were criticised for being dupes for Serbian propaganda. The BBC’s John Simpson was singled out for criticism by Clare Short. “I said what I bloody well wanted,” he said in The Guardian by way of response to a barrage of angry and offensive to suggest that I was this glove puppet for Milosevic.”22

“’We were aware that those pictures would come back later and there would be an instinctive sympathy for the victims of the campaign,” said Tony Blair explaining why NATO had bombèd the Yugoslavian TV station, RTS killing 16 and wounding 16 in more than an incident that Amnesty International has identified as a war crime.23

“What was hidden was almost everything on the receiving end...the hatred it inflamed in Kosovo, the fear and trauma of the civilians in
Committee has found this to be the case. It is a clear example of "omission on a grand scale." Another example is the NATO's massive scale military intervention in Kosovo, which was illegal. This is now widely acknowledged. NATO's military action in Yugoslavia was ignored by the press.

Edward Herman and David Peterson cast doubt on one of the key events that prompted the "international community" into action—the Racak massacre in January 1999. The head of the OSCE verification team in Kosovo (whose history brings his objectivity seriously into question) described it as "a massacre ... a crime against humanity" and his report went via CNN around the world. But forensic studies revealed that the dead were more likely to have been KLA—rather than civilians killed—in "exchanges of small-arms fire and "savage fighting" which were in fact filmed by an invited Associated Press film crew.27 During the war Knightley says: "The pressure on the media in NATO countries to produce atrocious stories was intense." Yet many such reports turned out to be false. Up to 700 bodies were said to have been buried in a mass grave at the Treca mine. Trepa—the name will live alongside those of Srebrenica, Auschwitz and Treblinka," said The Mirror in June 1999. One month later the UN International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) announced that investigations had revealed that there were no bodies in the mines.28

Widely reported claims by American Defense Secretary William Cohen (CBS, 26May 2000) that over 100,000 "may have been murdered" turned out to be unfounded. By November 1999 the number of bodies exhumed by the twenty forensic teams who were brought in to provide body counts had reached 2,100 including KLA as well as civilians.29 Massacres after the bombing campaign by the KLA were downplayed by the media.

Democracy, justice and NATO War Crimes

Another example of "omission on a grand scale" is the unreported fact that the NATO bombing campaign against Kosovo was illegal. This is now widely recognised (again, even the British government's own Foreign Affairs Select Committee has found this to be the case).30 It broke numerous international laws and agreements.

During the Seven Days of September, the UN Charter and NATO's own constitution, and flagrantly over-ride the authority of the UN. Furthermore it was undemocratic in that, for example, Tony Blair did not consult Parliament before committing Britain to the NATO action.31 There is uncertainty about the final number of people that NATO killed. NATO officials have said that Human Rights Watch's (and the Yugoslavian government) estimates of around 500 civilians killed by NATO were reasonable.32 However General Joseph W. Ralston, Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff has said that the estimate of civilians dead was "100,000."33 The ICTY government estimates a total of 1,002 army and police killed or missing34 and the UN says that another 10-15,000 civilians were wounded.35

General Wesley Clark, admitted to the BBC's Mark Urban that NATO was targeting civilians. In a campaign which involved over 38,000 combat sorties and 10,484 strike sorties, NATO deliberately destroyed infrastructure (bridges, roads, railways, water lines, communication facilities, factories, industry), health care, education, agriculture and the environment, as well as sites of historic and cultural importance.

The use of Depleted Uranium has left an enduring legacy of environmental contamination along with that wreaked by the destruction of oil refineries, petrochemical plants, chemical fertilizer factories, fuel storage tanks and power plants.36 Shortly after the war a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees study of the situation in Kosovo found that "forty per cent of Kosovo's water supply is of poor quality—polluted by a range of materials including human, as well as animal corpses."37 Of the 70 per cent of the health facilities that existed before the NATO bombing still exist, and 60 per cent of the schools have been damaged or destroyed.38

Despite NATO's withholding of information necessary to make a full assessment, Amnesty International has recently issued a report accusing NATO of war crimes. It recommends that the victors should be given adequate redress and that those responsible should be brought to justice.39 There have also been a number of independent legal actions which have gone almost entirely unreported in the press. These include a comprehensive indictment prepared by US former Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, for the Independent Action Center detailing 19 separate charges of war crimes, crimes against peace and crimes against humanity.40 And in England the Cambridge-based Movement for the Advancement of Justice, which allows Hammond and Herman to conclude that in its funding, choice of personnel and actions the ICTY has served as an arm of NATO.41 The ICTY relies on NATO for its evidence so that any report is currently being read by the ICTY Chief Prosecutor.42

The ICTY comes under a microscope in a chapter by Mirjana Skociko and William Woodger, which allows Hammond and Herman to conclude that in its funding, choice of personnel and actions the ICTY has served as an arm of NATO.43 The ICTY relies on NATO for its evidence so that NATO's own war crimes and the massacres committed by the Croatian Army with the covert support of the US in Krajina and the KLA's subsequent massacre of Serbs, Romans and others are unlikely to be tried.

Context

One of the main things missing throughout the media coverage of the campaign was context. Here Depressed Capability excels by bringing this to light. Diana Johnstone and Richard Keeble put Yugoslavia into the context of the United States' ongoing imperial 'globalisation' project, that is the expansion of free trade, to eradicate anything that stands in its way. Yugoslavia's transformation from "a medium-sized independent state, with a unique reputation in the region for resistance to foreign empires, into a series of ethnic statelets whose economic assets can be easily expropriated;"44 is, according to US foreign policy advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, just part of an on-going political strategy for the US. Johnstone writes that "This involves creating a 'geopolitical framework' around NATO that will initially include Ukraine and exclude Russia. It extends the geostategic basis for controlling conflict in what Brzezinski calls 'the Eurasian Balkans', the huge area between the Eastern shore of the Black Sea and the west coast of China, which includes Serbia and its petroleum resources, a top priority for US foreign policy."

David Chandler lays out the history of Western intervention in Yugoslavia over the last decade. Up until 1989 the US actively supported Yugoslavia's "unity, independence and territorial integrity," because her "brand of market communism was an example to the rest of the Soviet Bloc to leave the constraints of the Soviet Union and open up to Western influence." But the tide of international relations turned with the so-called end of the Cold War when the benefits for IMF-friendly, economic reform programme stopped coming and Yugoslavia suddenly found itself isolated diplomatically within Europe.45 Chandler's focus is the diplomatic context. By taking sides with the separatists, encouraging and prematurely recognising their independence, Europe and the United States have "undermined the democratic state institutions necessary to cohere and integrate society and maintain law and order," he argues. "The breakdown of inter-ethnic cooperation in Bosnia was a direct consequence of external pressures on the political mechanisms holding the republic together within a federal framework, as opposed to the product of external invasion or a resurgence of ethnic hatreds. With US encouragement, the Muslim-led government decided to seek international recognition for independence against the wishes of the Serb community."46 He's best on Bosnia, but stops short of any discussion of the IMF's role prior to 1989, or any treatment of economic reform and training of military groups in Yugoslavia.47

NATO rising—the US in Europe

Whilst the US undertook 80% of the air strikes, 90% of the electronic warfare, and 80% of the guided air weapons and launched over 95% of the cruise missiles,48 it was important that the operation was seen to be under the auspices of NATO. After the collapse of communism, the US actively supported the demise of Yugoslavia.49 The US Joint Chiefs of Staff has said that the estimate of civilians killed in "exchanges of small-arms fire and 'savage fighting'" which were in fact filmed by an invited American Press film crew.27 During the war Knightley says: "The pressure on the media in NATO countries to produce atrocious stories was intense." Yet many such reports turned out to be false. Up to 700 bodies were said to have been buried in a mass grave at the Treca mine. Trepa—the name will live alongside those of Srebrenica, Auschwitz and Treblinka," said The Mirror in June 1999. One month later the UN International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) announced that investigations had revealed that there were no bodies in the mines.28

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The next time

Even though the media glare has moved elsewhere, the campaign against Yugoslavia continues. NATO states have imposed economic sanctions against the country; opposition movements are being funded; and the Montenegrin leadership is being encouraged to threaten to break away. If Kosovo was indeed the “most secret project to ascertain and assert the truth and to bring to justice.

Notes:
1. Degraded Capability, p.97
3. Knightley, p.484
4. Degraded Capability, p.83
5. More covert operations are hinted at. The US embassy in Britain offered newspapers pre-written stories on the war for free, “emphasising that although the US government owned the copyright to the articles, there was no need for the newspapers to tell their readers this.” (Knightley pp.503-504).
6. Knightley, p.513
7. Degraded Capability, p.133
8. Knightley, 512-513
9. Degraded Capability, p.85
10. ibid, p.124
12. Introduction to Knightley, p.xii
13. Knightley, p.526
14. Prentice speaking at a Campaign for Peace in the Balkans conference, 10/6/00
15. Interview with Phillip Hammond, Lesley Ridoch show, BBC Radio Scotland, 17/7/00
16. Degraded Capability, p.134
17. ibid, p.138
18. Guardan at 28/00
19. Degraded Capability, p.124
20. ibid, p.106
21. ibid, p.7
22. There were also a handful of journalists actually in Kosovo during the bombing. These included Eve Ann Prentice of The Times (who wrote a book about her experiences, One Woman’s War, Duck Editions, London, 2000), Paul Watson, a Canadian reporter who was working for the Los Angeles Times and some Greek television crews.
23. Tony Blair interviewed for Moral Combat—NATO at War, BBC2, 12/90. Interesting to note also that Hammond, in an interview with BBC Radio Scotland, says that: “NATO initially issued an ultimatum to RTS saying that they must carry six hours a day of Western news or else be bombed. RTS said well, okay, we will carry the six hours if you carry six minutes of our programming, called their bluff in other words. So NATO went ahead and bombed them.” Lesley Ridoch show, BBC Radio Scotland, 17/7/00
24. Degraded Capability, p.31
27. ibid, 117-119
28. Knightley, p.521-524; Degraded Capability, p.129-130
29. Knightley, p.523
30. Foreign Affairs Select Committee, Fourth Report: Kosovo “Report and Proceedings of the Committee” 7/6/00
31. Knightley, p.505
32. Amnesty International—“Collateral Damage” or Unlawful Killings—Violations of the Laws of War by NATO during Operation Allied Force, Amnesty International, June 2000; see also NATO Crimes in Yugoslavia (The White Book), published by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs which Amnesty International describes as the most detailed official account of the damage caused by the NATO bombing.
33. Quoted in Amnesty International, ibid.
34. Reuters, 23/300 quoted in A1, ibid
35. UNDP report quoted in Knightley, p.505
37. Paul Watson, San Francisco Chronicle 14/5/99
38. Amnesty International, ibid
39. IAC—see note 36
40. <http://ban.joh.cam.ac.uk/~maicl/>
41. Degraded Capability, p.206
42. ibid, p.13
43. ibid, p.13
44. ibid, p.21
45. ibid, p.24
46. See for example Michel Chossudovsky “NATO’s Reign of Terror in Kosovo” in Variant Vol 2, Number 10, Spring 2000
47. Degraded Capability, p.39
48. ibid, p.8
49. ibid, p.53
50. ibid, p.16
51. ibid, p.39
52. ibid, p.8
53. ibid, p.39
54. Foreign Affairs Select Committee, Fourth Report: Kosovo “Report and Proceedings of the Committee” 7/6/00
55. Degraded Capability, p.208
56. Knightley, p.501
“When the going gets weird the weird turn pro”

William Clark

This is an attempt to unravel some of the changes that have taken place within the Arts Council of England in the last five years and examine their roots. Part one concentrates on official statements (drawn mainly from the Council’s web site) with part two aiming to look beneath the surface rhetoric by drawing on a range of source material. The article is intended to promote discussion and debate within this area. Please contact us with any corrections or criticisms of the points raised.

“Mr Tony Banks MP... has told this Committee of his personal dislike of the arm’s length principle on more than one occasion—great supporter of the arm’s length principle... I have never understood why we go through the angst of going out, fighting elections and winning elections only to hand all the fun over to some bureaucratically mandated body and never having it go out there and who, in the end, is responsible for these things, when we then have to take all the collateral damage here when it goes wrong.”

(Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport Sixth Report)

“We are an independent, non-political body working at arms length from government.” States the Arts Council of England’s (ACE) website. A quarter of a billion is a lot of money to keep a mere arms length—or more accurately a short stroll round the corner—from the House of Commons.

“Labour yesterday appointed a man headhunted by Tony Blair to oversee the party’s media operations—a role once filled by Peter Mandelson. Phil Murphy... was appointed...as assistant general secretary (communications). He will head the press operation and prepare for the next general election campaign. His salary was not disclosed but he is at present earning £70,000 a year at the Arts Council, where he is working on a five-year contract and...”

(The Guardian 27/1/99)

Labour’s media operation was something Phil was always on the lookout for:

“...such as his vigilant policing of the Council’s e-mail system. Last month he issued a note to all staff informing them that an internal memo telling of a peace vigil for Iraq outside Parliament was not approved of. ‘If I stress that the Arts Council system must not be used as a vehicle for advertising or encouraging political activity of any kind.’”

(The Guardian 28/1/99)

So perhaps we are being misled when the ACE site communicates that “Changes in lottery legislation in July 1999 meant the Arts Council could integrate its grant-in-aid and lottery spend—something that had still not been done at the beginning of the year.”

Legislation is a plastic thing for such a subtle concept of ‘trust’—a concept of which the previous chairman, Lord Gowrie, resigned on 10 July 1997; and about which questions remain unanswered at the highest level.

“I am bound to say that I share the suspicions of those who have said ‘This is but the first step, and we shall find more and more money milked from the Lottery to provide money which should come from taxation.’”

(Lord Annan, Hansard: Col. 755 18/12/97)

The Financial Times reported the matter as a significant shift in capital, and as ‘Gawrie in dis-agreement’ with ministers about the transfer of Lottery funds from ‘original good causes’. The timing coincided with a Labour conference announcement by Culture Secretary Chris Smith that millions originally agreed to be given to charities, the arts, heritage and sport would be collected for the government’s New Opportunities Fund (NOF) before new Lottery legislation had been introduced in parliament. And before Lord Gowrie told him he would be going. The money is regarded by many as a kind of institutionalised slush fund.

“The ACE website explains the origin of the government’s ‘restructuring’ of the ACE as a spin-off from the ‘re-branding of Britain’ in the lead up to the millennium. It builds on the much publicised ‘Cool Britannia’ phenomenon, a phrase supposedly coined by John Major to characterise forward looking British culture, and the new government’s political alignment with the creative sector.”

After the election everyone got a little carried away with all that champagne at a No. 10 party with Liam or was it Neil? A “Re-Branding Britain” panel was chaired by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, to help out business and tourism and to “engage Government departments and other bodies in promoting the same message in their overseas activities.” Further little committee meetings followed with the Department of Culture Media & Sport (DCMS) Creative Industries Task Force and Creative Industries Unit with Lord Puttnam, who for a small consideration admires the government’s line. Others—even the NME—thought of it as another cynical PR exercise.

Then according to the ACE site:

“In July 1997 Tony Blair set out his vision for Britain: ‘The heart of all our work is one central theme: national renewal. Britain rebuit as one nation, in which each citizen is valued and has a stake, in which no-one is excluded from opportunity and the chance to develop their potential; in which we make it, once more, our national purpose to tackle social division and inequality’ To this end the Social Exclusion Unit has been set up to ensure that Government policy across all ministries takes on board the need to tackle poverty and promote social inclusion.”

Forcing a political project on every organisation—or using government schemes as a template—perpetuates this historic failure to address central cultural issues: namely, freedom of expression. This admission of failure moves not to support the redress of racism or class prejudice directly. It defines a mass in which politically contrived cultural propaganda projects will be administrated via the NOF with the ACE following the ideological trend of these projects. Exclusions will continue to operate within a very hierarchically divided and secretive system, but they will operate using a rhetorical which says they do not. The odd grant for a temporary public campaign might not be going to solve any long-term economic problems. The government do not seek to establish the legitimacy of forms of expression which directly and politically engage with race and class; these are still thought to be a challenge to the government.

As misconceived ideas about what the government was trying to do filtered down through the Arts Council system they tended to cause a broad and regressive political limitation and control of the arts—with the more mindless arts officers bolstering their inadequacies by paranoid adherence, while artists wondered what was happening to the scene. Perhaps purely for bureaucratic ease we saw a rise in the level of unnecessary prescriptive conditions on funding allocations, which have always existed to some extent; but, when taken together with no
real appeals or independent inspection procedure within the Arts Council—the ‘rules’ become merely vague guidelines when they are traduced from written form to the act of intolerance of difference. This boosted acceptance towards projects which do not challenge pre-conceived notions and are not in accord with the specific realties of the dynamic of art and capitalism—in favour of the imposture of the PAT 10 report as a model.

Sadlly this Policy Action Team’s report to the Social Exclusion Unit was a process which could be described as one government advisor from the ‘think tank’ Comedia reporting his findings to another government advisor from the think tank Demos.

It was a fait accompli: an aid to the government helping themselves to Lottery money via sleight of hand. Previously the share of Lottery funds was: 15% for each for arts, sport, heritage and charities; 20% for millennium; and 13% for health, education and the environment. The ‘temporary adjustment’ changed this to: 5% for arts, sport, heritage and charities; 20% for millennium and 60% for government health, education and the environment projects.

Of the pilot projects listed, the reality is that some have harnessed additional resources—such as ‘Better Government for Older People’. Many have no connection whatever with any community, their location is “to be decided”. All the projects represent additional funds to government offices, from the Lord Chancellor’s to the Cabinet and Home Offices who are running these projects. What remains centres on the New Deal or is dependent on Local Authorities. Here, years of downward pressure on finances have led to drastic reductions in not simply arts spending, but also the dismantling of the basic social services infrastructure. These ‘pilot projects’ are façades which cover this up. Unless there is an attempt to increase local government spending, severe problems will remain.

Credulity towards the government’s plans for the arts evaporated when Mark Fisher the DCMS chairman, who wrote a great deal of it, was re-routed and ended up thoroughly denouncing the government’s whole approach and joining Peter Hall’s “Shadow Arts Council.” (Guardian 25/9/99)

Yes, what if you do not believe the government’s rhetoric? What if you believe that the party which denied its constitutional basis concerning the redistribution of wealth will not engage in the redistribution of wealth. Or what if you actually believe that the government is incapable of forming worthwhile policy towards the arts?

Through changes to ACE and the Lottery, government control of two forms of economy within the arts has tightened and increased. The level of funds may well rival the market economy (excluding grey and black areas) at the level of the working artist, a perspective rarely taken into account.

Control of these funds have been concentrated towards specific ends, one of which is simply to accumulate funds in the Treasury. The chief inconsideration is the fact that so much goes to artists is that arts policy is supposedly based on consultation with artists. Who seem to have requested that they be ignored within all decision-making procedures and that these powers are kept in secret.

Government abuse of Lottery funds to hype their ideas, has the overarching illusion of ‘Social Inclusion,’ which masks the process of major policy shifts quickly abandoned days later; which are not the acts of a strong government. This policy was conceived to reflect the views of small influential groupings: the nexus of people who are paid to advise and consult.

Speaking at the Arts Marketing Association’s annual conference (Cardiff, 29 to 31/7/99), the new minister for the Arts (Mark Fisher’s replacement) Alan Howarth and François Matarasso from Comedia and chair of the PAT 10 report “proposed that artists needed to rethink themselves at a fundamental level, looking outward at their value and impact rather than seeking only to change what people think.” (Daily Telegraph)

That pair have been giving up and down the country promoting a very polite description of government control of the arts:

“The DCMS Review was also intended to usher in new, more strategic relationships between the Department and its quangos. The Department has sought to achieve greater alignment between its objectives and those of its quangos, sending clearer signals about overall direction, while at the same time seeking to disengage from day to day interventions. The Funding Agreements between the quangos and the Department are described by the Department as being ‘at the heart of the developing new relationship.”

(Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport Sixth Report)

The ‘shared strategic objectives’ of the government and its quangos set out the overall aims and objectives of the DCMS, any particular aims for the sector in question and the aims and objectives of the quango. They then set out what is viewed by the DCMS as ‘explicit and challenging statements of the outputs and levels of performance expected of sponsored bodies over the funding period’. The agreements are signed both by the Minister of the Department and by the Chairman of the quango concerned.

ACE welcomed the Funding Agreement, believing that “it provides us with greater clarity than in the past about what is expected” of the ACE by DCMS. ACE argued that the Agreement “should be the central—and possibly sole—document governing the relationship between the Department and the Arts Council.” (Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport Sixth Report)

We do not live in a totalitarian regime however. In official documents, there is a “studied ambiguity” about the results of failure to meet the agreed standards. The ACE’s asserts that the Department “has the right to reallocate the ‘investment for reform’ if the Secretary of State is not satisfied with the progress achieved by the [ACE].” At the same time, it seeks to provide reassurance that “indicators are not a crude on/off switch for funding ACE.” The Select Committee observed a slight incentive problem in all this quantification and compliance:

“for example, if a quango meets all its targets, this may mean there is a case for re-allocating resources to other areas where targets have not been met.”

They also found that Chris Smith “has not been open enough in his dealings with quangos... that he had ignored their earlier demands that all letters and dealings with the quangos—which include ACE—should be made public.”

Conservative Members of the Commons and Lords object in principle to the Lottery being used to fund what should be the responsibility of Government. They object too, to the introduction of the provision that effectively gives the Secretary of State power over the New Opportunities Fund.

“It is no wonder that the Secretary of State does not want to place any limit on the amount of money that he can divert to the new fund. We have sought and failed to secure protection for the existing good causes. That is a matter of shame, because the lack of protection undermines the confidence of the distribution bodies and of the recipients of the lottery money.” (Hansard 30 April 1998)

According to them the Secretary of State and his successors will be able, without further reference to Parliament, to allow new causes to benefit from Lottery money. In response to questions by MPs in a select committee as to what criteria were used to evaluate Lottery Projects, Peter Hewitt, the Chief Executive of ACE replied:

“We look at the status and contacts of the board, which tend to be important.”

Which will come as little comfort to artists and groups who “never had any direct access to funding” and even may be from these communities which have been excluded and ignored—and we may even refer to our culture in our art.

The group which formulated the new ‘shibboleth’—the DCMS—fraudulently present it as the result of independent research and consultation:

“The PAT 10 report has helped to highlight the range of cultural activity taking place within communities and among groups who can be defined as excluded. That is: the arts have often played a vital role in community development—delivering tangible social and economic benefits such as jobs, improved skills, and learning opportunities.”

(ACE web site)

The ACE’s trust in the government’s engineers of the soul is presented as adhering to the findings of an independent group which has ‘helped’ them. Yet scrutiny of the fundamental set-up of PAT 10 reveals a rigged jury. It contained 13 members of government out-numbering 11 supposedly independent individuals, mostly from government-funded organisations with a meagre involvement with the arts, whose common characteristics are that they have been inured to this sort of thing passing as democracy. Needless to say none of them are artists although in the few who write about arts (much the same people) we see consultants such as François Matarasso (Comedia) masquerading as an ‘artistic’ practitioner.

The lunacy abound with the ACE site outlining how they will redress the “historic imbalance.”

The basic problem with the following paragraphs are revealed by cutting out the abstract stuff.

“The following initiatives, taken in 1999, are intended to lay the foundations for long-term change... The majority of the Council’s funds are distributed to a relatively small number of Regularly Funded Organisations (RFO)... Most RFOs do not work specifically to address social exclusion.”

Astonishingly the web page states that:

“The PAT 10 report identified the lack of long-term arts evaluation studies as a key issue... Evaluation is taking place, but on an ad hoc basis—there is a need for long-term studies and a coherent overview...Evaluation is too often seen by organisations as an add-on—a bureaucratic exercise in form-filling to trigger funds—rather than something which has a use and value in itself. The DCMS is committed, as part of its Action Plan for tackling Social Exclusion, to a programme of research into the impact of culture and leisure on individuals and communities and to developing, monitoring and evaluating methodologies as standard elements of social inclusion work.”

We know we don’t know what we’re doing now, and we know it all will come down to justifying our own position of inventing policies so that we can continue inventing policies. So hire more consultants.

What exactly is on offer to the poor? Reading the sections on the New Deal it is witness to the ACE walk down a very dark road. It is a blatant attempt to invent policies so that we know it will all come down to justifying our own position of inventing policies. It is more accurately a directive from the World Bank: it enforces an interpretation of the purpose of arts administrations as joining with the state in assum-
ing power by implementing continual conditions as a form of control. Where administration becomes rationing.

It supposedly tackles a ‘Lost Generation’ and lumps truancy and school exclusion; street living; problem estates; begging and homelessness; lone parents and the disabled, all of whom will be going ‘off welfare and into work’.

“ACE are drawing up plans for a research project looking at possible models by which arts organisations can map there [sic] ‘social achievements.’

In the manner of Chico and Groucho tearing pieces off the “Sanity Clause” the writer relates that the “New Dealer” has “five options”. But then one option “is still being developed and is not yet described in the New Deal literature.” The current four options are reduced by “the option summarised in the New Deal literature as ‘work in the voluntary sector’ is potentially misleading and, on it goes. The process for the ‘New Dealer’ is outlined with this friendly warning “You cannot replace existing employees with New Dealers.”

Then it is noticed that most organisations will not be able to participate because they cannot offer any qualifications. Of course the fact is that a great deal of the people forced onto fictitious work will be artists. Perhaps we could all employ each other.

The website being disingenuous in the extreme with its comments on the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education report by Ken Robinson, chairman of the Whitehall commissioned inquiry. He has delivered an outspoken criticism of the Government’s response. His request that summaries of the report be sent to every school and arts organisation was rejected by school standards minister J. Jacqueline Smith. At first he was told the government don’t have the resources to print summaries of the report. Then when the National Union of Teachers offered to pay for it the issue became one of copyright, which the Government has so far refused to address. For Ken Robinson “It isn’t just about raising standards, it’s about broadening our standards. The last government didn’t get it and neither does this one.” (The Stage 21/2/98)

**Policy entrepreneurs**

**Chris Smith:** We now understand very clearly that a government cannot and should not create art, nor dictate what art does anywhere. On the whole art that has been dictated by governments, however benevolent, has tended to end up being not particularly good. The thing about literature, painting, music and artistic creation of all kinds is that it speaks to the imagination and soul of people....In Glasgow’s City of Culture year, a ferment of activity transformed Glasgow’s previous image to a new image which made people who lived and worked there feel a lot better about the place, gave them more things to do, put Glasgow on the map and generated a lot of extra economic activity for the city. So I see artistic value and economic value running hand in hand.

Ken Warpole: The problem with the Glasgow example is that there were writers in the city who thought that a specific and unique cultural tradition was actually marginalised by that commercial process.

Chris Pith offers the new condition of the number of them are still able to use that tradition to very great effect.


“It is the absence of direct responsibility for practical affairs and the consequent absence of first-hand knowledge of them which distinguishes the typical intellectual.”

_Friedrich Hayek_

In 1986 Ken Warpole wrote From arts to industry, new forms of cultural policy, for Comedia with his friend Geoff Mulgan who worked at the GLC and organised pop concerts. With Martin Jacques, he saw the transformation of the Communist Party of Great Britain’s theoretical journal, Marxism Today (MT), into the think tank “Demos.” MT worked to efface its connections with the Soviet Union, and sung the praises of Thatcherism in the eighties along with attacking the Labour left. With the launch of the Demos Quarterly, and a series of well-received reports (No Turning Back, Freedom’s Children) signs of ‘Demos’ origins were hidden. Then (one day as Pinocchio was skipping to school...) Demos and Comedia steadily insinuated themselves towards an opportunity called New Labour.

Lecturer at University of Westminster (1988-90), consultant to European Commission and also member of Comedia, Mulgan is another proponent of the Third Way—which aids business and government in suborning local initiatives. Alongside David Milliband, he is an ‘intellectual’ in the Number 10 Policy Unit. He worked with John Prescott and Lord Rogers on the Government’s ‘Urban Task Force’, integrating strategy towards ‘social inclusion’. He will also help draft the next election manifesto. He argues that the role for new-style government should be to set moral agendas, to shape minds rather than change institutions. Mulgan’s attack on the irrelevance of academia in art that special MT issue is a virtual dismissal of theoretical argument itself.

Mulgan and Charles Landry (who runs Comedia) wrote Thinking the Invisible Hand: Remaking Charity for the 21st Century (Demos, New Statesman, 3/95). Building on this and other works in 1997 (most likely to coincide with the election’s year) Mulgan and fellow Demos member Mark Leonard cobbled together “Britain,” which advanced the think tanks’ most ludicrously superficial argument—that the UK could rebuild itself by rebranding itself. Just as the renaming of Doonray to Sellafied solved the problem of radioactive pollution. Mulgan proved useless to Gordon Brown as an advisor—ridiculed in the debating chamber not just because of his ‘Marxist’ past but for the substance of his advice.

The ideas which influenced the Social Inclusion Unit’s PAT reports and then the DCMS and thus ACE policy began in early ‘97 with Leonard pushing the ‘rebranding Britain’ campaign for the Foreign Office—while Mulgan turned it inward for the Cabinet Office, working as ‘special advisor to Tony in No.10 and on the Social Inclusion Unit. Leonard broadening Britain abroad in a manner which will distract from its position as a major or exporter of war industries and training—the boot boy of NATO. He also writes as an apostate promoting European Union legitimacy in the face of wholesale corruption with works such as ‘Making Europe Popular’. Mulgan—through his position on the Social Inclusion Unit—advised Blair on the broad rhetoric around his themes of promoting art as a distraction from cutting public spending by 60%.

The tough approach—compulsion towards single parents and the disabled to find work—having caused major or disagreement and protest around the ‘welfare roadshows’, leading to the departure of Harriet Harman and Frank Field—ended in July 1998. Mark Leonard is Director of the Foreign Policy Centre (FPC) which develops his Foreign Office work towards an M16 front. Presumably Demos and Comedia are supposed to be objective and impartial. Leonard’s new FPC co-publish with Demos ([http://www.fpc.org.uk/proejctx](http://www.fpc.org.uk/proejctx)). One interesting board member is Baroness Ramsay who followed a career of over twenty years in HM Diplomatic Service in M16. She now lies for the Foreign Office in the House of Lords. She was Foreign Policy Advisor for John Smith from 1992 until his death. She was part of a Glasgow University 60s clique which included Smith, Donald Dewar, Gerry Irvine the Lord Chancellor, Meredith Campbell, Angus Grossart the merchant banker, J. en McAdieen the ex-leader of Glasgow City Council and Lord Gordon, founder of Radio Clyde who hollied with Ramsay and Dewar shortly before he had his heart attack. (Sunday Times 13/6/99)

The FPC organises conferences such as this in November: “The USA in the International Community: Creating Effective Strategies for Multilateralism with the British American Security Information Council”. In the immediate aftermath of the US elections, this conference *will* assess and debate how the new political landscape will affect America’s participation in international governance. Bringing together key figures from government, politics, the media, NGOs and business from both Europe and the US, the conference will focus on how proponents of multilateral frameworks can seek to foster strategies for maintaining and enhancing multilateral cooperation.

The conference is by invitation only. The Guardian blithely stated that: “The [FPC] will make foreign policy feel less like the preserve of an elite and more the topic of national conversation”. It is funded from the following sources: BBC World Service, BP Amoco, Bruce Naughton Wade, Clifford Chance, Cluff Mining, Commonwealth Institute, Control Risk Group, Lord Gavron CBE, Paul Hamlyn, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Interbrand Newell and Sorrell, Rio Tinto and Royal Commonwealth Society. Control Risks (a ‘private security firm’) and its spin-offs has long had deep associations with (and gets its work through) M15 and M16, SIS and so forth. (The Terrorism Industry, Edward Herman and Gerry O’Sullivan, Pantheon, New York 1989)

Mulgan and Leonard’s ideas were put forward in conferences such as: “Does Britain Need a New Identity?” (3/11/97, ICA London) an “invite only lunchtime event to present the findings of the
Demos report ‘Britain: a country...commissioned by the Design Council—and to serve as a focal point for gathering ideas and exploring ways of taking the recommendations forward. Speakers: Peter Mandelson MP, Geoff Mulgan, David Marr, Peter Potter, Sir Colin Marshall, John Sorrell.”

One can picture them all in this secret huddle talking about social inclusion. Marshall is involved in political/business interfaces such as the CBI and The British American Business Council—where he is linked with tourism—he subsequently joined various hypocrisi- cal government panels on ecology and business. Potter is the founder and chairman of Palon Pte. Ltd. One of the problems is that the governmentÉ Trade breeds trust, and trust breeds business.

Anthony Giddens, director of the London School of Management thinking of the Harvard scholar Mary Betty Amann? Even friendly commentators struggle to under- stand what Mulgan is on about in his books.

“Mulgan says he is interested in ‘the ancient left idea of co-operation’. But within that ancient idea he charges about all over the intellectual chinese shop—now embracing the ideas of Amritari Elizion, the avatar of Us communitarianism, now reaching for the business world, and committed to fairness. A world pathetically reminiscent of Trumpton and Chigley. His work is academically flawed because its outcomes are making a decisive break with the anti-intellectual outlook.”

François Matarasso
(The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts, £31, 244 (29.7%)

Ron Amann
A fright at the opera

It is a long story, but something of a power vacuum was created back in 97 with the ACE’s trouble with the Royal Opera House (ROH). Lord Chalidngton (a long-suffering board member) began secret consultations with Ms Allen, the Secretary General of the ACE, but not that organisation’s lead assessor of the ROH. Given her experience of public office, Ms Allen’s conduct “fell seriously below the standards to be expected of the principal officer of a public body” (House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport First Report).

Chris Smith had been Culture Secretary for only four days when this meeting took place. The Permanent Secretary had also just taken up his position. There was no one in control with any knowledge or expertise of what was going on either in the ACE or the ROH. As the new government came in and Lord Gower went out, instead of focusing on the plight of its clients, a number of whom were going out of business because their grants had been cut or withdrawn, those left at the top of the Council concentrated on their own survival. Graham Devlin was Deputy Chief Executive of the private sector investment company, the Conran Foundation, responsible for all, and start to fund such capital projects outright on the basis of their strategic value—not on the basis of the wishful thinking and guestimates of boards, managers and consultants.”

So the insistence on private sector funding is detrimental to these projects—there is no need for it, nor can it be raised.

Yet two months later, the ‘independent’ national association which promotes partnerships between the private sector and the arts, unreservedly welcomed the DCMS spending review announced by Chris Smith, to develop business support for the arts. The announcement included a commitment to a Private Public PairingScheme (i.e. 25%) which would need to be leveraged to raise the sums, that further underachievement in this area is not a ‘risk’ as the NAO describes it, but a racing certainty. Government and the various Arts Councils should acknowledge this once and for all, and start to fund such capital projects outright on the basis of their strategic value—not on the basis of the wishful thinking and guestimates of boards, managers and consultants.”

Leverage

A main example here was the October 1998, National Audit Office report on the monitoring of 15 major Lottery funded capital projects which found only eight of the projects had been, or were scheduled to be, completed on time. Twelve were over budget, and eight had applied for, and been granted, additional funding. David Davis MP, the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, said:

“Almost all the projects are over-budget and half are running late, some by more than a year. It appears all too easy for grant recipients to go back to ACE for top-up grants when they find they run short of cash.”

He added that ACE’s weak monitoring of projects meant much of the money had been wasted.

“I am extremely concerned about the financial sustainability of some projects. There is a real risk that ultimately Lottery funds may have been used to no long-term effect at all. They may end up with some nice buildings, but if they cannot sustain themselves, their buildings will sit empty.”

ACE issued a statement immediately after publication of the report, but not mentioning all the recommendations. Reactions in the press were very hostile to Gerry Robinson (because of the resignations of the entire drama panel at the ACE) who was not there when decisions on this took place. This also ignores the slight complexities of the core problem of leverage.

On 24 May Arts Business carried a more pertinent editorial which read:

“The NAO has come out and said what many people have thought for a long time…a number of the very largest projects (mainly those regarded as being of ‘national’ significance) have still managed to go hopelessly out of kilter, generating vast overspends, project delays and ‘partnership funding’ under-achievements. [The] sheer level of capital available to arts organisations in the first four years of the programme (around £1 billion), and more importantly, that already earmarked for the next few years, is so vast in comparison with the total value of potential partnership funding (i.e. 25%) which would need to be raised to lever these sums, that further underachievement in this area is not a risk as the NAO describes it, but a racing certainty. Government and the various Arts Councils should acknowledge this once and for all, and start to fund such capital projects outright on the basis of their strategic value—not on the basis of the wishful thinking and guestimates of boards, managers and consultants.”

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Jeremy Newton

Democracy in action! This conceals the fact that billions of Lottery money is simply stashed away by the government: “as at October 31 1998, the balance of funds in the NLDF sat at £3.6bn. This money is held in Treasury bonds, where it serves no function other than to reduce the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement for the government.”


Back at that select committee we see the tight scrutiny that goes into allocating precious resources. “Would I be right in assuming that your financial relationship with the National Lottery may well be ongoing in the sense that they may give you another £200 million at some time, but that you are not beholden to them, you do not have to answer to them, you are an independent trust within which has been set up to paddle your own canoe?” (Lord Puttnam) Very much so. (House of Commons Committee on Science and Technology Minutes of Evidence 6/99)

I just as with the Dome, because NESTA is a politically favoured project one sees the casual way that £200m gets allocated to an untested organisation while doubts remain as to whether it is a proper purpose for Lottery funds to make up for failures in the capital market its board are so enamoured of. NESTA was funded by tapping into money from the mid-week draw. It was part of the government’s NOF.

Puttnam described its purpose as making a few “fat cats”. Newton defined it as a merchant bank: “One of the key things we do need to do and are beginning to do already is to work in very close partnership precisely with that venture capital industry. We are in very close conversation with...a number of the consortium precisely with that venture capital industry. We are extremely excited about working with NESTA to make that trick work, then there is a valuable bridging role that NESTA can play between the public sector driven research world and the venture capital private sector world. That is what NESTA is designed in some senses to do.”

So they handed most of their first lot of money to The Wellcome Trust which has an asset base of £13bn and an estimated expenditure in 1999/2000 of some £600 million, and is the world’s largest research charity. This after the 1996 £600m fund which was to transform the scientific research environment within UK universities. The J unit Infrastructure Fund (J IF) was set up by the DTI and the Wellcome Trust whose members dominate the board. Prof. Ronald Amann is an influential member. (http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/en/2awtpre-relsh093.html)

Wellcome of course now commission “art.” (Hey! who needs an Arts Council...) Following the success of their “sciart” awards in 1997 and 1998, a consortium comprising the ACE, the British Council, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Scottish Arts Council and the Wellcome Trust was formed in 1999 to continue the sciart initiative and to extend its remit. The consortium is also sponsored by NESTA.

“The House of Commons select committee on science and technology has recommended that [NESTA] must take risks in funding to succeed overall. The committee said that the government should not scrutinise short term operational cost efficiency, but look for its long term output and value for money.” (Spin, Science Policy Information news, 2 August 1999, No.419)

If you’re itching for a scratch card you may like to know that 20% of “their” money will go on staff. Jeremy Newton the NESTA Chief Executive was technically appointed on 1 November 1998, although previously he was “the interim chief executive on secondment” with NESTA for months while he simultaneously ran the Arts Lottery Fund at the ACE, where he had worked since its inception shaping the direction of the fund. With NESTA he “will work hard to avoid waste—and cut down on red tape,” he says.

To do this you could say Jeremy took the very first part of the ACE’s Lottery ‘guidelines’: “...the need to ensure that money is distributed...for projects which promote the public good or charitable purposes and which are not intended primarily for private gain...” Decided that the stuff in between was unnecessary: so ditched it, and then tagged on the bit at the very end says: “The Council may encourage applications of particular types...It may also draw the attention of potential applicants to the existence of funds and the possibility of an application being eligible for consideration. Such actions do not constitute solicitation.”

Oh and that bit about private gain has also been snipped. And you get a National Endowment. The government enquiry which castigated the ROH fiasco found that: “The lottery grant was a violation by the Arts Council of conditions which the Council itself had set. (Para 36)” (http://www.ballet.co.uk/docs/5/house_of_commons_roh_report.htm)

Newton left the ACE just as the NAO report came out thus avoiding any unnecessary questions and now gets £50,000 at NESTA. The rest are on £75 a day if it is ‘spent on NESTA business’, a running joke no doubt. The funds are unlimited: the £200m will give them £10m every year. You don’t have to be Carol Vorderman to work out that’s a lot of money but she’s on the NESTA Committee anyway. Well she’s everywhere else. (http://www.go-ne.gov.uk/Corporate/Business_Support/NESTA.htm)

We will draw this to a close with a little story. When NESTA rolled into town on a ‘public consultancy’ meeting, by invitation only and behind locked doors. When we phoned up to request them, telling them who we were, they said the meeting was full, sorry. We obtained tickets and one of us went along to the meeting (which was empty of artists—not even one film and video workshop had been invited) and afterwards asked Puttnam why they were doing nothing for the visual arts. He had no answer and mumbled that he’d have to speak to his press officer. He had nothing to say either.
The upsurge in interest around late 60s conceptual art and its correlate, the dematerialization of the art object offers the chance to make potentially radical conjunctions with layers of history that have not been fully played out. This renewed interest, demonstrated by large attendances at the ‘Live In Your Head’ show held at the Whitechapel earlier this year, seems to be indicative of an attempt to re-inject some social combative-ness into an art world that is full to surfeit with people willing to act as the “high priests of show business.”

What is revealed by a glance at this history is that beyond homogenised categories and stylish mimicry there are practices that are always already heterogeneous. We discover that the dematerialization of the art object was variously concerned with a rejection of morphology and aesthetic/scopic, with the rise of a text-based practice and an accent on process rather than product. The submerged legacy of conceptualism is one which encourages a rejection of art’s ideological role in society.

Through an examination of language, perception and the entrapment of desire in representa- tion, the more radical proponents of conceptualism were part of an avant-garde trajectory that submitted the institutions of art to a cri- tique. As with their precursors they were led towards an active pursuit of their practice in new dynamics of a social field. That such a dematerialization of the artist is now only a submerged lega- cy is, in part, a measure of how far the art institution has been engaged in a retro-projection that only benefits the econometrics of the ‘yba’.

Historical associations have been separated and ransacked under the pressure to produce. There has been a recasting of the spectator upon the art object which, injected with a know- ing style, has restrengthened the divide between artists and spectators and had the effect of re-privatizing the means-of-expression. There has been the activity of ‘nomination’ wherein the artist’s agency is only minimally drawn towards the de-specialisation of higher own role. There has been a submission to the ‘popular’ rather than a testing of the possibilities of what could be accepted as ‘popular’.

Those artists who have unquestioningly acceded to their delegated role as the vanguard of an hyper-real image culture—and as such always emi- nently exchangeable—have not only been talked-up as the inheritors of the cowl of conceptualism, but have bemusedly become as popular as adver- tisers. What follows is a critical tracking of just one of the vectors that could be said to have emerged from the conceptual practice that was represented by the ‘Live In Your Head Show’.

Maximum enthusiasm

Dematerialization of the art object can only prejudice a ‘void’ if the passing of the art object is mourned. The mourning itself, in substituting a mimetic trace for the lost object, is, in the case of conceptualism’s adherents, refashioned many times over from this trace to become fixated on, for instance, the ‘pictorialism of a text based prac- tice’, or in the populist adventurism of indexing creative activity that has escaped the art institu- tion.

For John Latham and Barbara Steveni of the Artist Placement Group (APG), the potential dis- appearance of the art object was not an occasion for mourning but an ongoing continuation of attempts to give art a purpose ‘outside’ its immedi- ate and overly obvious remit in the art institu- tions of gallery and museum.

As a spur to the APG’s formation in 1966, Latham’s own practice as an artist and theorist can be seen as part of a wider context of engaged activity. Examining the boundaries of what constit- utes visual art or language and becoming con- scious of the social role allotted to creative workers as ‘exports’ for national cultures, he came to view the creation of art objects (be they novels or paintings) as similar to the creation of manufac- tured commodities.

He gained notoriety through his creation of Skoob Towers (sculptural constructs made from books and burnt in public places). This led to explorations in jettisoning an object-base for art and, as an outgrowth of his association with Project Sigma and The Destruction In Art Symposium, led to a desire to work directly with a “total context of people” via the object, and to developing the “time-based” conceptual means of resisting the mono-dimensionality of art as a commodity.

Aligning himself with developments in physics, Latham came to view ‘events’ rather than the ‘par- ticles’ as a more apt basis for a socially engaged artistic endeavour, events spanning micro- moments and cosmological durations that, it was hoped, could be communicable as spur to action and participation rather than as objects of self-ref- erential contemplation.

If the art object was coming to be dematerial- ized, similarly the concept of ‘artist’ was to be overturned and redefined and Latham eventually worked-up the term ‘incidental person’ as a description of the intentions of artists engaging in the social field.

This can be seen as relating to one of conceptualism’s advances in terms of the artists’ own ‘indivi- dusality’ becoming the subject of art. But rather than produce a static subjectivity where the artist’s person, commodified, becomes an institu- tional currency, the hope for the incidental person seemed, was that the performative aspect of work within industry and government departments would not be seen through the prism of the art institu- tion. The conceptual activity of the incidental person, in becoming immersed in the unfurling dynamics of the workplace, in maintaining a fluid position of independence and ‘affectivity’, would come to “generate maximum public involvement and maximum enthusiasm” so as to “release the impulse to act.”

3 This impulse to act, which raises desire but leaves it unexpressed, could have become an area of concern and dissension within the APG, in that: not foisting a ‘brief’ upon the potential place- ments, but nonetheless holding them to ‘feasibility studies’, leads to questions around the desires of the incidental persons themselves and of what it was the APG as an organisation wanted to act upon in order to change what?

That the incidental persons, free from having to make an art-object, could have been in a posi- tion to examine the flows of desire within the social relations of workplace and government departments is, in terms of the dematerialization of the art object, one of the most efficacious ‘materials’ there could be. But any ‘success’ in such a direction is not the nomination of desire in such an environment as a surrogate ‘art piece’; but what that desire, as a material force “releasing the impulse to act”, brings into being once it is con- scious of itself as an active force in conjunctions with the desires of others. What it was that the APG, as facilitating administrators or as incidental persons, intended to change becomes crucial. Did they want to change society or did they want to change society’s attitude to art?

‘going public’

In constituting a move away from the art institu- tion and in encouraging artists to “take deter- mined control of their social function” the APG seemed to offer a radical direction. Their place- ments in industry (1968-1975) were only minimally negotiated through means of a funding body. Eschewing expectations about a resultant art work, they could be autonomous enough to devel- op lines of enquiry about social dynamics. The very ‘aimlessness’ of the APG’s brief could swing a focus onto the aims of commodity producing industries; the incidental persons could also bypass that layer of administration and curatorial mediation that still censors social art today.

The APG were working around areas of dissolv- ing the ‘divide’ between the artist and the public and moving further towards ‘dematerialization’. The problems, much vaunted at the time, as to who or what constitutes the ‘spectator’ of conceptual art, could, with an APG practice that involved itself with submerged social dynamics, come to materialise desire and work-relations as the con- ceptual objects of group participation and person-
al responsibility that unfurls over time, rather than as the contemplative still-lifes of an institutionalist or romanticiser3, which unidifferentiat-
extedly repeats the limits of its own confines. A release of the “impulse to act”, the materiali-
sation of desire in the social field as a rhythm between restraint and possibility, is, so the APG
thesis implies, no longer a matter of spectators being grouped by an institution but more a matter of
bring into rhythm the differential speeds of spectators, contemplation, self-expression and production,
and pursuing the resultant activities without seeking their artistic legitimisation.
Whether or not there is an idealistic projection onto the APG’s industrial placements is maybe besides
the point. If we take into account the strike wave creativity of the working class of this period or the
potentiality of an “imagined” APG then the actual outcomes of an APG placement will always pale.
However, as a concerted response to a still acti-
\ntivated neurosis of artists to feel “alienated” or “out-
side” the wider society, the APG was one
endeavour that sought to take conceptuality into
a more engaged, inter-disciplinary, direction rather than take it towards its ever-impending individu-
alisation.” The resultant “work” of an APG industrial placement could have been labour itself, or, ecstasyiza-
ing the working classes or, desire and social relations, or a union meeting, but
it was also a practice that insisted upon the de-
specialisation of the artist’s role and the trans-
formation of the exhibition into a zone for social research.
This latter point seems to be the case with the 1971 show Art & Economics which the APG staged as a ‘going public’ with its activities to that date: a melange of displays, time-based documentation, the sound of steel manufacture and discussions with “artists, industrialists, trade union represen-
tatives, MPs and others.”

Bringing such people into the public space could have made for an injection of accountability and democracy by extending the placement to utilise the art space as a forum. However, the pre-
vious quote attends to a case of the workers them-
selves becoming subject once more to dematerialization. The compromised nature of the APG
endeavour which takes on a radical sem-
blance when it is contrasted to the object-based aestheticism of the art institution, comes across as increasingly naive when it is a matter of artifici-
at what it is that the APG sought to change.

In providing a space in which the ‘incidental persons’ could operate independently of govern-
ment directives the APG was actively encouraging “contextualised concepts” which would in many
circumstances be the autonomous province of the ‘incidental persons’ themselves. In this way much
of APG’s activity would rest with the personal tes-
timony of the various ‘incidental persons’ and the people with whom they worked. In the absence of
such information, where it seems that the ‘micro-
\nvent’ as a means of registering desire, can come into focus as the subject of discussion as to APG’s efficacy on a smaller, intimate scale, we are

into fruition as the apt subject of discussion as to
such information, where it seems that the ‘micro-
event’ of desire and the
“impulse to act”, come, perhaps, to be satisfied with
finding a new status for art as that which, when the theories are extended to a cosmological

level, forms the basis of a Grand Universal Theory or a “meaning of the world”. Latham’s time-based theories, being content with the flux of a specific turning point, a conjunction between art and physics through the Einsteinian auspices of “all
matter being at a dimensionless point”, faller
quite considerably when we sense that what is
being removed from the “time-based” approach
is the notion of history as the social continuum we
are actually living.

Whilst such an approach may allow for the effects of an APG placement to be seen over a longer duration of time, as normally allotted an artist-in-residence, whilst it admits to process and reflexive reassessment, it does not appear to take account of what occurs prior to the place-
ment, the very history that the incidental person
would bring into a situation and the very history of
that situation itself. If Debdor and Cage looked elsewhere for their legitimacy, if they raised the
concept of duration and, in leaving it empty, gave it
critical overtones by inferring the silence and
blankness that it was necessary for its recipi-
\nets to take action to define time in a space-time
continuum, then, perhaps Latham’s error, with half an eye turned towards eternity, was to show dura-
tion and attempt to fill it with an overarching the-
ory that may have functioned as a “brief” to which
the incidental persons were encouraged to
adhere.
When it is a matter of groups seeking common
objectives and directions for action, it is perhaps
such over-arching theories, with their undertow
of disciple-inducing didacticism, that have the
\nega-
tive effect of one group member waiting for others
to get up to speed, and, to what extent do such theories, in their channelling of multiform desires in the direction of the theorist as ‘expert’, give rise to a situation in which the “impulse to action” is fettered by conditionings of ‘correct’
\ncor-
formance? Such problems could be seen to have
been operative not only with the APG but with
Debord and his Situationist comrades.
This hum of contradictions is probably the fate
which would befal anyone who attempted to get a
’situation’ to the government. Indeed, in terms of
those situational ideas disseminated in the early
60s by Project Sigma, Latham’s time-based move
owards what he calls ‘event structure’ is synchro-

nous but fundamentally divergent from the
Situationist International’s notion of ‘creating situ-
ations’. However, it is just such a concept that Rolf
Sachsense informs us that the APG deliberately
adopted and adapted: the lack of a contract
between incidental person and the host agency,
the dematerialised nature of the work with social
relations and the impassioning of the participants
with a “release of the impulse to act” could all
combine to bring about a situation.

In some ways then there is an APG alignment
with one extrapolation of ‘creating situations’
which Guy Debord made in 1957:
“…when we take for example the simple gathering of a
group of individuals for a given time, it would be desirable,
while taking into account the knowledge and material

means we have at our disposal, to study what
organisation of the place, what selection of participants and
what provocation of events produce the desired

ambiance.Ó9

On inspection, the APG’s “situation” is more
closely confined than that of Debord’s open-ended
description. If we bring in Debord’s later compar-
ison of a constructed situation as a means of mak-

ing our own history10, our own times, then the
APG construct a situation whose ambition is pro-
fessional. Bringing together people from various
disciplines (civil servants, industrialists, architects etc.) whilst still orbiting such terms as ‘contract’
and ‘art-object’ did not amount to an active pur-
\nsuit of de-specialisation but brought forth the
‘incidental person’ as a specialist in his/her own

right.

For Debord the ultimate situation would be a
revolution, an insurrectionary event. For such
’
\n situations’ to come about means that its participants
must be passionate enough to desire a change of
social structure. A passion which becomes an
“impulse to act” precisely because it is despe-
\nised and seeks not to be allotted a professional
role but the polymath role of remaking a society.

The starting point for Debord was that participa-
tion is essentially open to the degree that it
becomes creativity in the social field regardless of its being defined as an “art” activity. What remains
unrecorded is how the ramifications of this latter
speed of endeavour, the releasing of passions and
their inevitable confrontation with authority, were
overlooked or strategically omitted from the over-
all approach of the APG.

\n
**independent interest**

On record as announcing a “Frankfurt School orthodoxy of apartheid between artists and gov-

erment”,11 Latham’s disavowal with what appears to be a continual criticism of the APG’s
tack is worthy of sympathy to the extent that leftist purity, in refusing the testing practice of con-
tradiction, can often remain at a level of artificial idealism akin to the glosses it lamb-

ated.

Latham, speaking before the time-based theo-
\ries took a firmer grip on him, referred to knowl-
edge as being for experts and as that which
renders thought unnecessary.12 In many ways this encapsulates the success and failure of the APG
endeavour in that he was prepared to uproot him-
self, almost make himself blank, and enter a situa-

Time-based theories

Latham’s keenness to reference Rauschenberg’s
blank canvas as a “turning point” in the shift from an
object-based art brings forth other works of the 50s that were similarly intended to make
art reflect upon its social purpose: John Cage’s 434’s
and Guy Debord’s Howlings in favour of Sade. These two precursors of “dematerialization” high-
light potential areas of radical conjunction for conceptual art: music as eminently “dematerial-
ized”, communicating in a “counter-literal” way, and
after Debord’s filmic experiments, revolution-
ary politics as the very process of combined work
in the social field to effect wide-reaching change.
Both these pieces raise the notion of duration.

gets untransladed, fun to Cage and Debord.
Latham’s “time-based” theories, whilst functioning
to illustrate the dematerialisation of the art object
and leading to the “micro-event of desire and the”
“impulse to act”, come, perhaps, to be satisfied with
finding a new status for art as that which, when the
theories are extended to a cosmological

level, forms the basis of a Grand Universal Theory
or a “meaning of the world”. Latham’s time-based
theories, being content with the fluxy of a specific
turning point, a conjunction between art and
physics through the Einsteinian auspices of “all
matter being at a dimensionless point”, falter
quite considerably when we sense that what is
being removed from the “time-based” approach
is the notion of history as the social continuum we
are actually living.

Whilst such an approach may allow for the effects of an APG placement to be seen over a longer
duration of time, as normally allotted an artist-in-residence, whilst it admits to process and reflec-
tive reassessment, it does not appear to take account of what occurs prior to the place-
ment, the very history that the incidental person
would bring into a situation and the very history of
that situation itself. If Debord and Cage looked
elsewhere for their legitimation, if they raised the
concept of duration and, in leaving it empty, gave
it political overtones by inferring the silence and
blankness that it was necessary for its recipi-
\nets to take action to define time in a space-time
continuum, then, perhaps Latham’s error, with half an eye turned towards eternity, was to show dura-
tion and attempt to fill it with an overarching the-
ory that may have functioned as a “brief” to which
the incidental persons were encouraged to
adhere.

\n
When it is a matter of groups seeking common
objectives and directions for action, it is perhaps
such over-arching theories, with their undertow
of disciple-inducing didacticism, that have the
negative effect of one group member waiting for others
to get up to speed, and, to what extent do such theories, in their channelling of multiform desires in the direction of the theorist as ‘expert’,
give rise to a situation in which the “impulse to action” is fettered by conditionings of ‘correct’
\ncor-
formance? Such problems could be seen to have
been operative not only with the APG but with
Debord and his Situationist comrades.

This hum of contradictions is probably the fate
tion knowing nothing about it at all. As a blueprint for the incidental person it may not have been realistic but it was a means of changing a situation with Kafkaesque iniquities: “They certainly had no wish to listen to my questions, but it was precisely because I asked these questions that they had no wish to drive me away.”

The clerical bureaucrats of a Governmental Department could, by means of an APG placement come to gain some outside knowledge about their operations and the social reality they were concerned with managing. An APG placement was not one-sided; just as the danger of bringing about the release of a “latent public impulse”14 can be steered back on course by a combination of “specialists,” a wilful ignorance can not only be welcomed as a surface to project such linkage onto, but it was precisely because I asked these questions that they had no wish to drive me away.13

Latham and Steveni, it took Steveni and Latham years to get the placements up and running. Orandum”, it took Steveni and Latham years to get the placements up and running, but it was precisely because I asked these questions that they had no wish to drive me away.13

Whatever the promotion of an ‘independent interest’ the incidental person becomes, once again, the transcendental artist rising above politics. Paying next to no attention to the historical make-up of the State as that body which seeks to maintain sectional class interest as the public interest, is as idealistic as the leftist purists that recoils from the often invigorating contamination of contradiction. When married to other ex post facto assertions such as the claim made that art should be a work complementary to rather than opposed to that of governing bodies, the source of a new equilibrium, it is tantamount to seriously underestimating the connection between capitalism and government making such linkage invisible. An operation, then, reveals that the APG was not seeking to change society but society’s idea of art: “Artist placement was intended to serve art... assuming that art does have a contribution to make to society at the centre.”15

Serving art as if to serve some article of faith and assuming, perhaps through wilful ignorance, that power lies at the ‘centre’ in the offices of government is to re-collapse the advances made by the ‘dematerialisation’ of the art object in the direction of a work in the social field and to deny the power of a government’s subjects to change their situation. As such it touches upon the problems of the APG approach in that the incidental person is turned back into an artist by means of their ‘professionalisation’.

This makes for an accord between APG and the Government Departments in that the incidental person as a ‘salaried’ rather than a ‘waged’ employee becomes identifiable as a management representative involved in the ‘decision making’ concerns of the government department. If this perhaps removes the contradictions of the industrial placements between ‘shop floor’ and ‘top office’—in that outcomes emanating from the incidental person’s presence are more of a policy making kind—it does not remove the sense that the APG were seeking legitimation from the authorities by ultimately proving their responsibility to the aims of that authority: “a new component necessity to parliamentary democracy.”18

Spoof work

Given this compatibility between the APG and the left-liberal slants of Government Departments, it is not surprising the lengthy negotiations and the legitimating assurances of the “civil service mem- orandum”, it took Steveni and Latham years to get the placements up and running.

Prepared to sacrifice their own careers, they put themselves through the machinations of a capitalistic democracy intent on keeping control over cultural activities through the auspices of the Arts Council. They were witnesses to having their pro- jects filched and their input erased from the his- torical record. The over-toned echo of the APG is such that it must be assumed effective work seeks to be submerged either in the desiring effects of a placement’s ‘micro-effects’ or in what Sir Roy Shaw (then General Secretary of the Arts Council) dubbed as a ‘professionalisation’ of a state controlled culture, extensively documented through correspondence by Latham and Steveni. This spoof work began in the unprecedented situation of an art initiative, that of the APG, being brought to fruition in the governmental placement without the financial assistance or political backing of the Arts Council. By the term of the government placements had ended, the APG doggedly persisted in seeking representations to the Arts Council and other government departments to continue their work. The Arts Council continually rebuffed their approaches, cutting not only their access to funds but cutting the APG out of the historical record, refuting the existence of correspon- dence that was evidence of APG’s possession and becoming increasingly obtrusive to the APG’s appeal for funds from other bodies. This situation led Latham and Steveni to appeal to and reapop to, against decisions, to consult their MP and eventually to meet with the Shadow Arts Minister. At all turns their dogged persistence, after some minis- terial support, met with a brick wall. In ‘Report Of A Surveyor’, Latham paraphrases a letter from Sir Roy Shaw, to the then shadow Arts Minister in which the APG is misrepresented and maligned to the degree that, it is inferred by Latham’s para- phrasing, the Shadow Arts Minister reconsider his supportive interest in the group. This letter, under special protection of the Arts Council’s Royal Charter and consequently, Latham informs us, to take effect unchallenged leads Latham, not unduly, into detecting the whiff of a conspiracy: “it may have been the assumption placed against administrator’s own careers that is the chief factor, or it may be that some internal state security is believed, or imagined, to be threatened.”15

The “public interest” which the APG hoped to serve independently is, in this ‘spoof work’, revealed, at the first turn, to be the site of an inevitable conflict that even the most informed and combative of artists could not compete with alone. Whether this unchallengeable edict from on high was informed by a wariness as to the per- ceived challenge of APG placements to the APG-inspired Arts Council ‘residency’ scheme or whether it was a fear of the subversive potential of the incidental person strategy is not a choice to be made, it is both at the same time and maybe more. This ‘spoof work’ reveals—unhealthily for those who believe the state is run by the half-wits who front it, that the threat implied by the inci- dental person was being taken more seriously by others than it was by the APG themselves: “If there is thought to have been a thread of intent in APG activity in any way suggesting plots to undermine the system, then may it be brought into the open.”12

official secrets

The ramifications of this ‘spoof work’ may be seen to be pessimistic and to offer no further strategies of continuation for a radical ‘event-based practice that seeks to redefine participation and change’ by tracking the desires in social situations. But maybe such pessimism is itself strategic. The governmental route has perhaps been tried and tested, and so the route that is hopelessly compromised; not least by the fact that the APG through the ‘spoof work’ reveal, in the space of their practice, the presence of other ‘inci- dental persons’ who do not have the encumbrance of an artistic identity to shake. As such, as functionaries, personifications of their job descrip- tion, would presumably make sure that such a re- occurrence of the APG route would meet with short shrift.

The APG work in the social field, whilst compromised by an inchoate belief in democratic capi- talism and by a professionalisation rather than a de-specialisation of artists, has, nonetheless con- tinued to keep open a concern to effect social institutions other than art institutions. Their escape from the self-referentiality of art may have been successful in terms of a refutation of the art object, but it has been won at the expense of reconvening the art object as governmental reports which, in the case of Ian Breakwell’s placement for the DHSS in the area of mental health, has been and perhaps still is, subject to the offi- cial secrets act.

This tangible outcome of Breakwell’s placement as a ‘textual work’, in perhaps revealing the ultimate sanction that a Governmental Department could wield over a placement in order to make sure desire didn’t break out in the social field in unmanageable proportions, does not therefore undermine the slow seepage of effect that the placement had for those who participated in it and, who knows, led to a growing distrust of those institutions where social control and govern- ance is practised like an art: Such exposure is the APG’s legacy and this is where Latham’s time-based theories work at their most efficaciously. As he says: “perhaps we have to consider that all action is potentially, if not directly linked to what happens on the subsequent enactment.”11

For subsequent enactments to keep occurring there needs to be a variety of follow-throughs which would include the testimony of the inciden- tal persons and other AGP members through an embracing of the political potential of desire as a material force in the examination of social rela- tions. Such a desiring presence of people who nei- ther identify as revolutionary initiates or artist-professionals, is crucial in widening the scope of “subsequent enactment”. If such enact- ment is to escape from refining its experience in predetermined categories such as “art” or “go- vernment” and, as a result, limiting the range even of its own ghettoes. Such a ‘revolutionizing’ of daily life, a process much concerned with making social relations visi- ble, needs the continuing uprooting of the ‘experts’ rather than their continuing attempts at lead-weight coherence, an uprooting that enables those who feel they have access to the means of expression to give encouragement to those who are coming-to-expression. An improvisatory ele- ment, in which all begin from ‘zero’, could be one ramification of a conceptual art practice as could be the lent-momentum made possible through those ‘dematerialized’ forms that carry along with them the “rejection of any a priori identity of the artwork.”22

With no prescriptions in place, that activity could escape the purview of any and all institu- tions and in immersing itself in a socio-historical continuum in which desire can come to be ‘materi- ally visible’ as ‘radiant energy’ is perhaps where dematerialized artists meet with imaginative revo- lutionaries: desires outside their construction within institutions and build their own. Practice becomes invisible but ever-present.
Notes
5. Ibid, p19.
6. Ibid.
7. Rolf Sachsse reports that a great deal of dissension arose within APG members over the issue of adherence to these time-based theories which have been further developed by Latham and Steveni in the late 80s and coincide with the APG’s being renamed O+I. See Sachsse, ibid, p49.
8. For Project Sigma and its dynamo, the ‘novelist’ Alexander Trocchi, see the reprints in Break/Flow No.1 or Andrew Murray Scott (ed), Invisible Insurrection, Polygon, 1992.
11. Latham, ibid, p49.
15. Latham, ibid, p40.
16. Latham, ibid, p35.
17. Steveni, ibid, p18.
18. Latham, ibid, covertext.
19. Latham, ibid, p60.
20. Latham, ibid, p52.
An unedited version of this article will be downloadable from www.infopool.org.uk
Thoughts on Contemporary Irish Fiction

It was stated that while the novel and the play were both pleasing intellectual exercises, the novel was inferior to the play inasmuch as it lacked the outward accidents of illusion, frequently inducing the reader to be outwitted in a shabby fashion and caused to experience a real concern for the fortunes of illusory characters. The play was consumed in wholesome fashion by large masses in places of public resort, the novel was self-administered in private. The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despicable. In reply to an inquiry, it was explained that a satisfactory novel should be a self-evident sham to which the reader could relate at will without the degree of his credulity. It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living. This would make for self-respect, contentment and better service. It would be incorrect to say that it would lead to chaos. Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before—usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, theosophers and pain of shock and confusion from an understanding of contemporary literature.

Conclusion of explanation. That is all my bum, said Brinsley.

At Swim-Two-Birds, Flann O'Brien

One. In relation to the works of Joyce, Yeats and Beckett came the obsessive, petty and often futile Literary Criticism Industry, which has grown to surround these writers with so many theses from academic litterateurs makes some folk sick to the point of brain fever and hospitalisation for the nervous disorder of paranoid exaggeration. However, only the truly simple-minded would reject all history as unconnected to this is the language question on the Island with reference to the status of Gaelic. Is Irish writing in English really Irish writing?

The African-American novelist Alice Walker uses the metaphor of quilt making to describe the relationships between the characters in her novel The Colour Purple. This metaphor can be extended usefully to Ireland with regard to the patchwork of existing Irish identities; it could be argued that there are differences in the practice of literary art corresponding to the sense of identity of individual authors. “Autobiographical angles on history seem as inescapable in Irish criticism as in Irish literature.”

Four: The problem of gender. This is highlighted in no uncertain terms by the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, edited by Seamus Deane, published Derry 1991. This one hell of a book. Three volumes covering centuries of literary output. All kinds of stuff; religious, political, poetical, dramatic, novelistic. Mammoth is its range but it contains not one single, solitary, poor auld cunt of a hoar’s daughter of womanhood. Not one single wee lassie or mammy. Ah the boys would never be so patronising as to add a token girle. In this regard Edna Longley’s The Living Stream, provides some excellent insights. Ms Longley travels a hard critical road, particularly in relation to Seamus Deane and the Field Day project. She is somewhat soft on Unionism and hard on unconnected republicans. There are interesting ideas in there though, and folk really ought to wonder in amazement how and why the Field Day Anthology forgot about the existence of women.

One might say that Flann O’Brien was taking the piss (somewhat ironically) out of ideas in literary theory which would later come to the forefront in the work of Jacques Derrida and other post-modernists. While literary theory is enlightening and informs us greatly about the theory of the piss, there is much to be said for taking a step back from this position, which is largely academic and institutional, and engaging straightforwardly with the text. “Irish literature presents an inter-disciplinary challenge to which vulgar theory can be insensitive.”

Indeed, the character Brinsley in O’Brien’s novel has a good point with his utterance “That is all my bum.” At the same time it is important to be aware that there are deeper levels and ways of looking at things imbedded in a text which may not be placed there intentionally by the author. As with multiplicity of identity, a multiplicity of readings of a text may also be found, and lies the quandary and the space for argument. Such a space is a good one. It is the space between the empirical data (in the case of literary criticism this data being the text) and talking about the text discursively. Who knows exactly what this space is? Possibly the moment of cognition; possibly the moment of realising the possibilities of what a text suggests as you read it; possibly the pleasure in the process of discovery; all of what the human imagination is as and then some. And yet, such is an impossibility for any one individual, and this is what I think Flann O’Brien was driving at in the above quote.

Nevertheless, the ability of literature itself to create such a space cannot be denied. This is the space where art lives. Where the emotions are stirred, where the language is made to connect with feeling, with being alive; where it reveals both its social and individual nature, its ability to transform and stimulate, to give pleasure, annoyance and pain, to shock and pacify. This, my friend, is the nature of the fucker. That which cannot be precisely pinned down but leaves a gap for important questions about the way people live on the ball of atoms called planet Earth.

The foregoing outpouring came into being as a result of thinking about three novels written by Irish men in the 1990s: Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark, Dermot Healy’s Sudden Times and Roddy Doyle’s A Star Called Henry.

Seamus Deane: born Derry 1940. Educated at Queen’s University, Belfast and Cambridge. He is the author of Celtic Revivals: Essays In Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980, A Short History Of Irish Literature And The French Revolution and Enlightenment In English Literature 1789-1832. He has also published four collections of poetry.

Dermot Healy: Born Finea 1947, currently living by the sea in Co.Sligo, is a playwright, poet and prose-writer. Published work includes, Fighting with Shadows, A Goat's Song, The Band for Home and two collections of poetry. He has worked on building sites in England and this experience partly informs the fiction of Sudden Times.

Roddy Doyle: Born 1958, Dublin. Educated at University College, Dublin. Former school teacher, his six novels have been noted for their wit, honesty and lack of sentimentality.

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Roddy Doyle: Born 1958, Dublin. Educated at University College, Dublin. Former school teacher, his six novels have been noted for their wit, honesty and lack of sentimentality.

1. The Star Called Henry: Volume One Of The Last Roundup is the first person narrative of Henry Smart, born in the 1920s and brought up in the slums of Dublin. The story is related from the perspective of an elderly man looking back on his childhood. Doyle uses real historical events and characters as he sets fit to give voice to the character. James Connolly and Michael Collins appear as large as life. The 1916 Easter Rising and subsequent civil war are the backdrop to much of the action. However, History, or historical accuracy, is not the question here. Henry is the “Glowing Baby pink and cream...
Henry's father is a one-legged, poorly paid bouncer and assassin working for a brothel owner. His mother is ground down by ill-health, poverty, childbirth and miscarriages. His Granny is the only adult character he keeps in touch with over the course of the novel. Henry and his young brother Victor live as "Street Arabs" always on the look out for ways to scam money and food. They are at the arse end of society and the only thing that appears worse than life on the street is to end up in the orphanage. Victor dies of TB and this helps foster a rage in Henry which burns brightly until, in the end, he can do no more fighting:

"It was too late. I'd taken men up to the mountains over Dublin and shot them. I'd gone into their homes—because I'd been told to. I'd killed more men than I could account for and I'd trained other men to do the same. I'd been given names on pieces of paper and I'd sought them out and killed them. Just like my father, except he'd been paid for it."

One of the most interesting characters in the book is Miss O'Shea, also known as "Our Lady of the Machine Gun." She is a women prepared to account for and I'd trained other men to do the same. I'd been given names on pieces of paper and I'd sought them out and killed them. Just like my father, except he'd been paid for it.

The novel is set in Sligo and London. London from Ollie's perspective is a very weird place. Folk are up to strange acts of violence and corruption. Reading this book is entering into somebody's dream. Everything is like... like being drugged without you knowledge. The sense of rattled, raw nerves, the atmosphere of... the paranoia, but: Is it?

"After London it was serious.
I lay low.
I stayed with the mother a while, pottering in the garden, walking with the beach with all these images in my wake. I dropped into Gerties pub the odd time, but people were wary of me at the beginning. Then I suppose they got used to me again. But in my mind's eye I kept seeing Edmond serving behind the bar. And I found it hard to talk to anyone with that constant argument in my head. Argument with the father.
Then would start the lament: if I had done this, none of that would have happened. if I hadn't. If I hadn't. if I had. It went on till I was sick of my own consciousness. The guilt was stalking me.
I could not get by the first dream."

The world is strange and surreal with few adjectives. It is there and not there. Ollie's head? Funny things with time and place?

"The top part of me was death. The bottom of me was life. My head was deathly cold. The upper part of my trunk had come free. And my groin was warm. If I could put the pieces back together again."

The struggle of a child to grow into and understand the world. There is also a mixture of mythological and 'real life' but Deane's young Catholic boy is rooted in the reality of his community and his family. Family ties and family life being investigated more deeply in A Star Called Henry. The boy relates to his father and mother, to aunts and uncles, his brother and sister. Yet the book is haunted by characters who aren't there—"My father's mother, long dead, came to our house soon afterwards...."

The most important of these absentee characters is uncle Eddie, the circumstances surrounding his mysterious disappearance in 1922 still haunt the adults of the family as well as the boy himself, firing his curiosity to separate fact from myth. There is a prevailing sense of sadness, death and being possessed by history; haunted by the past, both real and imagined. The memories of the family's IRA connections, stretching back to before the civil war, are impossible to escape. In some way the political conflict has scarred each generation of the family.

Deane does hit some lighter notes, especially in the section called "Maths Class" where the pupils are at the mercy of a tyrannical barm-pot teacher. Reading in the Dark comes from a male perspective, the woman characters have less of importance to say. The mother is defined by her silences. Only aunt Katie has much to say, "Because Katie had no children to look after...." implying that women only have anything worth uttering where the matter concerns children.

Nevertheless, Katie has a fine repertoire of stories to entertain the boy and his siblings. In particular the story of two changing children is right out there in the world of the occult. This story within the story is set "away down in the southern part of Donegal where they still [speak] Irish, but an Irish that is so old that many other Irish speakers couldn't follow it." The Gaelic language itself is like one of the missing characters. The language question still being part of an unsettled historical score.

This is a story of betrayal in a family, wrapped in a society in which history itself appears as a betrayal. Yet Seamus Deane faces this situation with clear-sighted compassion. In the end neither fact nor myth appear satisfactory: myth is not fact, fact itself is grim. And the reality of the beginning of the 'Troubles', where the novel ends, brings with it the need for such clear-sighted compassion, if ever the cycle of conflict and grievous suffering is to be broken.

Stylistically, Deane has a gentle, lyrical touch, his prose is both direct and beautiful. He also has amazing brevity which strengthens the novels impact.

In Sudden Times it appears Dermot Healy is in about a whole different bag. Again though, there is the first person narrative stand-point giving a feeling of clarity of things not being knawt they appear to be on the surface. The concern with family, with identity and where one comes from is also important.

Ollie Ewing, Healy's narrator, is labouring under post-traumatic stress, trying like fuck to hang on to reality. To the everyday. Ollie would really like for things to make sense. For everything to be alright. For his father to love him. For his brother Redmond to be....

The novel is set in Sligo and London. London from Ollie's perspective is a very weird place. Folk are up to strange acts of violence and corruption. Reading this book is entering into somebody's dream. Everything is like... like being drugged without your knowledge. The sense of rattled, raw nerves, the atmosphere of... the paranoia, but: Is it?
Time bends and shifts. Healy shows consummate narrative skill in his handling of time, in his structuring, his ordering of events of a disordered nature, keeping things in disordered order. It is reminiscent of Spinoza’s Ethics somehow accumulative, somehow mathematical, somehow a leap into proof.

Mister Healy has a wonderful black sense of humour. Ollie’s experiences at the hands of the police and in court are extremely funny. But what about the evidence? The proof? The truth? Everything is so very slippery, as soon as it appears to be known it changes.

Sudden Times, in common with the other two novels, is driven by the violent death of people related to the main character. Driven by brutal trauma and how that comes to haunt the survivors. The grief and suffering. How to cope? How to hang on?

The reader is presented with an array of characters, some funny, some sad, some frightening. And in the course of Ollie’s conversation with a German psychiatrist questions of religion and language pop up:

“Tell me this, I asked him, did your father ever surrender? No. And you tell me this, Ollie. Vot is it like to speak in the language of the conqueror? I had no answer to that.”

“You’re a terrorist is no psychopathic aberration, but produced by the codes, curriculum and pathology of a whole community.”

Notes

3. Ibid. p.66.
5. Ibid. p.318
7. Ibid. p.60.
8. Ibid. p.61.
10. Ibid. p.48.
11. Ibid. p.46.
12. Ibid. p.37
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. p.199